

## **Accreditation of Post secondary Education in Chile**

By:

Éster Valenzuela Rivera

Director of University Diego Portales Law School, Chile

The current post secondary educational system confronts multiple challenges. One of them is the capacity to respond adequately to the profound cultural, social and economic changes due to globalization. In addition, such responses must comply with the post secondary educational standards. Hence, the process of accreditation serves to certify and guarantee quality standards of post secondary education. The accreditation aims to assess the consistency between the defined profile of the education of the alumni and the ways in which is achieved. In addition, it is a process of certification about the quality and management standards of the educational institution.

The accreditation is defined as a mechanism to guarantee quality. It begins with a process of self evaluation that enables the institution to identify its strengths, weaknesses and development opportunities. It is accompanied by external peers and experts evaluators that define standards that later are reintroduced into the institutional management.<sup>1</sup> The latter is supervisory step necessary to oversee the correct functioning of the post secondary educational system.

Prior to the nineties, quality certification was left to the mechanisms agreed by the educational institutions. This meant that it was mostly an intra peers quality control system. The Constitutional Organic Law<sup>2</sup> on Education No. 18.962 of 1990 created Post Secondary Education Counsel, currently, the National Counsel for Education established by the General Education Law No. 20.370. This body had to design a mechanism that would provide autonomy to new universities by assessing the compliance of their own development projects.

In 1999, two different bodies began their operation the National Commission for Undergraduate Studies Accreditation (CNAP) and the National Commission for Graduate Studies Accreditation (CONAP). They laid down the basis for the accreditation system. As a result of their work, a new law was enacted –Law No. 20.129 of 2006- that established the National System of the Guarantee of the Quality of Post Secondary Education and it created the National Commission of Accreditation. This latter body aim is to promote and verify quality of education by post secondary educational institutions. Although the process of accreditation began in the late nineties, it is only in the last few years that it becomes relevant in public opinion for student enrolment as a factor of prestige for universities and predictor of quality of education. The process of accreditation is also associated with financing in so far as those institutions that are accredited the students can access to student loans backed by the government.

### The process of accreditation

Accreditation is a three-stage process. The first is the self-evaluation conducted by all member of the educational institutions. The second is done by the external peers and experts evaluators and the third done by the accreditation agency. If the institution fulfills with the pre-established evaluation criteria, the institution is accredited for certain number of years depending upon the degree of accomplishment of their own objectives. If the institution does not fulfill the standards it will not be accredited.

---

<sup>1</sup> Executive Report of the Study Institutional Accreditation, [Informe Ejecutivo Estudio de Acreditación Institucional] at: [www.cnachile.cl](http://www.cnachile.cl)

<sup>2</sup> This constitutional organic law refers to a statute that complements the constitutional text and requires a higher quorum for approval.

### Strengths and Weaknesses of the Chilean accreditation system

One of the most relevant strengths of the system is that institutions must perform their own process of evaluation that enables a periodic internal reviews that would identify weaknesses and enables the necessary updates. This is a democratic process; it must engage all community bodies of the institution: teaching and administrative staff, students and alumni. This promotes critical appraisals, improves management hence the quality of the services. The process of accreditation also certifies quality of services which has an impact on the public ranking of the institution and on future student enrolment.

This is an important element within a context of explosive growth of post secondary education and its demand. Under such scenario it is of outmost importance to have a system that can guarantee quality of the education that is provided. Accreditation promotes the ongoing improvement of post secondary education. It has also been said that accreditation aids into having the educational system in fine-tuning to the development goals of the country.

There are two main parameters used. One of them is the aims and the mission of the educational institution, and particularly the school that is under accreditation and the second is the requirements of the discipline or profession. These parameters define the profile of the alumni that serve as a guide to actions and the assessment of the accrediting school.

Another value added of accreditation is that enables the professional practice responds to common minimum requirements. In this way, universities and schools that fulfill the requirements can be identified. Accreditation represents a guarantee for the students that enroll in the institution about the competencies and proficiencies for their education.

There is international and national consensus that one of the advantages of accreditation is able to improve management of educational institutions. The self-evaluation helps to clarify internal structures and processes helping to adjust existing structures and processes. It also helps in the ability to diagnose and plan, establish a mechanism to follow up alumni and considers employers as relevant source of information for the design of the school curricula and the development of teaching the soft skills that students must attain to engage in the labour market. Finally we can say that accreditation enables implement teaching models that support the alumni profile.

On the disadvantages of the accreditation in Chile relate to the lack of common quality criteria, the array of conflict of interests ingrained in the agencies of accreditation that seldom is made known. A third is the peer evaluators are professors or professionals of the discipline who lack any educational background in the area of education curricula. They lack the competencies to assess the consistency of the profile of the alumni. Evaluators are required to have experience in academic management whether in undergraduate, graduate, professional or technical education. One of the disadvantages can also become a real risk to uniform post secondary education in detriment of the diversity of educational programs and projects. This could halt innovation.

### Accreditation of law schools

The process for law schools began almost five years later than institutional accreditation with great mistrust to the point that the most important and oldest law schools, University of Chile and the Catholic University have not undertaken the process.

The University Diego Portales Law School was the third nationally to go through the process and the first among the private universities. We were granted 5 years of accreditation, the maximum period issued so far to law schools by the Commission. Today the majority of law school in the country have undergone through the process saved the law school already mentioned. This has occurred because the accreditation provides information for future students and promotes

enrolment.<sup>3</sup> In relation to law schools, there are an requirements set out by society for the profession<sup>4</sup>, but also it must consider the mission and the objectives set out by the institution coupled with the minimum requirement that the students must achieve for the legal profession.

#### The challenges of accreditation of the law schools

One of the most striking feature of law schools in Chile is the diversity. From law schools that are over one hundred years old compared to the newer ones less than 30 years old and some even created in the last ten years. Some are quite large while others have no more than 200 students, some cater to specific groups, economic and social élite to lower socioeconomic levels. There are secular and confessional universities related to the Catholic Opus Dei and Legionnaires of Christ. The majority does not have any full time faculty and do not engage in knowledge production, some have introduced innovation in legal teaching while other use the same old traditional methods. This diversity becomes a challenge to find parameters to evaluate the law schools. The creation of a single standard hinders innovation, especially in the way law is taught. Innovation is not perceived or sought as a wanted trait. This becomes a chilling effect on law schools that want to implement changes. It is of the essence that accreditation takes into self evaluation on existing curricula but also take into account the plans to improve curricula, pedagogic innovation that considers today's needs for the legal profession.

Accreditation must remain a voluntary process that respects the value of autonomy of the institutions, academic independence and freedom of expression. It must consider the level of employability of the alumni and teaching connected to a globalized world.

---

<sup>3</sup> Information from National Commission of Accreditation Chile at <http://www.cnachile.cl/oirs/resultados-de-acreditacion/?buscar=true&name1=4>.

<sup>4</sup> The description of these requirements are found in <http://www.cnachile.cl/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/derecho.pdf>