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Promoting Social Equity, Diversity and Inclusion through Accreditation:

Comparing National and International Standards for Public Affairs Programs in Latin America

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Abstract

Purpose – Given widespread acceptance of the importance of addressing social inequalities in Latin America and the critical role that public policy and public administration can have on advancing these goals, this paper examines the extent to which accreditation of public affairs education programs can be a tool to advance those goals.

Design/methodology/approach – International and national accreditation standards are compared using content analysis for their reference to social equity and diversity in their standards regarding faculty, students, curriculum content, and learning outcomes. The research applies content analysis of key documents and thematic coding.

Findings – International accrediting agencies focused explicitly on programs in public affairs place a much greater emphasis on social equity and diversity than their national counterparts which accredit a full range of programs and institutions. National accrediting agencies assert the value of diversity, but their standards and reporting requirements suggest otherwise.

Research limitations/implications – The research suggests that international accreditation standards have the potential to advance social equity goals more effectively than national standards and that there is great potential to enhance this component of national accreditation standards. Implications for policy makers, accreditation professionals, and scholars are identified.

Originality/value – The research is original in its focus on the role of accreditation in promoting social equity and its comparison of national and international standards. Although limited to Latin America and public affairs programs, the research provides a basis for examining similar patterns with respect to other disciplines and professions, and in other regions of the world.

Keywords: *Accreditation, Latin America, Social Equity, Diversity, Program Accreditation, Public Affairs Education*

Paper Type: Research paper

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Introduction

The influence of globalization on the demand and supply of higher education is well documented. In the last two decades of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st century, the world has experienced a rapidly increasing demand for higher education, and a corresponding proliferation of new institutions and programs (Blanco-Ramirez & Berger, 2014). Among the new universities and degree programs are some of questionable quality and capacity, particularly with respect to their ability to prepare graduates for the demands of a globalized economy. Many governments, particularly in developing countries, have recognized that this trend necessitates greater regulation of quality to protect key stakeholders (Billing, 2004; Blanco-Ramirez & Berger, 2014). Countries around the world have responded by establishing or strengthening standards and processes for assuring minimum quality standards and/or promoting excellence. At the same time, globalization creates pressures and opportunities for quality assurance agencies to use accreditation standards to fulfill a broader social role, specifically as it relates to social equity, but it is less clear to what extent this role has been embraced.

Depending on where one looks and what metrics one uses, globalization can be seen as helping or hindering the quest for greater equality and equity. It has been credited with leveling the playing field in what Friedman (1999; 2005) refers to as a “flatter world.” At the same time it has been blamed for exacerbating inequities according to what Florida (2005) refers to as a more “spikey world” in which some locations are able to attract the most talented and creative professionals who take them to great peaks of economic advantage, and other communities are left behind in the valleys. While global inequalities have declined overall across emerging

economies and developing nations of the world, largely due to economic advances in China and India, inequality within countries has increased in many countries, as measured by the Gini coefficient. (Bourguignon, 2016). Responding to within-country inequalities demands actions on the part of officials at all levels of government and in all sectors of the economy, including the public and private actors in the realm of education. Institutions and programs of higher education and, by extension the agencies that evaluate and accredit them, have both an opportunity and responsibility to respond to social inequities.

While higher education has a longstanding tradition of advancing social goals, this manifests differently across countries (Kempner & Tierney, 1996) and it is an often neglected aspect of comparative higher education research (Valimaa & Nokkala, 2014). Comparative studies of higher education policies are more likely to examine issues of institutional power relative to the State, relations between the academy and the market, the level of autonomy and academic freedom provided to institutions and faculty as teachers and scholars (Goedegebuure, Kaiser, Maasen & de Weert, 1994), rather than demographic diversity. When diversity is included as a criterion for comparison it generally refers to the extent of diversity among higher education institutions and systems, such as whether they are public or private institutions, comprehensive or specialized, and the level of governmental regulation (see, for example, Goedegebuure, Kaiser, Maasen, Meek, van Vught & de Weert, 1994; Meek, Goedegebuure, Kivinen & Rinne, 1996), and not diversity in the sense of social equity or inclusion of all ethnic and racial groups. Similarly, comparative studies of quality assurance systems tend to focus on differences in processes, standards, or ability to advance economic goals more so than social goals (Lim, 2001).

The overarching question posed by this research is: To what extent and in what ways do systems of accreditation designed principally to address higher education quality, also advance social equity, diversity and inclusion? This topic has not received much attention in the higher education literature on quality assurance to date (Ferreira, Vidal & Viera 2014; Proitz, Stensaker & Lee; 2004). It examines the intersection of the two 21st century pressures associated with globalization mentioned above, namely the creation and expansion of a system of quality assurance and accreditation to oversee a growing number of higher education institutions and programs, and the need to be responsive to persistent and in some cases, deepening social inequalities and inequities with respect to both access and opportunities for education.

Scope of, and Rationale for, the Research

Within the broad research question articulated above, this research compares selected national and international accreditation standards in the context of Latin America only, and for programs within the field of Public Affairs. Prior studies of systems of accreditation have generally focused on either individual case studies (of programs or nations) which limit generalizability and comparability, or aggregate level quantitative analyses which may mask differences by omitting essential contextual information (Rubaii & Bandeira, 2016). The rationale for a relatively narrow attention on accreditation as a tool for promoting equity and social inclusiveness, as well as a justification for the specific research foci in terms of region, points of comparison and discipline, are discussed next.

Accreditation as a Tool for Social Change

Education, particularly higher education, has a role in alleviating social problems related to inequalities of various kinds in a global economy (Trani & Holsworth, 2010) and to contribute to a more democratic and just world (Cooper, Parkes & Blewitt, 2014). Higher education is viewed as a major tool for bringing about progress on many fronts. Among these are, national development and poverty reduction (Garcia Guadilla, 2003; Lopez Segrera, 2010; Martin & Stella, 2007); preparing the labor force for a knowledge-based society driven by information technology (Orozco Silva, 2010); increasing visibility and international collaborations on a global scale (Garcia Guadilla, 2003); and making improvements in the areas of social justice and social equity (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). All of these goals are jeopardized, however, if the institutions and programs are of insufficient quality. As a result, in countries across the globe, new laws have been enacted, new agencies created, and new procedures developed to assess and certify the quality of higher education offered by various institutions.

Clearly, the first priority of accreditation is to assess academic quality as well as an education program's or institution's capacity to deliver on its promises based on its demonstrated performance record. Beyond this, accreditation standards can also call attention to certain values and promote broader organizational and societal changes. According to neo-institutional theory, changes occur in organizations when the combination of exogenous and endogenous dynamics reach a point where they can no longer be ignored (Cooper *et al.*, 2014). Accreditation can be an exogenous force to motivate positive social changes.

In separate studies of business schools, accreditation has been demonstrated to have an impact not only on organizational effectiveness but also on organizational culture (Lejeune & Vas, 2009). Accreditation also promotes greater attention to ethics, social responsibility, and

sustainability (Cooper *et al.*, 2014). Prior studies have raised concerns about the potential for national and international accreditations to diminish institutional diversity (Proitz, *et al.*, , 2004); in contrast, this research examines the extent to which accreditation might promote social diversity and inclusion of all groups as well as attention to issues of diversity and inclusion within the curriculum of public affairs programs.

Comparing Differences in National and International Accreditation Systems

Various systems exist to regulate, evaluate and certify the quality of higher education institutions and their programs. Even the term *accreditation* can mean different things in different countries. In some countries, it is little more than an authorization to operate a program or institution, whereas in others it is a recognition that an institution or program has met certain predetermined standards of educational and infrastructural quality. The standards may apply equally to all types of institutions or only to some. Opportunities for accreditation may also be made available to programs across all disciplines or limited to particular types of programs and institutions. For example, academic disciplines with the greatest number of students, or those with the highest levels of governmental or social priority, or those with a professional focus, may be required to secure accreditation while others are not. Thus, degrees in education are singled out for extra quality assurance review in Colombia because of their broad social impact (CNA, 2010a), whereas Ecuador has made medicine and law priority field (CEAACES, 2014). Similarly, accreditation may be limited to undergraduate or graduate level programs only, or extend across all levels. Accreditation powers may be concentrated in a single agency or spread across several. Furthermore, in some countries accreditation is

mandatory while in others it is voluntary (Billing, 2004; Blackmur, 2007; Burke, 2005; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011).

Despite the variations in accreditation practices and policies, there is considerable consistency in the processes. Almost all forms of accreditation involve a process of self-evaluation and preparation of a written report, a site visit by an external team of higher education experts, and a final decision by the accrediting body as to whether an institution or program will be recognized.

The awarding of accreditation reflects conformity with recognized standards. These written standards may also vary, however, by agency and nation. Some accreditors' standards may reflect expectations at minimum levels of quality, while others set higher levels of performance criteria for institutions and programs. They may place an emphasis on inputs, outputs, or outcomes, or be limited to conventional notions of quality based on indicators of student achievement such as test scores, graduation rates, time to completion of degree, and employability upon graduation. Others may also incorporate an assessment of contribution to broader social goals (Cooper, *et al.*, 2014; Ferreira, *et al.*, 2014; Proitz, *et al.*, 2004).

Beyond the growing number of national quality assurance systems, and the occasional regional entity, there are many international accreditation organizations. In cases where national accreditation does not exist or is not mandated, institutions and programs may turn their attention to international accreditors. Even when national accreditation is obligatory, programs may see value in the additional credentials offered by international accreditation agencies (Blackmur, 2004).

Within the above environment, there have been numerous comparative analysis of national accreditation systems, comparing those within the European Union (Ferreira, Vidal & Vieira, 2014), between the United States and Europe (Trow, 1006), the United States and Japan (Mori & O'Brien, 2009), selected developing countries (Lim, 2001). Among these, there are also studies comparing countries within Latin America (Leite, Contera & Molis, 2003). This study takes a different approach in that it directly compares national and international accreditation standards within a specific discipline or profession, namely that of public service, and it focuses on a particular region, Latin America. In doing so, the study is not simply an anecdotal account of a single university or program's experience responding to national and international standards, nor is it a comparison of accreditation standards at a single level (national or international). Additionally, the study contributes to our understanding of comparative higher education quality assurance systems through its explicit focus on diversity and social equity.

Although not limited to accreditation, Teichler (2014) makes the case for examining supra-national as well as national policies in comparative higher education research. The potential tensions between national contexts and U.S-based international accreditors has been documented in several contexts, including engineering programs in Pakistan and Turkey (Mermon, Demirdogen & Chowdhry, 2009), institutions in Taiwan (Cheng, 2016), and social work programs in the United Arab Emirates (Vereen, 2013). At a broader level, the two levels of accreditation have been characterized as having applying fundamentally different models.

Cheng (2015) finds evidence of a contrast and tension between that aspirational models used by international accreditors and the compliance models of national accreditors. Because of the very different political and educational contexts in which national and international

accreditation systems and policies are developed, it is reasonable to expect that they might differ in terms of their emphasis on promoting social values beyond quality. It is thus appropriate to see whether the evidence supports that expectation.

The Latin American Context

Latin America is recognized as the region of the world with among the highest and most persistent levels of poverty, income inequality and social exclusion (Altamar, 1996; Hoffman & Centeno, 2003) stemming from its colonial roots and exacerbated along gender, age, indigenous and other group lines (De Ferranti, 2004; Karl, 2003). Despite progress in recent years in the majority of Latin America countries, deep inequities remain (Korzeniewicz & Smith, 2000; Lopez-Calva & Lustig, 2010; Ocampo, 2004). In this context, tertiary education is recognized for boosting social mobility and narrowing wage gaps (Lopez-Calva & Lustig, 2010), with a strong focus on educational quality (*Latin America Gini back in the bottle*, 2012).

Throughout Latin America, the period following the economic crises of the 1980s was characterized by an increase in demand for higher education (de la Garza Aguilar, 2008; Garcia Guadilla, 2003; Lopez Segrera, 2010; Martin & Stella, 2007; Orozco Silva, 2010), resulting in a proliferation of suppliers mostly from the private sector (Garcia Guadilla, 2003; Lopez Segrera, 2010; Martin & Stella, 2007). The growing diversity in the forms of higher education institutions (HEIs) (de la Garza Aguilar, 2008; Torres & Schurgurensky, 2002) corresponded with a heightened concern about disparities in educational quality (Martin and Stella, 2007).

Researchers noted that an increasing number of private higher education institutions in the region “do not pursue the common good, but rather work only according to market principles” resulting in “academic quality deficiencies” (Espinoza & Gonzalez, 2012, p. 21). Of particular

concern has been the influx of what are referred to in the common vernacular as *universidades garajes* (garage universities), a term intended to reflect not only a lack of academic quality but also the absence of even the most basic physical infrastructure, in extreme cases.

In response, the 1990s marked the beginning of a trend in Latin America emphasizing quality assurance trends in higher education (de la Garza Aguilar, 2008; Inga & Velasquez Silva, 2005), accompanied with the development of institutional- and program-level accreditation systems. Multilateral lending organizations and other international bodies have provided additional incentives for countries to implement quality assurance and accreditation processes, along with other reforms (Leite, *et al.*, 2003; Rodriguez-Gómez & Alcántara, 2001).

In contrast to the United States model, which relies heavily on nongovernmental accreditors, most accrediting bodies in Latin America are governmental. The government agency may be within the Ministry of Education, a semi-autonomous arm of the Ministry of Education, or a completely separate government body. In some cases, the quality assurance and accreditation responsibilities are divided or shared among several agencies. Not all countries rely on a government agency, however. In the Dominican Republic, a private non-profit organization has been tasked with accreditation responsibilities. In Guatemala and Honduras, the process is overseen by prestigious public universities.

Quality can be defined in many ways, and the accreditation standards and reporting requirements across the regions reflect different definitions and priorities. In a working paper within its Inter-American Dialogues, the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL in Spanish) identified quality and equity as the two most pressing educational issues in Latin America (Puryear, 1997).

Some scholars have suggested a tension between quality and equity (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002). This research seeks to examine whether in lieu of a tension, there might be examples of synergies between these two goals of Quality, as given by accreditation agencies, and Social Equity and Inclusiveness.

Public Affairs Education as a Disciplinary Focus

In addition to a responsibility to deliver a high quality education, institutions and programs have a responsibility to model and promote values of inclusion and diversity and to contribute to reducing social, political and economic inequalities. These values should be reflected at the institutional level and included in programs across all disciplines, but they are particularly relevant and important in programs in public affairs. Public affairs programs play an essential role in educating and preparing future government officials who, after graduating, will have the responsibility to represent all people, will have the authority to make and implement public policies, and will have in their hands the capacity to change organizations, communities and nations to make them more inclusive and equitable.

Education for careers in public affairs takes many forms around the world in part because public service careers are themselves quite varied. Public affairs includes elective and appointive office at local, provincial and national levels of government as well as within regional and international governing bodies, and encompassing a full range of policy and issue areas. Traditionally, we speak of public service solely in the context of positions in government, however increasingly nongovernmental and civil society organizations are included as well. An increasingly popular and important educational path to professional public service takes the form of professional master's degrees in public administration (MPA), public policy (MPP),

public management (MPM), or public affairs (MPAff), including a growing number with specializations in nonprofit administration. These programs are well established in the United States and are being developed rapidly in other parts of the world, including in countries throughout Latin America, in recognition of the need for highly professionalized public administrators who have advanced knowledge, skills and abilities to address the complex challenges of 21st century governance (Newman & Rubin, 2008).

As public affairs is recognized as a field which demand high level competencies, there is pressure to professionalize and systematize the educational preparation for those careers. This brings with it a need to monitor the quality of educational programs and to share information about quality to interested parties. For programs in public affairs, the values of social equity, diversity, and inclusion (hereafter abbreviated as SEDI) are or should be very important. As such, accreditation standards for public affairs programs should have a corresponding emphasis on these social goals. Graduates of these programs are the future policy makers and administrators who will be responsible addressing the issues of globalization, including issues related to social equity.

Method

This research study asks: To what extent and in what manner are the values of social equity, diversity, and inclusion (SEDI) reflected in national and international accreditation standards for public affairs programs in Latin America? In doing so, it also responds to several gaps identified in the comparative higher education literature discussed earlier, such as, the absence of attention to social goals and diversity (Valimaa & Nakkala, 2014), the role of supranational organizations (Teichler, 2014), and the tendency for research to be in the form of

individual case studies that are not comparable or aggregate level quantitative analyses that lack sufficient detail and nuance (Rubaii & Bandeira, 2016). The research design and specific methods employed to address these issues, are now described.

Sampling Frame and Selection Criteria

The accreditation agencies included in the analysis were selected on the basis of several decision rules. In selecting national accrediting agencies, I focused on Spanish-speaking countries in the region that make program level accreditation available to graduate programs in public affairs. I excluded countries in which Portuguese (Brazil), English (Belize), French, Creole, or other languages are the official language of government. I also eliminated those countries or agencies that only accredit at the level of institutions, those which accredit programs only at the undergraduate level, or those which accredit programs in specific disciplines not including public affairs.

Once a country was determined to meet the required criteria and the appropriate accreditation agency was identified, a final decision rule was applied. To be included, the agency needed to make their accreditation standards available in full text on their websites in either Spanish or English. Table 1 identifies how each of the countries were evaluated on these criteria to result in the final selection of Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Paraguay.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

In the case of the international accrediting bodies, the selection was much more straightforward. The study includes organizations which offer program-level accreditation for graduate public affairs programs, and extend their services throughout Latin America. Two organizations fit these criteria: the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and

Administration (NASPAA) and the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration (IASIA). Table 2 lists the national and international organizations and their corresponding accrediting arms.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Content Analysis and Thematic Coding of Key Documents

With the list of national and international accrediting agencies in hand, the next step was to examine the documents in which their standards, procedures and decision criteria are explained. Content analysis of key documents provided the basis for assessing the extent to which they advance the goals of SEDI. A similar methodology has been used to examine variations across countries by examining the standards of the member agencies of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (Ferreira et al., 2014).

Depending on how it is utilized, content analysis can lean more toward quantitative or qualitative analysis, often generating critics on either side. When it is limited to a pure count or quantification of terms and factor or cluster analysis, it is criticized for ignoring underlying substantive meanings and contextual factors; when it explores the meaning behind the hermeneutic discourse reflected in the key documents, the method is criticized for being too impressionistic and subjective (Bos & Tarnai, 1999).

Despite these criticisms, documents are an essential source of information and analyzing their content for reference to specific concepts is an appropriate methodological component of comparative studies of higher education policies (Owen, 2014). A key to a methodologically sound content analysis is to balance the quantitative and qualitative elements. One can begin with identification of some pre-established concepts based on one's

research questions. But, beyond counting those references, it is also important to examine more closely the context in which they are used to better understand how they ought to be interpreted (Bos & Tarnai, 1999).

The documents included in the analysis were the standards themselves, as well as instructions for the preparation of a self-study report or other manuals or guides explaining the process and criteria for evaluation. For each document, keyword searches were conducted on the electronic version with the terms in either English or Spanish, depending on the language of the document, and using variations on each term. I searched for general concepts such as *diversity, difference, equity, fairness, equality, inclusion, and non-discrimination*. I also searched for references to specific groups on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, indigenous roots, language, nationality, and social or economic well-being. In each case, variations on the terms were used to identify all possible references. Thus, when looking for references to gender, I also searched for the terms *male, men, female, women, sex, and sexual orientation*. Similarly, when looking for references to social and economic status, I searched for terms such as *disadvantaged, poverty, poor, socio-economic status, strata, class, wealth, and income*.

Each time a term was located, the context of the reference was then examined more closely to determine whether it did in fact represent an effort to advance SEDI, and in what way. For example, a reference to diversity that was explained in terms of the need to recognize differences and promote cultural diversity was interpreted as contributing to such goals, whereas a reference to diversity that was found to refer only to the importance of recognizing diversity in the types of university structures was not. Using the well-established method of thematic coding, the references to SEDI were also grouped according to themes that were

generated holistically after reviewing the documents rather than being forced into predetermined categories (Creswell, 2013).

Researcher's Lens

Qualitative research acknowledges and accepts the role of the researcher in shaping methods and interpretations (Creswell, 2013) and often proscribes that the researcher declare her perspective or “lens.” As with most all forms of qualitative research in the social sciences, one’s perspective or lens is rarely unidimensional or simple; the perspectives and lenses I applied as a researcher for the purposes of this study include several key elements.

First, is that of a U.S.-based academic in public affairs, who has been actively involved promoting social equity and diversity within programs and within the accreditation standards of NASPAA which until 2009 applied only to programs within the United States. My perspective also includes that of an advocate and consultant for internationalization of public affairs accreditation standards which represent cultural sensitivity to the differences in country contexts. Finally, I have extensive experience in Latin America, in the form of teaching university classes, conducting field research involving interviews with university and governmental officials, collaborative authorship with Latin American scholars, and consulting to public affairs programs. These latter experiences in Latin America have made me particularly sensitive to need for greater attention to social equity, diversity and higher education quality.

Explicitly acknowledging the perspectives that I bring to the research, allows both me and the reader to be attentive to how they may have shaped my interpretations and conclusions.

Findings

The references to the key concepts within the accreditation agency documents varied considerably across the six agencies. Sometimes the concepts appeared as part of the lofty mission statements and goals for the organization. At other times, the terms were buried in the detailed interpretations of the standards.

The thematic analysis provided the basis for identifying 11 distinct ways in which the standards might address these issues. A brief description of each of the 11 categories is presented in Table 3.

The 11 categories generated through this process included the following:

- Three, which simply require a statement indicating that this value is important (#1-3),
- Two, which address the demographic composition within the program (#4-5),
- Two, which relate to the curriculum content and learning outcomes (#6-7),
- Two, which address strategies and plans (#8-9),
- One, which relates to the programmatic environment (#10), and
- One, which addresses reporting of data over time (#11).

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Within each of the 11 categories, the quality and quantity of attention to SEDI varied. The concepts may have not been mentioned at all, or mentioned once, or repeatedly. The nature of the references ranged from a simple aspirational goal to a detailed and enforceable requirement. The number and strength of references were combined into a single three-level scale representing, (a) no reference at all, (b) weak or implicit references, and (c) strong or repeated references. The scores for each of the six agencies for each of the 11 categories using this scale are presented in Table 4.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Even a cursory glance at Table 4 illustrates very clearly that attention to SEDI ranges from non-existent to extensive, and that the international accrediting bodies are attributing considerably more attention to these broader social values than are their national counterparts.

The most widespread and forceful attention to promoting social goals is found in the standards of NASPAA in which explicit attention is directed to SEDI in ten of the 11 categories, and implicit reference is provided in the other (NASPAA 2014 and 2015). In its “Preconditions” for accreditation, NASPAA highlights the importance of public service values, among which are “demonstrating respect, equity, and fairness” (NASPAA 2014, p. 2). An accredited program is required to “promote diversity and a climate of inclusiveness through its recruitment and retention of faculty members” (p. 5). The rationale provided for this standard is that “the program’s faculty, as a group, should include a variety of perspectives and experiences (e.g., gender, ethnicity, race, disabilities) to invigorate discourse with each other and with students, and to prepare students for the professional workplace” (p. 6). Within Standard 4 regarding students, programs are similarly required to “promote diversity and a climate of inclusiveness through its recruitment, admissions practices, and student support services” (p. 6) with the rationale that the “program should encourage diversity in its student body to help prepare students for the workplace of the 21st century” (p. 6). Within Standard 5 regarding the curriculum and universal required competencies, is reference to the need for graduates of NASPAA-accredited programs to be able to “articulate and apply a public service perspective” and “to communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce” (p. 7).

Additional details and requirements of documentation are provided within the Self Study Instructions. Programs must demonstrate that they are modeling public service values as they relate to faculty diversity, and how they do this in accordance with a program-level “strategic diversity plan, developed with respect to a program’s unique mission and environment” (NASPAA, 2015, p. 16). Programs are required to upload their own diversity planning document as an appendix to the self-study report and COPRA uses these to determine if there is “substantial evidence regarding programmatic efforts to promote diversity and a climate of inclusiveness, specifically demonstrable evidence of good practice, a framework for evaluating diversity efforts, and the connection to the program’s mission and objectives” (p. 15). Similarly, with respect to student diversity, “the program should demonstrate its overt efforts to promote diversity, cultural awareness, inclusiveness, etc., in the program, as well as how the program fosters and supports a climate of inclusiveness on an on-going basis in its operations and services” (p. 23).

In the glossary of terms, “diversity” is defined as “differences relating to social identify categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, disability, age, and veteran status. NASPAA is using the Common Data Set (CDS) categories for US-based programs. Non US-based programs will define their own diversity categories based upon their own context” (NASPAA, 2015, p. 35). In their self-study reports, programs must provide to NASPAA data on how diversity of faculty and students over time.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the case of Paraguay. The National Agency for Higher Education Accreditation (ANEAES, for its initials in Spanish) has final authority to evaluated and accredit academic quality of higher education institutions as well as

undergraduate or graduate programs. Accreditation certifies that the institution or program is of academic quality based on a judgement of whether its objectives, resources, and management are in alignment. ANEAES publishes detailed guidelines regarding accreditation, including three volumes (of 27, 48 and 43 pages, respectively) focused specifically on graduate level programs in which there is no mention whatsoever of the SEDI values. Instead, the emphasis is generally on management, planning and improvement. The core values of the process and system address transparency, continuous improvement, participation, among others; the principles of quality examined include relevance, efficiency and effectiveness (ANEAES 2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

In between the extremes represented by the international standards of NASPAA and Paraguay's ANEAES standards, we see a range of approaches. IASIA's Standards of Excellence articulate eight guiding criteria for accreditation of programs that can "provide public administrators with the competencies and capacities to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life, especially for the most economically, socially and politically disadvantaged members of society." (IASIA, 2008. P. 5), one of which is that "inclusion is at the heart of the program" (p. 6). Within a discussion of these criteria, the standards explain that both diversity of ideas and participatory diversity are essential, and that these include issues of ethnicity, nationality, race, sexual orientation and accessibility (p. 6). In the discussion of the human resources needed for institutional capacity, the standards refer to the importance of having a body of professors and students which reflect the country's diversity and which advance social and cultural diversity (p. 8).

The IASIA standards require specific curriculum components (inputs) in five broad areas, three of which explicitly mention supporting workforce diversity, promoting equity in service delivery, developing approaches to poverty alleviation, and acknowledging and reconciling cultural diversity. Although the language of the IASIA standards suggests they place great emphasis on SEDI, the actual reporting requirements and decision criteria reflect a less certain commitment. Programs are not required to report data about the diversity of students, recruitment, admission, support services, and there is no requirement for a specific plan at the program level beyond the formal policies at the institutional level. At the level of the specific criteria used to rate quality, there is practically no mention whatsoever to the SEDI values; diversity is mentioned in one of 12 institutional-level criteria, and a general reference to public service ethos is part of one of 35 program-level criteria.

Colombia's accreditation standards place a high priority on sustainability in its many forms: economic, social and environmental. In the context of social sustainability, there is reference to the importance of social inclusion (CNA, 2010, p. 4). Among the 11 quality criteria identified in the CNA standards, one is equity. In the description of equity, they standards make reference to non-discrimination, recognizing differences, and accepting diverse cultures in their many manifestations. The other ten criteria are: *universality, integrity, identity, responsibility, coherence, transparency, pertinence, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability*.

The CNA process is highly structured with a series of standards centered around ten areas. Within these 10 areas, the standards specify 29 characteristics and 100 indicators of quality. While this is perhaps the most sophisticated and comprehensive system, it still does not require programs to give attention to SEDI as part of the standards of accreditation. Nowhere in

the instructions for preparation of self-study report or the external site visit is there anything to suggest that attention will be given to diversity or equity.

The accreditation manual for graduate programs in Costa Rica identifies five values as part of its stated mission and vision: *excellence, integrity, social responsibility, respect, and leadership* (SINAES, 2012). Social responsibility and respect both have the potential to incorporate values of SEDI, but a closer read of the document demonstrates that they do not do so to any great degree. The explanation of “social responsibility” makes reference to being responsive and attentive to national needs and accountability via transparency, and “respect” is described as a need for climate of acceptance of differences. When “respecting diversity” is discussed further, it becomes clear that it refers only to diversity of types of universities and their differing levels of autonomy. In the detailed criteria and types of evidence to be provided for admission and enrollment of students, qualifications of academic personnel, and plans of study, there is no discussion to social equity or inclusion. The only reference to diversity among faculty is to state the importance of having some faculty who speak a language other than Spanish.

Mexico’s National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT, for its initials in Spanish) evaluates graduate programs at public and private higher education institutions for designation as “graduate programs of excellence.” Programs that meet minimum standards are listed on the National Registry of Graduate Studies (PNPC, for its initials in Spanish) and are classified as either High Level or Competent on an International Level. CONACYT’s accreditation standards make general reference to the value of respect for cultural diversity (p. ##), and in

indicators regarding student admission, diversity is briefly mentioned regarding students from other national and international institutions.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

This study extends the larger arena of comparative higher education studies into some new areas and offers some new perspectives on social equity, diversity and inclusiveness defined broadly. The findings, albeit limited by the study's focus, have implications for policy makers, accreditation professionals, and scholars alike.

Unique contributions of the research and its associated implications stem from both the study's focus, as well as its findings. The research hones in on the social role that accreditation can fulfill in promoting equity, diversity and inclusion. It explicitly compares national and international accreditation standards with respect to specific diversity and equity issues. It focuses on a region of the world with deep and documented social inequities. It deals with a discipline with an explicit commitment to promoting greater social equity, namely public affairs education. The research clearly illustrates that in public affairs programs in the Latin American context, international accrediting bodies are placing a greater emphasis on SEDI than their national counterparts and thus, these agencies have a greater potential to advance the SEDI goals. There may therefore be a clear social value associated with having public affairs programs in Latin America pursue international accreditation, in addition to, or in place of, national accreditation. Public affairs programs could also advance SEDI values in their training of future public servants.

As discussed earlier, poverty, social exclusion and income inequity are persistent problems in Latin America which have been exacerbated in many instances by globalization.

Globalization has contributed to the increased demand and supply of higher education throughout Latin America and the corresponding need for some means of assuring quality. If higher education is to play its intended role in addressing diversity and equity issues, the quality assurance frameworks and accreditation standards being established in Latin American countries will need to add explicit criteria to require institutions to address these social issues. For those responsible for developing, implementing and evaluating accreditation standards within these and other countries, this research suggests an opportunity to learn from the practices of the international accreditors. SEDI values are important in most national contexts today.

Beyond the practical implications for public affairs programs and Latin American national accreditors, the results also raise questions about what might explain why such a clear distinction was observed between values of international versus national accreditors. Two explanations for the observed distinctions warrant attention as a means of contextualizing and conditioning the findings.

First, the selection criteria used for this study may have screened out agencies in countries which might place a greater priority on SEDI than the four countries included in the study. The accrediting agencies in Nicaragua, Ecuador and Panama all have powerful statements about SEDI values, but they were excluded from the study because none of these accredit graduate programs in public affairs. Likewise, the accrediting standards of Argentina and Cuba which could be applied to graduate public affairs programs, were omitted because of their lack of online availability. Expanding the research to more countries within Latin America

would provide a more complete picture, and similar studies in other regions of the world would provide an interesting basis for comparisons.

Second, we must acknowledge that given the sample used as the basis for the analysis, the distinctions between national and international accrediting bodies unintentionally parallels distinctions between generic and specialized accreditation bodies. That is, while the national accrediting standards apply to public affairs programs, they must equally apply to the programs in the full range of other disciplines and professions, such as medicine, law, engineering, business, sociology, art history, and so on. In contrast, the accreditation standards of NASPAA and IASIA are limited to programs in public affairs.

If one accepts the earlier assertion that public affairs programs have a heightened responsibility to be attentive to social equity, diversity, and inclusion, it should not come as a surprise that accrediting bodies for public affairs prioritize these values. Arguably, then, the key basis for understanding the results may have less to do with national versus international accreditation, and more to do with the tailored focus on SEDI values that can be incorporated into specialized accreditation standards for public affairs or similar fields, but which is less likely to be included in standards designed to apply to all disciplines.

On a practical level, this would suggest that to the extent that nations want to advance SEDI goals, they will either need to bring them to their broad accreditation standards or develop program-specific standards for certain professions or degrees. From a research perspective, this would suggest the value of additional studies. These could examine whether the same distinctions hold when comparing national and international standards at the institutional rather than program level, and when comparing national and international

standards for programs with a less explicit or central commitment to the SEDI values as public affairs.

Conclusions

This research began with the overarching interest in exploring how the values of social equity, diversity and inclusion are advanced by systems of higher education accreditation and whether national and international accreditors approach this issue differently. More specifically, the research examined the extent and manner in which the SEDI values were reflected in national and international accreditation standards for public affairs programs in Latin America. The findings reported above suggest there is indeed a notable difference in levels of emphasis. The specialized international accreditors of public affairs programs advance SEDI values much more explicitly and comprehensively than their national counterparts which accredit programs across multiple disciplines.

Accreditation agencies at the national and international levels have a responsibility to ensure academic quality of institutions and programs. They also have an opportunity to help higher education systems fulfill a broader role in addressing the social inequalities which persist or deepen with globalization. This research has demonstrated that, at least within the context of public affairs programs in Latin America, the push for advancing social equity, diversity and inclusion is more likely to come from international specialized accreditors than from national agencies. The research also illustrates the many ways in which SEDI values can be incorporated into accreditation standards, indicating the potential for improvement on the part of many accreditors.

The findings of this research can serve as the basis for encouraging additional research and policy on this important topic. Starting a dialogue among policy makers and accreditation officials about their roles in promoting greater equity and inclusion in an increasingly globalized world, might be a first step.

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Table 1*Selection Criteria for Inclusion of Countries in the Sample for Analysis*

Country	National Accreditation System for Higher Education Institutions	National Accreditation for Graduate Programs available for Public Administration Programs	Detailed Information about Accreditation Standards on the Web Site	Included in the Analysis
Argentina	Yes	Yes	No	No
Bolivia	? ¹	? ¹	No	No
Chile	Yes	No ³	Yes	No
Colombia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Costa Rica	Yes	Yes ⁴	Yes	Yes
Cuba	Yes	Yes	No ⁷	No
Ecuador	Yes	No ⁵	Yes	No
El Salvador	Yes	No	Yes	No
Guatemala	No ²	No	No	No
Honduras	Yes	No	No	No
México	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nicaragua	Yes	No	Yes	No
Panamá	Yes	No	Yes	No
Paraguay	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Perú	Yes	No ⁶	No	No
Dominican Republic	Yes	No	No	No
Uruguay	Yes	No	No	No
Venezuela	Yes	No	No	No

¹ Bolivia does not provide any information on its website

² Guatemala does not offer accreditation as it is understood in the United States, but there is an independent entity that approves new institutions.

³ Chile has accreditation for graduate programs, but only in the area of health

⁴ In Costa Rica, there is a manual about graduate accreditation, which the website of SISNAS indicates will be available soon shortly.

⁵ Ecuador is currently in the process of establishing accreditation for graduate programs to go along with that for undergraduate programs and institutions.

⁶ Peru offers accreditation for undergraduate programs, but not graduate programs.

⁷ There are references in academic publications to an accreditation system for graduate programs in Cuba, but there is no information available electronically about the standards.

Table 2

Accrediting Organizations Used as the Bases for Analysis and Comparisons

National Organizations (n=4)	International Organizations (n=2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Colombia – Consejo Nacional de Acreditación (CNA)• Costa Rica – Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior (YESNAES)• México – Programa Nacional de Posgrados de Calidad (PNPC)• Paraguay – Agencia Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación de la Educación Superior (ANEAES)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) – Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA)• International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration (IASIA) – International Commission on Accreditation of Public Administration Education and Training (ICAPA)

Table 3

Categories of Comparative Analysis Generated from the Content Analysis

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Diversity is identified as a fundamental value for the accrediting agency2. Equity identified as a fundamental value for the accrediting agency3. Inclusion identified as a fundamental value for the accrediting agency4. The standards refer to the importance of having diversity among professors5. The standards refer to the importance of having diversity among the student body6. The standards refer to equity, diversity, and/or inclusion as part of the required curriculum content7. The standards identify learning outcomes and competencies related to equity, diversity and/or inclusion8. The standards refer to a program having plans to increase equity, diversity and/or inclusion9. The standards refer to programs identifying specific strategies and activities to promote equity, diversity and/or inclusion10. The standards stress the importance of an inclusive and supportive learning and working environment11. Programs must submit data collected over time regarding diversity as part of the self-study report
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Table 4*Side-by-Side Comparisons of References in Accreditation Standards*

	International (NASPAA / COPRA)	International (IASIA / ICAPA)	Colombia (CNA)	Costa Rica (SINAES)	Mexico (CONACYT)	Paraguay (ANEAES)
Diversity identified as a fundamental value	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	--
Equity identified as a fundamental value	✓	✓	✓	x	--	--
Inclusion identified as a fundamental value	✓	✓	x	x	--	--
Diversity of professors	✓	x	--	--	--	--
Diversity of students	✓	--	--	--	✓	--
Equity or Diversity in the Curriculum content	x	✓	--	--	--	--
Learning outcomes & competencies	✓	✓	--	--	--	--
Plan to increase diversity	✓	--	--	--	--	--
Strategies and activities	✓	--	--	--	--	--
Inclusive environment	✓	x	--	--	--	--
Data collected over time	✓	--	--	--	--	--
SUMMARY	10 strong 1 weak 0 absent	5 strong 2 weak 4 absent	2 strong 1 weak 8 absent	0 strong 3 weak 8 absent	2 strong 0 weak 9 absent	0 strong 0 weak 11 absent

Note. ✓ = STRONG, mentioned multiple times or enforceable; x = WEAK, mentioned one time, implied, or included but without enforcement; -- = ABSENT, no reference

About the Author

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