Regulation and Quality Assurance Agencies of Higher Education in Mexico

JIMENA HERNÁNDEZ-FERNÁNDEZ

Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, Mexico

IXCHEL PÉREZ-DURÁN

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

BOLIVAR PORTUGAL-CELAYA

Universitat Pompeu Fabra Barcelona, Spain

This article examines the quality assurance (QA) regime of higher education (HE) in Mexico. In particular, we examine how the regulatory framework of HE quality has evolved in the past three decades and the different regulatory configurations and policy instruments used by QA agencies. We argue that the Mexican case is illustrative of a (weak) hybrid regulatory model that combines the policy instruments of both a state-centred model and a market-oriented model. Our results show diverse institutional patterns in the evaluation and accreditation of both public and private institutions.

Keywords: governance, higher education, Mexico, quality assurance, regulatory agencies.

As a result of economic and political liberalisation in the 1990s and 2000s, the so-called regulatory state expanded to different policy sectors (e.g. electricity, food safety, telecommunications, work safety, among others) and different levels of government (national, international, regional), and also became an important influence on the governance of higher education (HE) (Levi-Faur and Jordana, 2005; García-Juanatey et al., 2020). The regulatory state expanded to the HE sector through the creation of independent agencies to enact and introduce new regulatory instruments such as external evaluations and assessments of the quality of HE institutions (HEIs).

In the United States university initiatives promoted the creation of independent agencies to assess the quality of HE institutions. For their part, in some European countries quality assurance (QA) agencies were established by public initiatives. In the 1990s Latin America experienced an increase in the number of higher education institutions that relied on external organisations to obtain formal recognition through accreditation

1

programmes (Buendía-Espinosa, 2013). Mexico is a representative example of how QA bodies expanded in the Latin American region, with the emerge of several agencies – some of them formally independent from the executive branch – that evaluate and accredit educational quality in HE through public, private or mixed organisations (Martínez-Iñiguez, Tobón, and Romero Sandoval, 2017).

This article aims to contribute to the understanding of how QA agencies have evolved in Mexico, as well as the difficulties faced in gaining leverage in a complex institutional landscape. To analyse the evolution and the current design of the Mexican QA regulatory governance of HE – their agencies and instruments – we use the three models of higher education developed by Dobbins, Knill, and Vögtle (2011) and Dobbins and Knill (2009), as well as the HE (hybrid) governance models and their instruments highlighted by Capano and Pritoni (2018, 2020), Van Vught (1995), and Van Vught and De Boer (2015). In addition, we examine the activities carried out by QA agencies for both public and private HEIs in Mexico. Mexico is an interesting case for examining the agencification process since – in comparison to other Latin American institutional arrangements – it does not have a single national regulatory QA agency. Rather, it has created several agencies that deploy a panoply of instruments with different regulatory mandates, scopes and capacities.

This article is divided into five parts. First, we present the three models of HE developed by Dobbins, Knill, and Vögtle (2011) and Dobbins and Knill (2009), as well as their corresponding policy instruments. In the second section we present the evolution of quality assurance regimes in Mexico since the 1970s. In the third section we present the current configuration of the quality assurance agencies. In the fourth section we discuss the activities carried out by QA agencies at both public and private HE institutions. Finally, we present our conclusions.

Models and Policy Instruments of the Regulatory State in Higher Education

The introduction of the regulatory state in the HE sector can be traced back to processes of economic and political liberalisation carried out in the 1980s and the 1990s and 'changes in state–society relations, partly inspired by New Public Management (NPM) templates' (Maassen, Moen, and Stensaker, 2011: 480). Magalhães and Amaral (2009: 187) argue that HE policies received the attention of NPM reforms along with many other sectors, specifically those related to social policies. These changes over the last three decades have reconfigured the role of the state in HE in many countries, specifically, the relationship between governing and governance processes, to the extent that King (2015) refers to this configuration as a HE regulatory state. As Capano and Pritoni highlight, in general, governance reforms have been based on the following aspects:

> institutional autonomy; new competitive funding mechanism; the quality assessment of research and teaching; internal institutional governance; and the changing role of the state (less commander and controller and more supervision from a distance). (Capano and Pritoni, 2020: 30)

When it comes to the case of QA policies, universities in the United States developed QA instruments in the late nineteenth century. As Jarvis (2014) argues, from the late 1960s to the 1980s these reforms were essentially adopted and implemented in most

Anglo-Saxon countries ruled by conservative governments. In Europe two reform initiatives, the Bologna Declaration in 1999 and the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, accelerated the reform process in higher education (Maassen, Moen, and Stensaker, 2011). As a result of this gradual process, 'nearly half the countries in the world now have QA systems or QA regulatory bodies for higher education' (Jarvis, 2014: 156). Gornitzka and Stensaker (2014: 180) point out that the development of the 'external QA systems in [Western] Europe in the period from the 1990s to the early 2000s' were 'seen as part of a modernisation of the governance of HE often including the aim of providing HEIs with more autonomy, ensuring a stronger institutional leadership of universities, and a reformed funding system emphasising a stronger result-orientation'. It is within this context that the establishment of QA agencies became a central mechanism for performing external evaluations. The number of agencies rapidly increased and resulted in the creation of international and continental agency networks such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

In a comparative study, Billing (2004) demonstrates the diversity in the different models of national QA regulatory governance regimes for HE. The study argues that although there are some elements that apply in many countries, national QA frameworks differ in key features, such as the institutional design of the national agencies, as well as whether participation is voluntary or compulsory. In a similar line, Maassen and Stensaker (2011: 8) emphasise that the forms of evaluations carried out by these agencies differ as 'they covered a variety of methods and approaches to quality assurance, approaches usually tailored to specific national needs'.

With the aim of understanding the context in which QA agencies operate, we use the typology developed by Dobbins, Knill, and Vögtle (2011) and Dobbins and Knill (2009) of three historically European models of higher education– the state-centred model, the academic self-governance model and the market-oriented model – that correspond to different interactions between the state, the market and academia. In the first model the state controls the QA regime and the universities have relatively little autonomy, specifically because this model 'conceives universities as state-operated institutions. The state directly coordinates all or most aspects of HE, such as admission requirements, curricula, exams, nomination of academic personnel' (Dobbins, Knill, and Vögtle, 2011: 670). The second model, also called the Humboldt model, 'is based on a state–university partnership, governed by principles of corporatism and collective agreement' (Dobbins, Knill, and Vögtle, 2011: 671). Although this model assumes that the academic community is in charge of university affairs, 'the state remains a potent actor thanks to diverse planning and financial laws limiting the scope of self-governance' (Dobbins, Knill, and Vögtle, 2011: 671). Finally, in the market-oriented model universities 'compete for students and financial resources' and see themselves in the role of producers and entrepreneurs, 'which offer academic services to students' (Dobbins, Knill, and Vögtle, 2011: 672).

From a complementary perspective, some scholars (Van Vught, 1995; Van Vught and De Boer, 2015; Capano and Pritoni, 2020) propose governance models for examining HE regimes, namely the state control model, the state supervising model and the market-oriented/neoliberal model. The first model relies on the idea of strong state centralisation and control mechanisms over the actors/institutions that are subject to regulation. This model corresponds to the ideal type of the state-centred model highlighted by Dobbins, Knill, and Vögtle (2011), in which the most used policy instruments – understood as 'means, tool or technique by which a government wields its power

in attempting to ensure support or effect, or prevent, social change' – are highly restrictive. This model is focused on 'instruments of authority' (Van Vught and De Boer, 2015: 41–43), such as licences, warrants and vouchers, and instruments of 'the power of treasure', such as transfers and bearer-directed payments (Van Vught and De Boer, 2015: 41–43). Some examples of the former type of instruments include conditionals, which 'are the promises by the government to act in a certain way when certain conditions arise' (Van Vught and De Boer, 2015: 43); while an example of the second type are government payments under specific conditions. Although one might expect that market-oriented models use both types of instruments, in general, (positive or negative) constraints, prohibitions activities and treasures are mainly used by governments.

For its part, the second model emphasises the self-regulatory capacities of HE institutions, and the role of the government as arbiter and 'game designer', instead of the main actor that controls diverse aspects of HE systems (Van Vught and De Boer, 2015: 39). This second model, which is highly related to the self-governance model developed by Dobbins, Knill, and Vögtle (2011), is characterised by the usage of 'instruments of information' (responses and messages) in which the government focuses on gathering information, and 'the mildly restrictive instruments of authority (certificates and approvals)' (Van Vught and De Boer, 2015: 39). Examples of these type of instruments are those 'that attempt to build incentives into the system through administrative accountability schemes that incorporate performance-based rewards and sanctions' (Hannaway and Woodroffe, 2003: 4).

Finally, the market-model (also called the neoliberal model by Capano and Pritoni, 2020) is based on instruments whose main objective is to 'introduce competition and choice in the education systems' and to offset/correct problems with market failures (Hannaway and Woodroffe, 2003: 4), such as those based on competition and managerialisation.

QA agencies can be structured in different ways according to the adopted HE governance model. For instance, liberal models are more likely to encourage the marketisation of HE through QA instruments that pursue the introduction of competition among universities. In a comparative study, Capano and Pritoni (2018: 6) mention that some governmental reforms have created hybrid forms of governance 'that are characterised by working through policy mixes, that is, policy instruments belonging to different instrument categories or pertaining to different policy' systems. We acknowledge that in current democratic governance models it is possible to find hybrid QA bodies characterised by a combination of instruments. Nevertheless, such ideal types allow us to identify the predominant rationale behind each model.

Moreover, as Beerkens (2015) notes, in all governance models there has been an increasing convergence in the adoption of NPM managerial reforms and in the creation of quality assurance agencies, although the specific rationales of such reforms can differ across models. For example, although some models push for the creation of autonomous bodies to evaluate higher education quality, they can also push for higher levels of ex-post control and performance evaluation, as well as for more hierarchical evaluation systems. For their part, other types of quality assurance regimes are more likely to promote the creation of agencies with more formal and *de facto* levels of independence from the executive branch (Beerkens, 2015).

Our study focuses on examining QA regulatory regimes, by paying particular attention to agencies and instruments regulating the quality of HE at both public and private HEIs in Mexico. When examining these agencies, it is important to clarify whether they perform accreditation processes or quality assessments. As Fairweather and

Blalock (2015: 6), point out, accreditation 'is meant to ensure that an institution (and, in some cases, an academic programme) meets the minimum fiscal and academic standards to offer degrees', while quality assurance 'differs from accreditation in its focus on distinguishing levels of quality between institutions and academic programmes'.

Quality Assurance Policies in Mexico over Time

The First Steps Towards a State-Centred Model in HE

The expansion of the public HE institutions in Mexico was particularly salient from 1950 to 1979 when the state operated as the principal provider of HEIs. By controlling the provision of public HEIs, Kent (1993: 77) suggests, the central government gradually 'designed and legitimated various national plans for the development of higher education'. In this period, HE policies were oriented to develop coverage across different regions/states as a response to industrialisation and urbanisation processes. In brief, at this stage, the fundamental role of the state was to fund the expansion of HEIs – through the use of treasury policy instruments.

Nevertheless, the expansion of public HE occurred without institutional considerations of the consequences of increasing public enrolment. As Mendoza-Rojas (2011) emphasises, in an authoritarian context, HE policies were set based on political considerations in order to forge alliances and create loyalties (Mendoza-Rojas, 2011). In this context, during this period of expansion, there were no policies in place for QA, either for public or private universities (Kent, 1993; Tuirán and Muñoz, 2010). All in all, during this period, the central government started to create – in an isolated manner – some governmental agencies which were not independent from the executive branch, such as Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT, National Council for Science and Technology) in 1970, with the goal of creating public research centres as a way of nurturing scientific research which later on was the basis for developing mechanisms of QA for faculty performance and postgraduate programmes at both public and private HE institutions.

The 'Modernisation' of the State-Centred Model and the Growth of Private HE Providers

At the beginning of the 1980s, the external debt crisis and the sudden decrease in oil prices caused the Mexican economic model to collapse. As a result, both the growth of public investment and public services decreased (Kent, 1993; Mendoza-Rojas, 2011; Mungaray et al., 2016).

The state reduced its investment in public education, while the private sector took advantage and gradually consolidated a bigger presence in HE. Although public funding 'for HE and research decreased by approximately 25 percent between 1981 and 1989' (Kent, 1993: 78), the 1980s were characterised by a public sector that focused on the expansion of total enrolment at existing institutions, whereas in the private sector new institutions were created achieving territorial expansion (Tuirán and Muñoz, 2010). Hence, while public universities were historically seen as the 'training centres for Mexico's elites' (Kent, 1993: 79), the growth of private universities was also accompanied by a decreased level of confidence for some sectors of society – particularly employers – in public HE (see Table 1).

Table 1.   Number of Higher Education Institutions and Students, 1960–1999

Higher education institutions	1960	1970	1980	1988	1999
Public institutions	39	73	143	394	515
Private institutions	18	43	126	332	735
Total	57	116	269	726	1250
Number of students (first degree studies)	77,033	208,944	731,147	1,078,191	1,481,999
Percentage increase	NA	271.2	349.9	147.5	137.5

Source: Own elaboration based on OECD, 2008, p. 18.

As a result of the exponential growth experienced in previous decades, the central government established controls on public spending in HE, and started to formulate national plans and new ways of coordinating the allocation of public resources. For instance, during the administration of Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, the central government established a National Higher Education Program (PRONAES) in 1984–1985, with the aim of establishing, in addition to the regular budget of HEIs, a complementary and conditional fund for public HEIs – subject to evaluations and renewal processes – on the basis on their performance (Rodríguez-Gómez, 2002: 135). Although this particular initiative did not continue with subsequent governments, the idea of adjusting the budget of public universities relative to their performance quality persisted.

According to Rodríguez-Gómez and Ordorika (2012: 224) the 1990s brought a neoliberal economic doctrine which shaped the restructuring of the HE system in Mexico, specifically through economic stimulus and conditional funding (Mendoza-Rojas, 2011). For example, throughout the 1990s, during the administration of Carlos Salinas, the government, along with the political support of the National Association of Higher Education Institutions and Universities (ANUIES), developed new forms of financing based on funds which were conditional on the implementation of measures that would strengthen the quality of education (Rodríguez-Gómez, 2002). Consequently, the budgetary process was transformed into negotiations based on a rationale more oriented towards market competition. Against this backdrop, evaluation was the tool for enhancing quality in the HE, but also a means for obtaining conditional public funding (Mendoza-Rojas, 2011).

In 1989, the central government created the National Evaluation Commission (CONAEVA) with the aim of articulating a national system of evaluation in HE, specifically based on self-evaluation of institutions and the external evaluation of programmes (Buendía-Espinosa, 2013). Hence, by 1990, some public institutions had started to carry out self-evaluation processes following CONAEVA directives. However, there was low participation within the academic community and an absence of a clear strategy for data aggregation and monitoring. By 1993, CONAEVA had lost its leading role in developing the expected evaluation system and it ceased operations in 1996.

Towards a Weak Consolidation of the State-Centred Model and the Growth of Market Providers

The 1990s brought a new episode in which internationalisation gained leverage in the public agenda. In this context Mexico was willing to cooperate to establish a trilateral accreditation mechanism for North America as part of the NAFTA negotiations.

Nevertheless, this failed because Mexico lacked an accreditation system and therefore the US associations prohibited any agreement. As a result, Mexico only became a member of the Program for North American Mobility in Higher Education (NAHME). In the long run, this event was very significant, to the extent that some experts have suggested that it was a fundamental driver in the development of a QA accreditation regime (Aboites-Aguilar, 2007).

After the creation of CONAEVA, the federal government promoted, through the Coordinación para la Planeación de la Educación Superior (CONPES, Coordination for the Planning of Higher Education), the creation of the Comités Interinstitucionales para la Evaluación de la Educación Superior (CIEES, Inter-institutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education). The CIEES was created in 1991 as a non-governmental body, an independent private non-profit institution with responsibilities regarding quality assessment and accreditation of programmes and academic units. The logic behind the agency design was to have on the board not only governmental officials, but also university associations and representatives from academic institutions. At this point in time, there was not a clear distinction between the accreditation of programmes and external evaluation of institutions through the CIEES (see ANUIES, 2018). In fact, according to De Vries (2007): 16), central government proposals sought to include programme accreditations as part of the CIEES functions, but the committees did not agree to enforce compulsory regulatory standards, instead preferring that the CIEES supported the external evaluation using a soft power approach through non-binding recommendations (De Vries, 2007). Hence, licences to universities were still granted by the national Ministry of Education.

In 1995, the ANUIES coordinated the elaboration of a proposal for developing a national accreditation system. This proposal established two alternatives for the consolidation of a regulatory model. The first option – which required a longer implementation period – was to formulate a comprehensive proposal for evaluation and accreditation of institutions, academic programmes and certification of professionals. The second proposal was to carry out partial and incremental actions, such as accreditation and certification, which could be called 'official' and which, on a voluntary basis, allowed HE institutions to obtain permits, licences and authorisations. The first proposal implied a legal regulatory framework with a mandatory system similar to those of other Latin American countries, such as Chile, Argentina and Colombia. The second option was instead based on consensual and voluntary agreements between the government, HEIs and academic associations. Subsequent policy decisions adopted in the following years suggest that the central government opted for the second strategy based on gradual and incremental voluntary policy changes.

Another key QA initiative during this period was developed by CONACYT in 1991 through the creation of a postgraduate quality register to recognise academic programmes which complied with QA standards. Originally, PROMEP only considered state public universities and some technological institutes (De Vries and Álvarez-Mendiola, 1998).

Following this trend, by 2000, the central government had created the Consejo para la Acreditación de la Educación Superior (COPAES, Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education,) as a non-governmental body in charge of regulating accreditation processes and quality agencies (De Vries, 2007). It is worth noting that the creation of COPAES –following the pattern of QA agencies created in the European Higher Education system – responded to the need for a specialised agency for the accreditation of programmes, as the already operating CIEES refused to expand its mandate to do

so, as well as to the need to maintain its regulatory tasks of external evaluation and institutional accreditation on a voluntary basis. According to Rodríguez-Gómez (2014: 201), at the time of its creation, the director of the CIEES was also director of COPAES to ensure, at least in the first stage, control and continuity of the work developed by both institutions. During its first decade, COPAES worked as part of the CIEES structure until 2010, when the ANUIES General Assembly agreed to divide both agencies. The overlap between the CIEES and COPAES was in part due to a lack of a statutory creation and an unclear delegation of responsibilities to QA agencies. Hence, COPAES emerged without a clear regulatory role in terms of compliance and enforcement capacities (De Vries, 2007). However, all in all, the only agency recognised by the central government as an accrediting agency is COPAES.

The first decade of the 21st century witnessed a new step in the restructuring process of public HE. Vicente Fox's administration in 2000 maintained the policies introduced during the 1990s (Rodríguez-Gómez and Ordorika, 2012). For example, until 2003, the CIEES' main activities focused on institutional evaluation, and from 2004, this range of activities covered not only public universities but also technical universities and technical institutes.

During Peña Nieto's presidential term, HE was not within the scope of education reform (Mendoza-Rojas, 2017) as reform deliberately focused on compulsory education and particularly on the evaluation of teachers. In recent decades, the main initiatives for improving the quality of HE have been strongly associated with the relationship between accreditation and the endowment of financial resources, in order to achieve proposed objectives such as regulation of the growth of enrolment, programmes and academic staff. As noted, since the 1990s this strategy was run through programmes such as PROMEP, but also the Comprehensive Programa Institucional de Formación de Investigadores (PIFI, Institutional Researcher Training Programme) created by SEP in 2000, and integrated into the Programa de Fortalecimiento de la Calidad Educativa (PFCE, Programme for Educational Quality Strengthening); and the National Programa Nacional de Posgrados de Calidad (PNPC, National Quality Postgraduate Programme) created by CONACYT in 1991, among others. In summary, however, Mexico does not have proper legislation for QA in the HE system.

Current Configuration of Quality Assurance Agencies in Mexico

The current QA system of HE has evolved into an amalgam of several organisations that operate simultaneously, and although they are intended to perform on a complementary basis, they ultimately carry out overlapping roles. The main agencies are CIEES, COPAES, Centro Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación Superior (CENEVAL, National Centre for the Evaluation of Higher Education), Federación de Instituciones Mexicanas Particulares de Educación Superior (FIMPES, Federation of Private Higher Education Mexican Institutions) and CONACYT. The most prominent of these at under-graduate level are CIEES, COPAES and FIMPES; and at postgraduate level, the CONACYT. Below we will describe each agency to highlight their scope, as well as the role they play in the configuration of QA agencies.

In general, this section shows that in the case of Mexico, accreditation, both of programmes and of institutions, has been implemented as a voluntary process through which HEIs submit themselves to the evaluation of an external body, with the intention of obtaining public recognition for the quality of their educational work (Egido-Gálvez

and Haug, 2006). In general, the process begins with institutional self-evaluation, followed by the assessment performed by the external body, and is finalised with a report written by the agency in question on the accreditation of educational quality (Casas-Medina and Olivas-Valdez, 2011).

CIEES is focused on quality assessment, in which HE institutions can participate on a voluntary basis. CIEES is organised around nine academic committees, seven dedicated to the evaluation of academic programmes, and two to the evaluation of institutional practices. Additionally, CIEES provides advice to institutions and supports the formulation of principles, standards and indicators (Rodríguez-Gómez, 2014). As an example of its performance, from '1991 to July 2006, the CIEES assessed 2,910 programmes', representing 'roughly 20 percent of the programmes offered in the country' (OECD, 2008: 39).

COPAES is mainly responsible for the accreditation of undergraduate academic programmes offered by both public and private HE institutions. One of the main functions of COPAES is to supervise the performance of quality assurance bodies, established as non-profit organisations. Institutions can submit, on a voluntary basis, their undergraduate programmes for accreditation. COPAES's structure of government consists of a director general and a general assembly which contains representatives from the Ministry of Education (SEP), ANUIES, FIMPES, and several professional associations (representing the areas of medicine, veterinary medicine, accounting, engineering and law), while the national academies of science, medicine and engineering participated as founding members. COPAES has authorisation from the SEP to award accreditation for five years with the possibility of renewal. In 2018, COPAES recognised 30 QA agencies covering a wide variety of fields. As an example of its performance, from '2002 to July 2006, COPAES accredited 881 academic programmes, which constitutes nearly 7 percent of all programmes in the country (30 percent of which are from the private sector)' (OECD, 2008: 40). It is worth noting that an important advance in the process of accreditation was carried out as a result of the Comprehensive Institutional Strengthening Program (PIFI), which sought to support HEI in achieving quality for their educational programmes and services. During the implementation of the PIFI the number of academic programmes accredited by the COPAES increased from 156 programmes in 2002 to 1,707 in 2008. However, PIFI was not properly implemented throughout the diversity of HE subsystems.

CONACYT is the leading public institution for the evaluation and quality certification of postgraduate programmes, both for private and for public HEIs that access public funding. In addition, CONACYT manages scholarships and keeps a database on research and postgraduate programmes in Mexico. One major difference compared with other accreditation agencies is that CONACYT is a governmental agency. CONACYT guides scientific and technological policies, including professional formation, and at the postgraduate level, manages the Programa Nacional de Posgrados de Calidad (National Programme of Quality Postgraduates) which is a key mechanism for QA in this domain (Buendía-Espinosa, 2013: 984). It also coordinates the assurance of research quality through the national System of Researchers (SNI).

FIMPES – whose accreditation processes began operating in 1994 – formally operates as a non-profit organisation and is composed of the main private universities in Mexico. FIMPES accredits – on a voluntary basis – educational institutions that comply with quality standards, and such accreditations are based on FIMPES's established benchmarks. It has a Technical Advisory Board which is a collegiate body mainly composed of senior figures of private HE institutions. As Acosta-Rocha (2015) argues, FIMPES

operates as an assessment body, but at the same time, is composed of the institutions it evaluates, a characteristic that may lead to criticisms of biased evaluations. Against this backdrop, Acosta-Rocha (2015) argues that private universities seek to obtain a favourable result from FIMPES at all costs in order to maintain a positive external image.

CENEVAL is a non-profit civil association whose main activity is the design and application of tools for assessing the knowledge, skills and competencies of students. CENEVAL was created as a joint initiative between the central government, and university associations, mainly the ANUIES and FIMPES. It is governed by a general assembly, consisting of educational institutions, associations and colleges of professionals, social and productive organisations, as well as representatives of the executive branch. CENEVAL's main contribution as a QA agency has been the design of measuring instruments and standardised exams. These exams have worked as external evaluation instruments, which allow students and their institutions or universities to verify their performance in light of national standards. For example, the examination of the graduates with EGELs (exam at undergraduate level) functions as a complementary certification which students can obtain alongside their university certificate (Gago-Huguet, 2000).

This brief review of the role of several evaluation agencies shows that the Mexican case of QA regulation is a hybrid arrangement that combines the policy instruments of both a state-centred model and a market-oriented model. In general, the creation of some QA agencies in Mexico has followed international trends. However, although the central government has delegated supervisory tasks to several agencies, some still operate with close links to the executive branch. Moreover, there has been an important growth of private HE providers, but this change has not affected the operation of the state-centred model or created tension between governance models. On the contrary, one can observe a hybrid system in which market-oriented and state-centred policies coexist through different regulatory arrangements.

Assessing the Activities Carried out by Quality Assurance Agencies

In line with comparative studies by Capano and Pritoni (2018), our study shows that in the case of Mexico, the central government has created a diverse amalgam of national agencies for the assessment and accreditation of HE institutions, covering aspects including teaching, research and undergraduate and graduate programmes. In this section, we pay particular attention to the activities carried out by the agencies in charge of accreditation.

Mexico has increased enrolment in HEIs from 10,000 students in 1930 to over 3.7 million students in 2014 (Cremonini et al., 2015). According to ANUIES (2018): 32), in the 2017–2018 academic year undergraduate enrolment reached 4.4 million students; 2.9 million students are enrolled in public universities and almost 1.5 million are enrolled in private universities, distributed through 33,000 programmes in total (ANUIES, 2018: 32). These numbers correspond to a total of 3,186 HEIs, of which 968 are public and 2,218 private.

When it comes to the activities of QA agencies in accreditation processes, according to the public register created by COPAES, as of June 2020 there are 4,034 programmes that have been accredited, of which 3,070 belong to public universities and 964 to private institutions (see Table 2).

As we mentioned in the previous section, QA agencies in Mexico are based on soft instruments instead of hard rules. Because the QA regulatory regime is voluntary, the government introduced a 'carrot strategy', by which it sought to incentivise the

Table 2. Number of Accredited Programmes by HE Subsystem

Public subsystems	Number of accredited programmes	Percentage (%)
Public state universities	1,445	35.8
Technological universities	503	12.5
Technological institutes	355	8.8
Decentralised technologicals	327	8.1
Public federal universities	249	6.2
Other HEIs	118	2.9
Polytechnic universities	69	1.7
Intercultural universities /pedagogical schools	4	0.1
Total public institutions	3,070	76.1
Private subsystem		
Private universities	964	23.9
Total HEIs	4,034	100

Source: Own elaboration based on OECD, 2008.

incorporation of evaluation and accreditation practices. However, the distribution of those accreditations demonstrates that this economic strategy has had a much greater impact on public rather than private HE institutions. Since accreditation is neither mandatory nor necessary, institutions and programmes can legally operate without any accreditation. In addition, the creation of FIMPES – a non-profit organisation composed of private universities and their authorities – as an institution focused on the institutional accreditation of private universities does not imply that they can access public funding. Hence, the lack of access to public funding for private HEIs explains why they have not been incentivised to submit themselves for accreditation.

When it comes to the analysis of the bodies that provide accreditation, we also observe that some provide far more accreditations than others. For example, Table 3 shows that practically 50 percent of all accredited programmes in the country were issued by only two accrediting bodies, the Consejo de Acreditación de la Enseñanza de la Ingeniería (CACEI, Council for the Accreditation of Engineering Education) and the Consejo de Acreditación en Ciencias Administrativas, Contables y Afines (CACECA, Council of Accreditation in Administrative, Accounting and Related Sciences). For instance, CACEI has provided 1,220 programme accreditations, 1,023 for public HEIs and 197 for private institutions. Meanwhile CACECA has accredited 855 programmes, 587 of them from public institutions and 268 from private ones. In this regard, while CACEI has accredited a higher number of public programmes, CACECA has a higher number of private accredited programmes. Clearly engineering programmes are concentrated in public institutions, while the distribution of business and administrative programmes demonstrates a more competitive dynamic between private and public institutions.

In addition, Table 4 also shows that there is broad variation in the number of accredited programmes across regions. In particular, it shows how diverse the HE system is with regard to differences in accreditation levels between public and private institutions across states, as well as how that diversity may relate to other variables such as the average level of schooling of the economically active population, and the level of marginalisation. We observe that states with the largest number of accredited programmes are the states of Mexico and Mexico City. Together, both regions contain a high percentage of Mexico's

Table 3. Number of Accredited Programmes by Accreditation Body coordinated by COPAES

Accreditation Body (coordinated by COPAES)	Total number of accredited programmes	Public accredited programmes	Private accredited programmes
ACCECISO	148	120	28
ANÀDEH	107	64	43
ANPROMAR	20	20	0
CACEB	56	55	1
CACECA	855	587	268
CACEI	1,220	1,023	197
CAESA	81	73	8
CAPEF	13	0	13
CAPEM	16	16	0
CEPPE	59	30	19
CENEIP	115	61	54
COAPEHUM	137	122	15
COMACAF	14	14	0
COMACE	53	49	4
COMACEO	3	3	0
COMAEF	32	29	3
COMAEM	101	53	48
COMAPROD	92	39	53
COMEAA	150	146	4
CONAC	68	25	43
CONACE	57	49	8
CONACI	16	8	8
CONAECQ	40	37	3
CONCAPREN	52	29	23
CONEVET	20	19	1
CONFEDE	53	53	0
Total	3,578	2,724	884

Source: Own elaboration based on COPAES https://www.copaes.org/consulta.php (Accessed June 2020).

population, and – compared to other states – are highly developed and have medium and very low levels of marginalisation, respectively. Another aspect worth highlighting is that the level of education of the economically active population is also among the highest in the country. This suggests that better-quality universities are located in markets with better levels of development and where the population has better opportunities to access education.

When it comes to differences in the levels of accreditation obtained by public and private universities, Table 4 shows that the public universities in each state have a higher percentage of accredited programmes. With regard to private universities, we also note that a small number of private universities accounts for a high number of accredited programmes – such as the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM, Technological Institute of Higher Studies of Monterrey). In contrast, Mexico City demonstrates a different picture of private institutions with accredited programmes, with the highest number of private accredited institutions, 201 out of a total of 385. It is the only state where accredited private HEIs exceed public ones.

Table 4. Number of Accredited Programmes in Public and Private HEIs across Regions

State	Number of accredited programs in public HEIs	Number of public HEIs that concentrate these accreditations	Number of accredited programmes in private HEIs	Number of private HEIs that concentrate these accreditations
Aguascalientes	37	6	6	3
Baja California	131	8	44	6
Baja California Sur	23	5	0	0
Campeche	73	8	0	0
Chiapas	80	8	11	4
Chihuahua	120	10	7	4
Ciudad de México	173	10	225	17
Coahuila	92	12	19	1
Colima	57	3	0	0
Durango	39	12	25	3
Estado de Mexico	390	34	29	3
Guanajuato	129	16	35	5
Guerrero	37	7	1	1
Hidalgo	113	15	3	1
Jalisco	181	11	69	8
Michoacan	108	21	17	5
Morelos	41	5	0	0
Nayarit	42	6	0	0
Nuevo Leon	76	4	38	4
Oaxaca	33	10	1	1
Puebla	222	25	114	10
Queretaro	56	6	50	4
Quintana Roo	51	8	16	2
San Luis Potosi	76	6	10	2
Sinaloa	102	7	0	0
Sonora	155	13	11	2
Tabasco	155	13	11	2
Tamaulipas	91	13	65	10
Tlaxcala	53	7	0	0
Veracruz	213	23	11	3
Yucatan	95	13	46	5
Zacatecas	52	12	0	0

Source: Own elaboration based on COPAES https://www.copaes.org/consulta.php [accessed June 2020].

Although the distribution of accredited programmes among public and private HEIs in general is highly dispersed, some universities – public and private – dominate, with a high number of accredited programmes. For instance, four public universities across four states have the highest number of accredited programmes. These are the University of Guadalajara with 133 programmes, the University of Veracruz with 130, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) with 113, and the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico with 112. Interestingly, UNAM, the biggest university in the country, only has 71 accredited programmes on its campus in Mexico City, and 42 accredited programmes in different campuses located across the state of Mexico. This data also shows that quality assurance has been far more important for public HEIs. All in all, although the number of accreditations has increased in the last decade,

the operation of the QA regime as a whole for HE in Mexico has been limited, both for private and for public institutions (OECD, 2008).

Conclusions

Our results have shown that the QA regime of HE in Mexico evolved into an amalgam of several organisations that operate simultaneously, and although they are intended to perform on a complementary basis, they ultimately carry out overlapping roles. The study has shown that the last three governments have opted for a hybrid set of soft mechanisms to incentivise the adoption and implementation of quality instruments. Although some QA agencies, such as COPAES and CIEES, have made some progress in the transformation of HE policies, the indicators used by these institutions to rate educational quality – such as increasing the level of schooling of academic staff and consolidating infrastructure – do not actually measure the quality of education but instead the necessary conditions to carry out educational processes (Fernández-Fassnacht, 2017).

Although the state has remained the biggest supplier of HE, we have shown that there has been an important growth of private providers in recent decades. In particular, our study has shown that the QA regime in Mexico performs differently in public and private HEIs. While public HEIs make greater use of QA mechanisms, their implementation in private institutions is not as prominent in a HE regime characterised by growing private participation. Consequently, the accreditation system has not become a quality signal from a market perspective. These heterogeneous activities can be explained by the voluntary design of the regulatory instruments, in which the central government has implemented funds for the modernisation of HEIs, including the incorporation of QA practices. These public funds have not included private institutions. Only recently, in 2017, did the government activate a mechanism to incorporate some QA requirements into the licensing process for private institutions, but their performance seems to remain on the same trajectory as previous years.

Research on the HE regime in Mexico has highlighted the need for a new institutional framework that can lay the foundations for a more integrated QA regime (Moreno, 2014). A new evaluation policy must overcome the current logic of resource allocation, and move from a vision that privileges the evaluation of inputs (enrolment, teaching staff, educational programmes) to one that values results and impacts, especially in terms of learning, construction of knowledge, employability and contribution to social equality across regions. In addition, other crucial points to develop include the coordination between HEIs and external stakeholders (Fernández-Fassnacht, 2017), and the strengthening of accountability for the quality assurance regime vis-à-vis society and other institutional players, such as the legislative branch. Since regulatory practices of QA agencies can serve as instruments for the social regulation of welfare state social services, further analysis is needed for assessing to what extent the performance of QA agencies affects quality in the geographical distribution of accreditations, and subsequently, the equity of HE services and access.

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