ALIGNMENT WITH INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION (ISG)

External evaluation report

Organization	National System of Accreditation of Higher Education - Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior (SINAES in Spanish)
Place	San José, Costa Rica
Date of visit	February 24-26, 2025
Report Date	March 30, 2025

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INTRODUCTION

About the review process

The National System of Accreditation of Higher Education (SINAES in Spanish)[1] requested an external evaluation of its performance in compliance with the International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ISGs) by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). SINAES carried out the self-assessment process and submitted the Self-Assessment Report and a list of supporting documentation to INQAAHE on November 13th, 2024.

The external evaluation of SINAES was conducted in accordance with the ISGs, which were published by INQAAHE in 2022 (ISGs), and was conducted by an independent review panel of international experts in higher education quality assurance.

The external evaluation review panel was composed of:

• Rafael Llavori (president of the evaluation panel): expert in evaluation and accreditation of the quality of Higher Education in the European Area.

• Dr. Karen Belfer (secretary of the evaluation panel): expert in quality assessment and accreditation in higher education in Canada.

• Dr. Maura J. Pereira-León (member of the evaluation panel): expert in quality assessment and accreditation in Higher Education, in Latin America.

Appendix 2 includes the identification of the members of the review panel of the external evaluation.

After an exhaustive analysis by the members of the panel of the self-assessment report and pieces of evidence presented by SINAES for the purpose of renewing their INQAAHE certification, a three-day in-person site visit was carried out on Monday 23rd, Tuesday 24th, and Wednesday February 25th, 2025. The agenda included a total of sixteen interviews with authorities, management, and operational staff of SINAES, rectors of higher education institutions, managers of the quality systems of the institutions, peer evaluators, representatives of national professional associations, and students. **Appendix 2** shows the agenda of the audit visit, showcasing the groups interviewed in each of the sessions conducted by the review panel.

The interviews were conducted in an atmosphere of collegiality and cooperation, which allowed the panel to gather the information required to answer their questions. The panel appreciated SINAES' attitude towards the review process. The panel would like to thank all the participants gathered during the audit visit for their willingness, patience, and positive attitude towards all the issues raised by the panel members.

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[1] See **Appendix 1** - Glossary

The panel would also like to thank SINAES for the organization and management of the audit visit.

The audit visit concluded in a session with the authorities of SINAES, during which the chair of the panel, on behalf of all members, presented a preliminary summary of their preliminary observations during the external review process.

After the audit visit, the secretary of the panel prepared the report considering the available documentation, the interviews conducted during the audit visit, and the panel's conclusions. All members of the panel reviewed and contributed to the report. The final version of the report was agreed upon among the panel members and was sent to SINAES for verification before being submitted to the INQAAHE Board of Directors for final approval.

About Costa Rica's Higher Education System

The higher education system in Costa Rica is known for its quality and access. Costa Rican higher education model includes: 1) para-university education, made up of public and private institutions recognized by the Higher Education Council (CSE in Spanish). These offer short careers of two or three years; 2) university system, includes public universities with autonomy given by the Constitution and coordinated and represented by the National Council of Rectors (CONARE in Spanish); and 3) private universities, are governed by the National Council of Private University Higher Education (CONESUP in Spanish). These institutions offer a wide range of academic and research programs.

About SINAES

SINAES in Costa Rica is responsible for guaranteeing the quality of institutions, schools, and higher education academic programs in the country. Founded in 1999, SINAES was created through an agreement between Costa Rica's leading public and private universities. Its main objective is to contribute to the continuous improvement of higher education through rigorous evaluation and accreditation processes. INAES is the entity authorized by the Costa Rica legislation to officially certify the quality of higher education institutions, degree programs, and courses that voluntarily decide to undergo its evaluation process to certify their quality.. Additionally, it supports higher education institutions (HEIs) with research, development, innovation projects, training, guidance and monitoring of member institutions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Costa Rica's National System of Accreditation of Higher Education (SINAES in Spanish) has been evaluated for the second time by the International *Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education* (INQAAHE). The evaluation has been carried out in accordance with the International Standards and Guidelines for Quality

Assurance in Tertiary Education, 2022 edition (ISGs)[2] by an independent team of international experts (or evaluation panel) appointed by INQAAHE and accepted by SINAES.

The evaluation was carried out jointly by INQAAHE and RIACES (Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) in accordance with the agreement established between international organizations and SINAES as the national accreditation body subject to the review. A single combined review panel was established which reviewed SINAES against INQAAHE and RIACES' standards framework as part of a single review exercise.

In accordance with INQAAHE guidelines, SINAES prepared a self-assessment report and a set of supporting documents that could be reviewed by the panel of experts prior to the site visit.

Following the established procedure, the panel visited the SINAES facilities on February 24, 25 and 26, 2025 and met with representatives of the Agency and stakeholders. Appendices 2 and 3 contain information on the agenda for the audit visit and the review panel, in accordance with the procedure established by INQAAHE.

After analyzing the self-assessment report, the documents and evidence provided by SINAES in a "cloud" hosting service, and the information obtained during the interviews carried out during the audit visit, the review panel presents the conclusions of their observations in this report, from which it extracts the following detailed assessment.

The Panel considers that SINAES substantially complies with the INQAAHE *International Standards and Guidelines*: for three guidelines, the assessment is substantially compliant, and for the three others, fully compliant**.** In each of the guidelines, the Panel has identified strengths and areas of development that have been included to recognize the efforts made by SINAES since its last evaluation by INQAAHE in 2019, while identifying important elements for the continuous improvement of the agency's activities.

The panel is aware that there might be an overlap between the recommendations stated in this report and some areas of development identified by the executive direction and/or the council CNA of SINAES.

With respect to Standard I *Legitimacy of the External Quality Assurance Provider (EQAP),* the Panel considers that SINAES **substantially complies** with the provisions of the ISG. It is a recognized organization with a solid reputation, endorsed by the government and its direct stakeholders in the tertiary education sector. The higher education community recognizes and values their contributions to academic quality in Costa Rica. Its activities are mission-bound and are carried out with adequate human and technical resources, and funding that, although sufficient, is highly

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[2] See **Appendix 3-** International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education, ISGs

dependent on public funds. The panel considers that SINAES should balance this financial asymmetry by finding greater contributions from its services and expanding its current portfolio with the backing of the National Accreditation Council (CNA in Spanish).

Finally, SINAES has a quality policy and the appropriate instruments to achieve its continuous improvement objectives. The quality assurance processes are applied to the evaluation procedures designed for accreditation purposes, although the Panel recommends strengthening the mechanisms with the goal of quickening the issuance of accreditation and reconsideration resolutions by the CNA.

With regard to Standard II *The EQAP framework for external review of quality assessments of higher education providers (TEPs),* the Panel considers that SINAES **substantially complies** with the ISG. The agency respects the autonomy, identity, and integrity of HEIs and their academic programs and recognizes that quality assurance is the primary responsibility of the institutions. The panel verified that the evaluation processes for accreditation purposes developed by SINAES explicitly include mechanisms that impact the continuous improvement for those responsible for the schools and academic programs, creating and consolidating a "culture of quality" in HEIs. An essential aspect of the accreditation process and its standards is its design, which considers the diversity of the country's HEIs, in both their mission and vision statements. The procedures are designed and applied by the peer evaluators, considering this diversity and with the guarantee of serving all the HEIs. Although SINAES develops a wide variety of actions to, on the one hand, inform and, on the other, train the technical staff of the HEIs and the peer evaluators, the Panel has noted the need to increase the training of peer evaluators, especially the international peers, to increase significantly the number of experts who carry out the audits. The Panel highlights how SINAES has increased its compliance with this standard in comparison to the previous external evaluation in 2019.

Standard III *3 The EQAP's Review of TE Providers: Evaluation, Decision Making and Appeals*, SINAES **substantially complies** with the provisions of the ISG. The evaluation of HEIs by the external panel is carried out using evaluation procedures grounded on a solid methodology by a very experienced technical team. The evaluation guides used for the evaluation clearly inform the schools and academic programs of the process and their responsibilities as providers. SINAES has a decision-making procedure that guarantees the terms of the resolutions of the accreditation processes with legal certainty. However, the Panel has noted some dissatisfaction among HEI officials regarding the delay in issuing final accreditation and appeal resolutions.

Standard IV *Internationalization and External Relations,* SINAES **fully complies** with the provisions of the ISG. S has strategic support for its internationalization mandate through an existing objective of the Strategic Plan in place. This support has allowed the agency to consolidate its presence in the international network of accreditation agencies to which it belongs. Likewise, the agency has increased the number and relevance of activities in the international arena. SINAES has also maintained its role

as the "interface" between the international sphere of quality assurance in the region and the stakeholders they serve, especially the universities.

With respect to Standard V *Integrity, Disclosure and Transparency*, SINAES **fully complies** with the provisions of the ISG. SINAES operates under strict technical and legislative parameters to ensure the integrity of all its functions. Each employee receives a detailed orientation on the institution's mission, vision, and values, in addition to the Code of Ethics. The agency complies with these regulations. Its marketing strategies include the regular disclosure and publication of its activities, which are in perfect harmony with the expectations of transparency stated in this Standard. The Panel highlights SINAES' policy for making public the annual budget, revenues, and tenders, among other aspects, which has become a benchmark for tertiary education sector organizations in the country and the region

Finally, Standard VI *Stakeholder role and Engagement*; SINAES fully complies with the ISG. SINAES develops numerous initiatives to publicize the results of its processes and promotes conferences and workshops to members of the country's HEIs and representatives of other stakeholder groups on the topics related to its area of responsibility. The Division of Evaluation and Accreditation (DEA in Spanish) and the Division of Research, Development and Innovation (INDEIN in Spanish) have created events in coordination with other departments to reach audiences of interest that are not yet part of the target audience of SINAES. Likewise, the panel notes the significant participation of stakeholders in these forums, which cover topics related to accreditation and continuous improvement.

ASSESSMENT OF COMPLIANCE WITH INQAAHE INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

1. Legitimacy of the External Quality Assurance Provider (EQAP)

☐ Non-compliant   ☐ Partially compliant   ■ Substantially compliant   ☐ Fully compliant

1.1 MISSION, GOVERNANCE AND ORGANIZATION

THE EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROVIDER (EQAP) IS A RECOGNIZED, CREDIBLE ORGANIZATION, TRUSTED BY KEY STAKEHOLDERS: THE GOVERNMENT, TE PROVIDERS (TEPs) AND PUBLIC AT LARGE. ITS GOVERNANCE, STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS ENABLE EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT OPERATIONS IN LINE WITH ITS MISSION.

1.1.1 The legal basis for the National System of Accreditation of Higher Education (SINAES in Spanish) is clearly defined by two laws of the Republic. The activities of SINAES have been declared to be of public interest, since its purposes consist of planning, organizing, developing, implementing, controlling and monitoring the evaluation and accreditation processes of university and para-university academic programs of both public or private institutions that voluntarily submit themselves to a rigorous assessment of their curriculum, faculty, infrastructure, methodology, among other aspects; with the purpose of determining and guaranteeing compliance with the appropriate quality standards.

Article 2 of Law No. 8798 establishes that "the criteria and standards defined by SINAES shall have an official status of the national academic quality criteria". The SINAES Accreditation Manual is the national academic criteria of quality and serves as the instrument that dictates the guidelines, criteria, and standards for future national accreditation agencies to adjust to these regulations appropriately. Thus, in practice, all careers, academic programs, or institutions, including other accreditation agencies operating in Costa Rica, and seeking evaluation for accreditation purposes and their subsequent benefits, must do so based on the criteria defined by SINAES. The governmental legal framework empowers SINAES as the only entity authorized by the State to attest to the quality of higher education publicly. In turn, Law No. 8798 gives the Executive Branch the power to provide financing to SINAES through the national budget of the Republic.

SINAES enjoys wide recognition from the stakeholders. In 2012, through Executive Decree No. 37036, the Ministry of Education (MEP) granted SINAES the power to approve proposals for changes in the curricula presented for accredited careers at private universities because of the implementation of improvement plans.

In addition, SINAES enjoys total independence and autonomy, as ratified by the Attorney General's Office (PGR in Spanish) when it indicated that SINAES is a decentralized body with the highest degree. The PGR also clarified the scope of the

legal system, which grants full independence to SINAES to execute its objectives and make administrative and governance decisions. The SINAES has always had total autonomy.

1.1.2 In 2022, a new Strategic Plan 2023-2027 was approved, which establishes as its mission:

> "*We are the National System that contributes to the achievement of the continuous improvement of higher education institutions through the evaluation, accreditation and monitoring of academic programs, careers and institutions, as well as the development of research, training, innovation and production of knowledge in the field of quality assurance at the national and international levels*" (updated by the CNA on June 7 and communicated through ACUERDO-CNA-145-2023).

The mission is clearly articulated and explicit and sets out the responsibility for ensuring the external quality of tertiary education. The mission describes the key functions of EQAP, as well as the purpose and scope of its activities, and its vision:

> "*To be recognized as a strategic partner by higher education institutions that seek continuous improvement as a decisive actor, through advocacy on public policy, with international projection, and integrated into the most important accreditation networks.*"

1.1.3 The EQAP has a well-articulated and coherent public management model based on the administrative independence from the National Council of Rectors (CONARE in Spanish). In 2019, the SINAES defined its Organic Regulations to establish a new structure, organization, hierarchical relations, and internal coordination, to comply with the functions assigned to it by law.

1.1.4 SINAES has two bodies: 1. The National Accreditation Council (CNA) on which the support, advisory, and internal audit units depend, and 2. The Executive Directorate, to which the following functional areas depend:

- Division of Evaluation and Accreditation (DEA in Spanish)
- Research, Development and Innovation Division (INDEIN in Spanish)
- Division of Management Support Services (DSAG in Spanish)

1.1.5 There is a manual that contains the profile of each position in the institution, with the characteristics, functions, knowledge and competencies, according to their occupational, functional and organizational location; in addition, it formalizes institutional administrative practices as a tool for initiating the processes of recruitment and selection of personnel, management of compensation, work assignments, development and performance management. The administrative structure of SINAES has clearly established its responsibilities, which allows it to effectively and efficiently attend to the accreditation processes and the evaluation tasks of the Internal Audit.

1.1.6 EQAP's activities are based on the Institutional Strategic Plan (PEI in Spanish), based on which the Annual Operation Plans (PAO in Spanish) are proposed. The Annual Operational Plans (PAO in Spanish) are approved by the CNA and must be linked to the institutional budget of SINAES. In this planning instrument, the entity defines the actions to be executed and the goals to be achieved, for which it carries out semiannual evaluations of the fulfillment of goals as a control and monitoring mechanism, and then establishes corrective measures in the cases that merit it. SINAES has the appropriate mechanisms to evaluate its progress, impact and plans for the future.

1.2 RESOURCES

THE EQAP HAS ADEQUATE RESOURCES — PHYSICAL, FINANCIAL AND HUMAN — TO CARRY OUT ITS MISSION.

1.2.1 EQAP has the staff it needs to carry out external evaluations effectively and efficiently. SINAES has a manual that contains the profile of each position in the institution, with the characteristics, functions, knowledge, and competencies, according to their occupational, functional, and organizational location. It also has a process for compiling the training needs generated by the executives of each area to ensure that its staff have the skills and knowledge that allow them to develop professionally and thus meet the objectives of the PAO and PEI.

1.2.2 The external evaluation process is carried out with the participation of three peer evaluators (two international and one national). SINAES maintains a database of professionals from different countries and areas of knowledge. To keep this database up to date and with enough people in the different disciplines being evaluated, a series of internal efforts are carried out to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the information.

Regarding the training of external evaluators, the evaluation and accreditation managers (GEA is Spanish) conduct an induction process with each team of peers prior to the external evaluation visit, explaining and giving details on the work to be carried out. In addition, a virtual peer training course called "Official Quality Accreditation Process for External Evaluators" has been implemented since 2023.

The course lasts five weeks and involves a total of 21 hours of work. When the report was submitted, about 10% of the peer evaluators had completed the course.

Interviews with stakeholders revealed the need to increase and strengthen academic training programs for peer evaluators, more specifically, international ones. The lack of training has negatively impacted their understanding of the Costa Rican context, the regulations governing the education system, and the autonomy and independence of higher education institutions.

1.2.3 Annually, the SINAES prepares budgets according to the income and expenditures related to planning the annual work, derived from the PEI and PAO; in addition, parallel to the PEI, a plan called the Strategic Plan for Information Technologies (PETIC in Spanish) is created and attached to the established budget, to

address the information technology needs, which include both software and hardware.

The institution has two sources of financing: 1. The transfer from the central government, established by law (Law No. 8798, Article 3), and 2. Revenue from "services". The transfer from the Government represents the main source of income for the institution, which ranges from 95% to 98%.

From 2018-2019, SINAES invested time and resources in a "technological transformation" process that included staff training, the development of internal processes to reduce time, and the use of technologies and applications to increase the organization's operational efficiency.

The evaluation has shown that SINAES has the physical, virtual, and financial resources necessary to fulfill its mission and objectives. Although its budget is legally defined, the amounts and allocations may vary depending on the country's economic and political situation.

The panel finds that the growing demand for accreditations, driven by the value placed on this recognition and the four-year reaccreditation cycle inherent in the model, poses an ongoing challenge to the DEA's operational capacity.

1.3 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

THE EQAP HAS IN PLACE POLICIES AND MECHANISMS FOR ITS INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE THAT DEMONSTRATE A CONTINUING EFFORT TO MAINTAIN AND IMPROVE THE QUALITY AND INTEGRITY OF ITS ACTIVITIES.

1.3.1 SINAES has a procedures manual, "PR-CA01: Control of quality system documents," aimed at ensuring the organization's internal and external quality. However, this manual focuses primarily on document management, beyond a comprehensive approach to continuous improvement. Although the PEI includes a strategic objective of quality assurance, SINAES is currently adjusting the action plan to achieve its full implementation.

The SINAES adheres to the "Law of Internal Controls" and must respond to it, independent of the constant change in the national context, as well as its own challenges in strengthening public management, particularly Law No. 8292. National regulations require internal, operational, and financial audits, as well as risk assessment, which drives constant review and improvement in the institution.

1.3.2 SINAES has approved procedure PR-CA03: "Self-evaluation, control, monitoring and external evaluation for internal improvement." This procedure establishes SINAES's process of self-evaluation and external evaluation with the aim of obtaining international recognition of good practices or for the purposes of continuous improvement.

Additionally, in the report and in the meetings with stakeholders, the panel found that SINAES has been developing, for the last three years, a "360° evaluation system" to assess its own activities. However, to date, this system is not yet in active operation.

The panel recommends strengthening existing mechanisms to streamline the decision-making process on the technical evaluation instruments developed by the SINAES technical staff and approved by the CNA.

1.3.3 The SINAES compiles data on accreditation processes, which include information on accreditation by area of knowledge, higher education institution (HEI), career, and program during the various stages. These results are disseminated through an annual newsletter, ensuring transparency and visibility of accreditation management.

1.3.4 EQAP has the authority to authorize the operation of other accreditation agencies, guaranteeing the quality and legitimacy of their processes. To maintain this authorization, agencies must undergo annual monitoring and certify their good practices as second-tier accreditation agencies. Failure to comply with these requirements may result in the revocation of the authorization.

SINAES strives to maintain accreditation management practices adapted to the various types of HEIs that exist in the country. However, the panel sees an opportunity to clarify and document the specific differences and similarities between these modalities, thus strengthening consistency and equity in accreditation processes.

1.3.5 SINAES conducts institutional self-evaluations for certification purposes and participates in periodic external reviews, including evaluations by INQAAHE every five years and SIACES every six years. These practices reflect a commitment to continuous improvement and accountability.

Best practices
− SINAES has excellent physical, technological, and human resources to carry out its activities, which guarantees continuity in its work and makes it a benchmark in the field of public policy bodies in Costa Rica.
− SINAES undergoes external reviews at frequent intervals, every five years with INQAAHE and every six years with SIACES.

Recommendations for improvement

The panel recommends:

— Strengthen existing mechanisms to streamline the decision-making process on the technical evaluation instruments developed by the SINAES technical staff and approved by the CNA.

— Define a strategy aimed at planning for the increase in demand for accreditation applications driven by the growing value given to this recognition, as well as the four-year reaccreditation cycle inherent to the model. This will allow the DEA to respond in the immediate future with the necessary operational capacity to address this challenge.

— Promote amending the Law that grants the SINAES the ability to design public policies that benefit quality assurance in the higher education system.

— Strengthen the equity and consistency of evaluation processes for accreditation purposes by adapting them to the various types of HEIs that exist in the country.

2. The EQAP framework for external review of quality of TEPs

☐ Non-compliant ☐ Partially compliant ■ Substantially compliant ☐ Fully compliant

2.1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EQAP AND TERTIARY EDUCATION PROVIDERS (TEPs)

THE EQAP RECOGNIZES TEPs AS HAVING PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY FOR QUALITY AND RELEVANCE AND PROVIDING SUPPORT IN PROMOTING TRUST AND CREDIBILITY.

2.1.1 The accreditation model in place since 2009 states:

> *"To promote spaces and mechanisms for permanent and participatory self-evaluation in Costa Rican higher education institutions, recognizing and sharing with them information on the value of self-evaluation as a fundamental tool to guarantee their continuous improvement."*

Official accreditation involves a joint and ongoing commitment between the HEI and SINAES to achieve higher-quality outcomes while respecting institutional autonomy. This collaboration aims to provide higher education institutions with valuable resources to better fulfill their responsibility for self-regulation and quality improvement, and address weaknesses while building on the strengths of their academic programs.

The agency respects the autonomy, identity, and integrity of institutions and academic programs and recognizes that quality assurance is HEIs' primary responsibility.

Similarly, the preparation and execution of the improvement plan is carried out autonomously. Universities design actions that align with their mission and vision, considering their organizational capacities and available resources.

2.1.2 The current regulations of SINAES are based on the constitutional principles that guarantee respect for and promote essential values such as equitable access, responsibility, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and social responsibility towards the public interest. The new IEP 2023-2027 reaffirms these values in its objectives, for example:

> *"Institutional values equity: use of impartiality to recognize the rights and merits of each one, using equivalence as a basis for equality, adapting the rules for specific cases in order to seek justice and responsibility: mixture of gratitude, loyalty and sincerity, which leads to commitment to the institution, with work, with colleagues, with recipients and with society."*

The quality criteria evaluated by SINAES mention this expectation of guaranteeing access to careers with equal opportunities, without discrimination, and with respect for diversity. However, they do not cover the area of academic freedom.

2.1.3 SINAES actively promotes the creation of organizational structures dedicated to quality assurance within affiliated Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Through its "Affiliation Regulations", it establishes as a fundamental requirement that HEIs have the necessary procedures and resources to carry out accreditation processes:

> "... *they refer to the capacity of the institution and the career to ensure quality, to sustain official accreditation, and to achieve compliance with the established improvement plan. The policies, guidelines and mechanisms established to facilitate the implementation of the self-evaluation process, as well as the preparation and execution of the improvement plan, its monitoring and follow-up, are of interest.*"

The panel recognizes that this fundamental requirement encourages the development of autonomous entities and processes focused on the self-management of institutional quality and the sustainability of the improvements achieved.

The evidence consulted and the interviews show that SINAES seeks to ensure that HEIs not only achieve accreditation but also develop a culture of continuous improvement and long-term sustainability.

2.1.4 SINAES, through the DEA, conducts a periodic review of the guidelines and procedures associated with accreditation processes. The agency has sought to expedite its procedures to reduce the burden on HEIs, without reducing the rigor of its evaluations.

2.1.5 SINAES has developed detailed guides and guidelines for its comprehensive accreditation model for undergraduate degrees, graduate academic programs, and distance learning academic programs, as well as specialized evaluation criteria for engineering, architecture, and law degrees. This information is available for consultation on the official website of SINAES: https://www.sinaes.ac.cr/areas-2/areas-dea/.

2.2 THE EQAP's STANDARDS FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY REVIEW

THE STANDARDS VALUE DIVERSITY OF PROVISIONS AND PROMOTE TRUST, RELEVANCE, ENHANCED QUALITY OF TE PROVISIONS, AND THUS PROMOTE A QUALITY CULTURE.

2.2.1 Aware of the institutional diversity it covers, SINAES has formulated its regulations with the utmost respect for the autonomy of higher education institutions. This principle is clearly reflected in the documents describing the accreditation process. The various assessment models and their guidelines explicitly express this condition:

> "*It respects the academic models and management styles of the different institutions, careers and academic programs; it stimulates innovation and flexibility – understood as a creative and pertinent response to the circumstances marked by a*

dizzying acceleration of change – it understands, studies and attends to the different developments in different institutions".

During interviews with stakeholders, the panel collected comments that point to a departure from these principles when it is sometimes found that peer evaluators make value judgments that do not seem to respect the diversity and trust placed in the performance of higher education institutions.

The panel recommends that SINAES strengthen existing mechanisms in the processes of training, monitoring, and peer support so that evaluators avoid omitting value judgments during their collaborations with SINAES.

2.2.2 The current and ongoing evaluation models of SINAES have been constructed, and their methodology includes the vision of various populations that participate in the evaluation processes for accreditation. The corresponding interest groups participate in its definition and review, such as university authorities, university quality units, accredited careers, and SINAES officials, among others. However, due to the high level of consultation carried out, change in the national panorama and leadership in the CNA, the new accreditation model that has been developed for nine years, today has not seen the light of its implementation.

The panel recommends strengthening existing mechanisms to streamline the decision-making process before management and the CNA regarding the approval of new technical instruments designed by the technical body.

2.2.3 The SINAES models are structured in such a way as to allow quality assessment to cover multiple topics. The topics indicated in this INQAAHE standard (with the exception of academic integrity) are fully incorporated into the SINAES criteria.

2.2.4 In the middle of the accreditation period, i.e., year two, SINAES asks the accredited career or program to submit the Progress Report on Compliance with the Improvement Commitment. As part of the follow-up stage, SINAES hires a professional to verify the degree of compliance with the scheduled actions. This review involves the documentary analysis of the information provided by the career or program and a meeting with the Self-Evaluation Commission.

Once received at SINAES, the Evaluation and Accreditation Manager prepares a technical input for the CNA, which proceeds to make an agreement and indicates to the career or program important aspects to consider in the following two years of the accreditation period available to all interested public.

2.2.5 The instruments and guides for HEIs are located on SINAES' website and offer all the information on the steps related to the accreditation processes.

The manual that contains the profile of each position describes in detail the internal procedures to be followed in each of its stages of a career or program in the process of accreditation. SINAES determines an Evaluation and Accreditation Manager for each process, and its functions to manage and monitor accreditation tasks are clearly established.

The interviews revealed the positive opinion of all stakeholders regarding the accompaniment work carried out by the Evaluation and Accreditation Managers throughout the accreditation process.

2.2.6 The SINAES "Code of Ethics" is the main reference for the ethical terms of the evaluation and accreditation process. It establishes the responsibilities of the different actors, including SINAES staff, members of the CNA, and peer evaluators. However, this code does not directly cover INQAAHE's criteria for academic integrity.

2.3 THE EQAP's EXTERNAL REVIEW PROCESS

THE EXTERNAL REVIEW FRAMEWORK HAS A CLEAR SET OF PROCEDURES FOR EACH TYPE OF REVIEW.

2.3.1 and **2.3.2** The external review process (the procedures and guidelines for each stage of the accreditation process) is governed by a reliable methodology and available to the public (on its website). This ensures their independence and relevance in the current context. The EQAP has demonstrated its ability to conduct virtual and in-person assessments, building trust from institutions and all stakeholders in the process.

The instruments have been used repeatedly and were adapted during the pandemic to respond to the requirements of virtual visits. The methodology used at this time is of a hybrid nature, which has made it possible to ensure the contribution of international peers in a context of collaboration and development of national academic quality.

During the interviews, the panel identified a clear need to update the accreditation model to respond to the demands of the current reaccreditation context. The current model is insufficient to address the particularities of reaccreditation and the increase in the volume of accreditation and reaccreditation, which impacts the system and SINAES's workload. For this reason, the panel recommends that the University's governance body develop initiatives.

2.3.3 and **2.3.4** In 2021, the CNA approved a policy for peer review teams and the peer review selection mechanism. This policy includes the documentation associated with the external evaluation teams, as well as the guidelines for the qualification of peers, such as academic degree, teaching experience, experience in university administration, publications, professional experience, and previous experience as an evaluator with SINAES and outside SINAES. On the other hand, each peer receives an orientation and a digital folder with access to the information.

SINAES seeks that, together and in a complementary way, the group of peers has a diverse and multinational vision of higher education institutions, have an up-to-date perspective of the discipline they are evaluating and have experience and previous training in evaluation processes for accreditation.

During the review, the panel found that peer training is voluntary, showing 10% participation.

2.3.5 To avoid conflicts of interest during the external evaluation, SINAES has two tools:

a) The SINAES reviews the attestations and the experience of each of the /professional candidates for the role of external peers. Subsequently, the information is verified in communication with each applicant. In addition, it has a Code of Ethics that applies to all peers that ensures there are no conflicts of interest.

b) SINAES communicates the names of the professionals hired to the academic programs and attaches their curriculum. Academic or procedural arguments are accepted as program demonstrates that: 1) the peer does not meet the necessary conditions to perform the role of evaluator in accordance with the requirements proposed by SINAES; 2) the peer has a conflict of interest with the institution; and 3) there are irreconcilable differences of an academic order between the program and the peer.

2.3.6 The guideline for external evaluations used since the pandemic (2020) establishes that the Evaluation and Accreditation Manager (GEA in Spanish) meets with the peer team the week before the start of the external evaluation visit to give the appropriate orientation. This accompaniment is permanent and continuous throughout the external evaluation process. The peers must comply with the requirements established by SINAES, so the coherence of the evaluation is safeguarded, independent of the evaluation team.

The guide for an external evaluation of a university or para-university academic programs is publicly accessible through its website https://www.sinaes.ac.cr/areas-2/areas-dea/).

2.3.7 The accreditation process is made up of different stages in which the deadlines for the delivery of materials and their attention are clearly defined. Among the strategic goals established of the PEI 2018-2022 was the AE3 activity "Increasing efficiency and quality in management," and it was achieved. At the time, the accreditation process took an average of eight months. In the last five years, the average time has been 6.8 months.

During the interviews, the panel found two instances that must be resolved to strengthen this criterion:

a) Tightening the deadlines for the peer evaluators to prepare the final report could compromise the analysis and, therefore, the final decisions.
b) The time required by the CNA to reach consensus on decisions sometimes generates very long delays in the issuance of accreditation reports, which affects compliance with the established deadlines and causes uncertainty in the system.

2.3.8 The peer evaluators prepare the preliminary and final reports in a fully digitized format, as established by the SINAES.

The EQAP allows schools and academic programs to submit clarifications or observations within a given timeline to the final external evaluation report.

The final peer evaluation report is reviewed by the GEA. If anything is missing, it is sent back to the peer evaluators to complete, and when it is received again, it is forwarded to the CNA.

The institution may submit a reconsideration to SINAES of the CNA's declaration if it considers that the statement indicates opportunities for improvement that the program considers irrelevant.

2.3.9 SINAES has clear and specific instruments for developing the self-evaluation report and has designed different guides and support mechanisms for HEIs that are carrying out this process. The GEA accompanies the institution in its preparation for and during the external evaluation. The GEA also serves as a facilitator for the peers.

For the external audit visit, SINAES provides the academic programs with a format for the agenda that is prepared according to the expected meetings that should be established according to the particularities of the program.

Through the INDEIN and DEA, strategies are defined and implemented for the training and updating of professionals in the fields of internal evaluation (self-assessment), external evaluation, curriculum development, and other topics that are necessary for the purpose of enhancing the quality of academic programs. At the initiative of the Executive Director, INDEIN has been holding virtual forums with interdisciplinary teams since 2020 (more than 50 meetings, as of the date this report was published). Since 2020, INDEIN has incorporated these meetings into its everyday work activities.

2.4 REGULAR SYSTEMIC REVIEWS

THE EQAP CONDUCTS REGULAR SYSTEMIC/THEMATIC EVALUATIONS TO INFORM ITS STAKEHOLDERS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC ABOUT ISSUES, DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS IN THE SYSTEM.

2.4.1 Through INDEIN, SINAES has established lines of research to support the HEIs in defining and developing their research initiatives, such as the internal portfolios of research projects, the co-financing of research academic programs and training projects, and activities for knowledge transfer. These actions respond to a) areas of improvement identified in the accreditation processes; b) requests for support submitted by affiliated HEIs, accredited academic programs and other interest groups, c) requests from the CNA, d) results of the evaluations of academic programs, projects and activities, and e) international trends for the improvement of the quality in higher education.

To strengthen inter-institutional and intersectoral work with other bodies in the system, SINAES has convened, for example, the Ministry of Public Education (MEP in Spanish), professional associations, research networks and centers, and accreditation agencies from various contexts.

Information on these projects can be found at https://www.sinaes.ac.cr/areas-2/areas/.

Since the internal evaluation processes of EQAP activities are not currently reviewed regularly, the issues that are investigated and reported are mostly operational in nature.

The interviews conducted allowed the panel to verify that SINAES uses various communication channels to disseminate reports on trends and impacts to all stakeholders regularly.

2.4.2 Law No. 8256 establishes that SINAES must maintain public information on accredited careers, and they do so by: regularly updating their website, publishing announcements on Facebook channels and the national written press.

The agency prepares and regularly communicates integrated reports on its results for the entire system through different resources and communication channels.

The results of research, training, and knowledge transfer are disseminated through the national press, newsletters, MailChimp, the SINAES website, and social networks (Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn).

Best practices

− SINAES has processes in place to ensure that HEIs not only achieve accreditation but also develop a culture of continuous improvement and long-term sustainability.
− The panel notes the excellent support given by the GEA throughout the accreditation process, which the interested parties have unanimously recognized.
− The use of international peers in all evaluation processes carried out by SINAES.
− The Introduction of continuous improvement mechanisms to significantly and progressively reduce the time taken to carry out the accreditation process to less than eight months.
− The intersectionality that SINAES has achieved through the field of higher education in Costa Rica and all its players.
− INDEIN's work in creating and consolidating the so-called virtual academic meetings stands out, having held 11 between 2021 and 2022.

Requirements

− Create mechanisms for the review of the decision-making process to avoid significant waiting delays for accreditation resolutions by the HEIs.
− Proceed with the publication and implementation of the new accreditation model.

Recommendations for improvement

The panel recommends:

− Implement mandatory training for peer evaluators, focused on ensuring the consistency of evaluation judgments to reflect the principles of freedom and autonomy of institutions, as well as the reality of the national context.

- Establish mechanisms to increase participation in the peer evaluators' training, which, according to the information collected in the interviews, is reaching only 10%.
- Accelerate the implementation of the 360° review and evaluation model of accreditation processes.
- Review and adjust the reaccreditation model to respond to the increase in demand for accreditation for new and existing academic programs without sacrificing the process's effectiveness and efficiency.
- Review the reaccreditation methodology to focus on aspects not previously evaluated during the accreditation process, such as aspects included in the improvement plans and the changes implemented after the program was accredited, to make the reaccreditation process more efficient and effective.
- Strengthen the mechanisms that offer follow-up to universities and offer effective feedback on improvement plans arising from the accreditation or reaccreditation process.

3. EQAP's Evaluation of Higher Education Service Providers: Evaluation, Decision-Making and Appeals

☐ Non-compliant ☐ Partially compliant ■ Substantially compliant ☐ Fully compliant

3.1 EVALUATION

THE EVALUATION CONDUCTED BY EXTERNAL PANEL IS BASED ON A CLEARLY ARTICULATED AND PUBLICLY AVAILABLE CRITERIA AND METHODOLOGY.

3.1.1 SINAES has clearly articulated evaluation models supported by a sound methodology. The structure and contents arise from the analysis of the needs of the higher education system in Costa Rica, using consultants and experts, as well as aligning with international trends in quality assurance. These models are analyzed, discussed and fed back by all relevant actors, resulting in evaluation models consistent with best practices in quality assurance and validated by the Costa Rican higher education sector.

Currently, SINAES has seven evaluation models for various disciplines and modalities:

GENERAL MODELS	DISCIPLINARY MODELS
Undergraduate courses (2009)	Engineering (2010)
Para-universities (2013)	Architecture (2010)
Postgraduate (2012)	Law (2010)
Distance learning (2011)	

3.1.2 Each evaluation model has guides for every stage: self-evaluation, external evaluation, and follow-up phases. These guides are designed to inform the program and the evaluation panel of their responsibilities in each stage in a detailed and differentiated way.

During the external evaluation, an additional process control mechanism is applied through the participation of the GEA, which, as an observer during the process, can interfere in the event of anomalies, to adjust and ensure the coherent and consistent application of the criteria and methodology.

3.1.3 The panel has been able to verify that the EQAP publishes on its website the information and regulations pertaining to each stage of the accreditation process, as well as the list of accredited careers. The information appears under the name of the university or para-university, and the disciplines.

In relation to the performance of HEIs, it is important to indicate that SINAES does not issue value judgments since the bodies in charge of evaluating the performance of HEIs in Costa Rica are CONARE, for public universities; the CONESUP, for private universities; and the CSE, belonging to the MEP, for para-universities.

3.2 DECISION-MAKING

THE EQAP HAS POLICIES AND PROCEDURES IN PLACE THAT ENSURE FAIR AND INDEPENDENT DECISION-MAKING ON REVIEWED CASES.

3.2.1 The external evaluation process is detailed below, includes both information provided by the career/program and by external sources.

The agenda of the audit visit is built in conjunction with the program, taking into account the meetings that SINAES has established within its protocols.

In order to make the accreditation decision, the CNA assesses all the attestations submitted:

- For the program:
    - The self-assessment report
    - The Preliminary Improvement Commitment
    - Response (comments on the final report of the peers)
- For peers:
    - The preliminary report (before the visit)
    - The final report
    - Submission of the final report to the CNA
- By SINAES:
    - A consolidated report that synthesizes the preliminary information provided by the peer evaluators.
    - A technical briefing that includes the final report and observations on the final report from the program,

For decision-making, the CNA considers the results of the self-assessment report of the program, the final report from the peer evaluators, and any other pertinent information.

3.2.2 EQAP accreditation decisions are based on a procedure and guide that are published on the SINAES website. The procedure for making accreditation decisions, PRC-AG06 states that the accreditation decision can be made in three possible scenarios:

1. Approve the program. The CNA declares that the program meets the requirements.
2. Defer the decision for the program. The CNA defines that "the program has reached significant levels of quality but does not yet meet the requirements to be officially accredited."
3. Not accredit the program. The CNA concludes that the career does not have the necessary characteristics to be accredited.

For the final decision, the SINAES asks the peer evaluators in their report for an evaluation of each criterion on a scale ranging from deficient to satisfactory. Likewise, peers must issue a qualified criterion in their final report, on whether they consider the career to be accreditable.

3.2.3 SINAES, through the CNA, has policies and procedures to carry out an impartial, rigorous and transparent decision-making process. The publication of the minutes of the CNA sessions to the public is a vehicle that reinforces this requirement.

The CNA has many documents at its disposal that facilitate the drafting of recommendations for academic programs.

During the visit, the panel noted the growing concern of representatives of various stakeholder groups about the existence of certain variations between the CNA's decisions and statements and the guidelines and mechanisms that govern its internal policies. This has created a perception of insecurity regarding some CNA decisions.

In response to this perception, the panel suggests creating mechanisms for decision-making that comply with the deadlines established in the regulations and thus reduce the delay in the CNA's resolutions, as manifested during the interviews.

3.2.4 The minutes of the CNA, which include the final report and the deliberation for the accreditation decision, are publicly accessible. SINAES maintains an updated registry of officially accredited academic programs on its website (https://www.sinaes.ac.cr/), which can be searched by area of knowledge, discipline, or educational institution, among other criteria.

As a public entity, the SINAES is subject to the 'Public Knowledge' policy and, therefore, to the fundamental right to access public information. This implies that the data relating to their activity is, in principle, of a public nature. However, Law No. 8256, "SINAES Law", in its first article, second paragraph, establishes the obligation of SINAES to "safeguard the confidentiality of the handling of the data of each institution" that participates in the accreditation process.

Accordingly, final accreditation reports are protected by the Law and the principle of confidentiality and are therefore not disclosed to the public. However, the complete file of the accreditation process is available to the corresponding HEIs.

3.2.5 The minutes/record of the CNA sessions in which the report of the peer evaluators was presented and the discussion of the CNA on the matter are made public. The reasons for the decision are reflected in the record and are officially referred to the program.

The panel highlights the effort SINAES needs to make to align national confidentiality regulations with the good practice of accountability by making information public, as included in the international quality processes related to reports and the results of evaluation decisions.

3.3 APPEALS AND COMPLAINTS

THE EQAP DEPLOYS CLEAR POLICIES AND PROCEDURES FOR APPEALS AND COMPLAINTS.

3.3.1 The EQAP has a manual with the profile of each position, which also describes the functions and responsibilities of each civil servant, the hierarchy for dealing with complaints that may be raised in the event of a non-conformity regarding the

procedures or operations of SINAES, which indicates the first point of contact as the Executive Director, and for appeals the CNA.

Regarding the timelines given to respond to any complaint, the administration has 10 calendar days as established by Law No. 9097 on the "Right to Petition," and internally, the staff is notified by a memo SINAES-DE-003-2021.

Every user of the services of SINAES has the right, for each of the decisions that are issued because of an accreditation process, to file an "Appeal for Reconsideration" in case they disagree with the result of the decision. The CNA is in the process of reviewing the "Review Regulation" and its procedure to update it.

3.3.2 The SINAES regulates the mechanisms relating to appeals for review of its own acts in accordance with national legislation. This process is defined in the "Reconsideration Regulation" of the agreements taken by the CNA, which is published on its website, in the part related to the Legal Framework.

Currently, there is a proposal to improve this Regulation for SINAES, which requires legal review and final approval by the CNA. This improvement is due to the sensitivity to delays in the resolution of appeals, as shown in interviews with representatives of various stakeholders.

3.3.3 SINAES, as a public entity, guarantees the right to appeal against the CNA's decisions. In accordance with the General Law of the Public Administration, these are processed through the 'Appeal for Reconsideration' (Article 126, paragraph c).

Likewise, an independent professional unrelated to the original evaluation process analyzes the arguments presented in the appeal and prepares a technical report for the CNA recommending the appeal's admissibility or inadmissibility. The CNA makes the final decision based on this report. This procedure aims to guarantee the HEI impartiality and transparency in the resolution decision.

However, the panel noted some stakeholders' concerns regarding the delays the CNA took to address reconsiderations and make decisions, which could affect the perception of transparency for this process.

Best practices
− It has a complete evaluation model; the processes and guidelines are clear and public.
− The CNA meets twice a week, demonstrating this collegiate body's high level of commitment.

Requirements
− Redefine the internal policies or regulations that govern the CNA to incorporate procedures that facilitate consensus-building in situations where initial agreement is not reached.

Recommendations for improvement

The panel recommends:

- Review the guidelines and internal mechanisms of the CNA to ensure that the EQAP's decision-making process is impartial, rigorous, and transparent. Ensure that the approach to decision-making and the measures to impose follow-up recommendations are consistent with the information collected during the accreditation process.
- Establish mechanisms, within the framework of the regulations, so that, when final decisions are made, the work developed and the professional contributions of the peer evaluators are valued, especially those focusing on the curricular design and academic-specific recommendations.
- Review the "Appeal for Reconsideration" procedure to clearly define the timelines and decisions made by the CNA to lessen the delays.
- Guarantee decision-making in accordance with the provisions of the regulations.
- Opportunity to review Law No. 8256, "SINAES Law," to increase transparency and provide the public with more information about accredited academic programs.
- Establish mechanisms that enhance the weight of the work carried out by the peer evaluators during the accreditation and renewal of accreditation processes, especially in relation to their experience on discipline-specific aspects of the program.

![ISG International Standards & Guidelines logo]

4. Internationalization and Foreign Relations

☐   Non-compliant   ☐   Partially   ☐   Substantially   ■   Fully compliant
                            compliant   compliant

4.1 INTERNATIONALIZATION

THE EQAP HAS A ROBUST INTERNATIONALIZATION STRATEGY THAT LEADS TO ENHANCED EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY IN ITS OPERATIONS.

4.1.1 Since its creation, SINAES has maintained a permanent presence in international networks. Since 2002 it has been part of INQAAHE, in 2003, the agency formalized its affiliation to the Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES in Spanish), whose network SINAES chaired during 2010-2011. Since 2022 it has been a member of the Ibero-American System for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (SIACES in Spanish) and carried out their Good Practice Validation procedure after joining, obtaining their certification in 2023.

Internationalization is a strategic objective of the PEI 2023-2027:

> *"Strategic alliances and positioning: Establish and strengthen national and international alliances of strategic value for SINAES. Thus, it is sought that as part of the internal activity of the organization we can have this process of self-evaluation and verification of good practices with SIACES that allows us to generate a strategic positioning and at the same time generate strategic alliances."*

In addition to its active participation in international networks, since 2009, SINAES has held a keynote lecture within the framework of the 'SINAES Lectures', of which most of the speakers have been prominent international professionals.

SINAES demonstrates a strong commitment to internationalization, evidenced mainly by incorporating international peer evaluators in all its accreditation processes.

4.1.2. To stay current in the international context, SINAES actively participates in various international activities, which allows it to obtain information on changes, trends, and innovations in the field of quality assurance of higher education. To date, SINAES has participated in 16 international events, promoting knowledge exchange in various areas.

Since 2007, SINAES has developed the 'SINAES Lectures on Education-Society', a space for talks, workshops, and conferences on relevant topics, with broad international participation. Likewise, since 2020, the 'Virtual Academic Meetings (EAV in Spanish)' have had a prominent international presence.

4.1.3 SINAES has signed collaboration agreements with accreditation agencies and international higher education bodies, through which it has carried out exchanges or participated in specialized forums, such as the one held in the SIACES gender commission since 2023.

This participation allows elements of the international quality assurance and accreditation agenda to be incorporated into Costa Rica's analysis and discussion forums.

SINAES actively participates in the working groups, seminars, and periodic conferences of the networks to which it belongs and regularly participates in other regional forums promoted by the Central American Accreditation Council (CCA in Spanish) or the Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Quality in Distance Higher Education (CALED in Spanish), among others.

4.2 EXTERNAL RELATIONS

THE EQAP EFFECTIVELY PROMOTES ITS COLLABORATIONS WITH KEY PLAYERS IN NATIONAL, REGIONAL, INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS.

4.2.1 The quality assurance system for higher education in Costa Rica comprises higher education institutions and regulatory bodies. Public and international universities have autonomy to regulate their academic offerings, while private institutions are supervised by Ministry of Education (MEP in Spanish) bodies. SINAES has been part of this system since 1999, focusing on quality accreditation.

The main regulatory actors are:

- CSE: Supervises para-universities.
- CONESUP: Supervises private universities.
- CONARE: Coordinates public university education.

SINAES collaborates closely with these organizations, contributing to the activities of the conglomerate that makes up the Costa Rican higher education system. Despite the lack of explicit national legislation, SINAES fulfills its technical responsibilities in program accreditation by facilitating and promoting coordination among both university and para-university HEIs in Costa Rica.

The panel highlights the role played by the agreement signed between SINAES and CONESUP to review the curricula of all accredited academic programs, and its participation in CONARE meetings to address quality issues.

In addition, in its efforts to internationalize, SINAES interacts with 27 national and international organizations, participating in conferences, exchanges of information and training. In addition, it plans to strengthen its international presence through strategic alliances and the recognition of accredited degrees.

Finally, the panel highlights the work carried out by SINAES to promote its mission objectives reflected in the PEI and the services it provides to the system, through regular in-person visits to the HEIs, which it restarted in 2022.

4.2.2 In line with its strategic vision (PEI, point 1.1.2), SINAES has cultivated international relations since its foundation. These relationships, of a permanent nature, materialize in their participation in global networks and in obtaining certifications of good practices from INQAAHE and SIACES.

SINAES has prioritized the exchange with international peers and other key actors in accreditation fora, both nationally and internationally. This collaboration is reflected in its participation in various events and the consolidation of cooperation agreements with accreditation agencies.

SINAES participates in different international activities that allow it not only to interact with its peers but also to be adequately informed of changes, trends, and innovations in the field of quality of higher education. SINAES conducts internal reviews and has relationships with INQAAHE, RIACES, and other international organizations. The panel recommends that the Executive Direction establish mechanisms to transfer these learning experiences to the technical staff and to the practice of national peer evaluators.

Opportunity to use the experience of international peers and the diversity of the organizations they represent to strengthen the instruments of SINAES.

Best practices

−   SINAES plays a crucial role in internationalization, both through the active search for strategic collaborations and by exercising outstanding leadership in organizing events for the Latin American community.
−   This active participation allows elements of the international quality assurance and accreditation agenda to be incorporated into Costa Rica's analysis and discussion forums.
−   The integration of international peer evaluators in accreditation processes reflects SINAES' commitment to adopting diverse global perspectives.
−   Participation in international events represents a valuable platform for promoting the work of SINAES and exchanging experiences internationally.

Recommendations for improvement

The panel recommends:

−   Evaluate the assignment of specialized personnel to manage international agreements to strengthen this strategic area and maximize its benefits for the organization and the higher education system.
−   Draft an explicit internationalization policy that identifies the relevance of the international projection for SINAES and the instruments and actors of the institution that will take part in it. Regardless of the existence of internationalization as a strategic objective of the PEI 2023-2027.

5. Integrity, Disclosure and Transparency

☐ Non-compliant ☐ Partially compliant ☐ Substantially compliant ■ Fully compliant

5.1 INTEGRITY

THE EQAP OPERATES WITH INTEGRITY AND PROFESSIONALISM AND ADHERES TO ETHICAL AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS.

5.1.1 To ensure public integrity in all its operations, SINAES adheres to strict technical and legal frameworks. Every employee receives comprehensive onboarding that covers the institution's mission, vision, and values, as well as the Code of Ethics for personnel and suppliers.

Compliance with these regulations is a fundamental requirement for everyone involved. In line with the principle of legality and the Law 'Against Corruption and Illicit Enrichment', SINAES implements procedures that prevent conflicts of interest and guarantee transparency. Through its website and as part of the Institutional 'Transparency Network', the entity publishes detailed information on budgets, income, expenditures, tenders and other relevant data. To protect the identity of academic programs, the public records of the CNA only include file numbers.

5.2 DISCLOSURE

THE EQAP ENSURES DISCLOSURE AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF ITS ACTIVITY IN LINE WITH THE CULTURE WITHIN WHICH OPERATES

5.2.1 SINAES maintains record management policies that prioritize confidentiality, transparency, updating of data, and institutional communication.

In compliance with national regulations, budgets are reflected in the PAO, demonstrating SINAES' commitment to transparency and public disclosure of information about its activities and the status of accredited academic programs.

SINAES complies with the public mandate to publish information on accredited and reaccredited academic programs for both HEIs in the university and para-university systems regularly and systematically to the public and stakeholders.

5.2.2 SINAES maintains a high level of transparency by disseminating on its website the external evaluation reports from international organizations, such as SIACES, INQAAHE, MULTRA and CCA, as well as institutional records. However, for legal reasons, the names and details of the academic programs in the accreditation process or those that did not obtain it are not disclosed, although positive accreditations are disseminated.

In addition, SINAES publishes studies and research results carried out by its staff on its website, which are available in the documents section.

5.3 TRANSPARENCY

THE EQAP HAS ROBUST SYSTEMS IN PLACE TO ENSURE TRANSPARENT AND RELIABLE OPERATIONS.

5.3.1 In accordance with Law No. 8256, the CNA holds the exclusive authority to make accreditation decisions. These decisions are based on the self-evaluation report, peer evaluator recommendations, and program observations. The CNA is comprised of respected and trusted members nominated by both public and private university systems, selected for their suitability.

Key documents related to accreditation processes, such as manuals, guides and formats are available on the SINAES website, detailing the three possible decision options and the reconsideration appeal, ensuring transparency and clarity in the process.

5.3.2 The DEA of SINAES manages the evaluation and accreditation of affiliated higher education institutions. Its responsibilities encompass planning, organizing, executing, and monitoring these processes, alongside training and assessing peer evaluators. The DEA also develops evaluation tools, maintains current information on HEIs, conducts curricular reviews, and disseminates findings to enhance educational quality.

Information Management (GI in Spanish) complements this work by closely monitoring accreditation files and generating reports to monitor the progress of each process, using Excel documents updated daily.

SINAES recognizes that the administrative burden derived from the accreditation processes hinders their ability to conduct reports and investigations. The panel recommends strengthening its research and analysis capacities to improve the effectiveness of its accreditation processes.

Best practices
– Publishing detailed information on budgets, income, expenditures, and tenders ensures the agency's operational transparency, setting a benchmark for higher education organizations nationwide.
– The digitalization of processes and remote work has demonstrably improved management efficiency and effectiveness, leading to increased satisfaction among universities, as reported in interviews.

Recommendations for improvement
– SINAES should explore incorporating information on recommendations for improvement into the publicly available reports of accredited academic programs on its website to enhance transparency and accountability.
– SINAES should define measures to strengthen its research and analysis capacity for studies focused on improving the effectiveness and efficiency of its accreditation processes. This would help optimize the time dedicated to these core activities, allowing for an increase in the number of reports and research documents produced.

6. Role and participation of stakeholders

☐ Non-compliant   ☐ Partially compliant   ☐ Substantially compliant   ■ Fully compliant

6.1 STAKEHOLDER ROLE

THE EQAP IS CLEAR IN ITS EXPECTATIONS FOR EACH STAKEHOLDER GROUP.

6.1.1 Since 2007, SINAES has actively fostered engagement through conferences, talks, and workshops. This commitment to interaction and continuous debate is further amplified by the VAS, initiated in 2020, and the accessibility of these events on its YouTube channel. Moreover, Evaluation Groups (EGs) play a vital role by providing essential induction and support to institutions undergoing external evaluation, ensuring a clear and effective understanding of the procedures.

The Executive Direction of SINAES, in collaboration with other areas, conducts visits to universities and para-universities to disseminate information about its activities. In essence, SINAES prioritizes keeping all stakeholders well-informed about its operations and the impact of its initiatives. To effectively reach key audiences, the DEA and the Communications area collaborate on joint projects, bolstering a public information policy centered on stakeholder engagement.

The DEA and the Communications area develop activities to reach high-interest audiences through joint projects, which benefit a public information policy that emphasizes stakeholders.

6.2 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

THE EQAP ENSURES MEANINGFUL AND IMPACTFUL STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION IN ITS FUNCTIONS.

6.2.1 SINAES has developed its evaluation and accreditation models over 25 years through close collaboration with the academic community and other relevant actors. This participatory methodology ensures that the evaluation criteria reflect the diversity of affiliated HEIs, including universities and para-universities with different educational approaches and modalities. To address this diversity, SINAES has created specific models, such as distance education. It has adapted its processes to evaluate para-university and academic programs at the postgraduate level, involving national and international experts in their development and validation.

The SINAES accreditation process emphasizes collaboration and continuous improvement, actively engaging HEIs at every stage, from the initial assessment to the follow-up on improvement plans. To further guarantee transparency and fairness, SINAES provides a recourse for reconsideration. This inclusive and participatory framework ensures that SINAES policies and procedures remain relevant and effective in fostering quality and accountability within higher education.

6.2.2 To enhance HEIs' training and knowledge, SINAES organizes annual regional meetings to address crucial topics like accreditation structure and process.

Furthermore, its virtual training course, which incorporates continuous evaluations and improvements based on feedback, underscores SINAES' dedication to training and professional development. These initiatives aim to ensure meaningful stakeholder participation in accreditation processes and ultimately improve educational quality.

The exemplary involvement of stakeholders in shaping accreditation evaluation processes is evident in models like the distance assessment and para-university career evaluations, which showcase the coordinated efforts of various SINAES divisions.

Despite SINAES' commitment to stakeholder collaboration and participation in identifying areas for improvement and review, significant internal obstacles impede the implementation of resulting changes. Consequently, while information gathering mechanisms function effectively, the process of enacting changes faces shortcomings.

Interviews revealed dissatisfaction among some stakeholders regarding the agency's slow pace and limited responsiveness, particularly in decision-making. This includes reconsideration appeals affecting the closure of accreditation processes and the approval of new evaluation instruments, in which the design and piloting stakeholders themselves actively participated.

Best practices

– Through collaborative projects, the DEA and Communications department effectively reach key audiences, enhancing a stakeholder-focused public information policy.
– SINAES has been instrumental in Costa Rican higher education, demonstrating a strong ability to convene sector stakeholders through diverse initiatives, foster debate and reflection, and significantly contribute to the sector's development.
– The exemplary engagement of stakeholders in designing accreditation evaluation processes, such as the distance assessment model and para-university career evaluations, showcases the coordinated efforts of various SINAES divisions.

Recommendations for improvement

The panel recommends:

– Define mechanisms aimed at improving the decision-making process, both in terms of reconsideration appeals that affect the closure of some accreditation processes, as well as in the approval of new evaluation tools.

CONCLUSION

Summary of good practices

Standard 1

− SINAES has excellent physical, technological and human resources to carry out its activities, which guarantees continuity in its work and is a benchmark in the field of public policy bodies in Costa Rica.
− SINAES undergoes external reviews at frequent intervals, every five years with INQAAHE and every six years with SIACES.

Standard 2

− SINAES has processes in place to ensure that HEIs not only achieve accreditation but also develop a culture of continuous improvement and long-term sustainability.
− The panel notes the excellent support given by the GEA throughout the accreditation process, which the interested parties have unanimously recognized.
− The use of international peers in all evaluation processes carried out by SINAES.
− The Introduction of continuous improvement mechanisms to significantly and progressively reduce the time taken to carry out the accreditation process to less than eight months.
− The intersectionality that SINAES has achieved through the field of higher education in Costa Rica and all its players.
− INDEIN's work creating and consolidating the so-called virtual academic meetings stands out, having held 11 between 2021 and 2022.

Standard 3

− SINAES has a complete evaluation model; the processes and guidelines are clear and public.
− The CNA meets twice a week, demonstrating this collegiate body's high level of commitment.

Standard 4

− SINAES plays a crucial role in internationalization, both through the active search for strategic collaborations and by exercising outstanding leadership in organizing events for the Latin American community.
− This active participation allows elements of the international quality assurance and accreditation agenda to be incorporated into Costa Rica's analysis and discussion forums.
− The integration of international peer evaluators in accreditation processes reflects SINAES' commitment to adopting diverse global perspectives.
− Participation in international events represents a valuable platform for promoting the work of SINAES and exchanging experiences in the international arena.

Standard 5

– Publishing detailed information on budgets, income, expenditures, and tenders ensures the agency's operational transparency, setting a benchmark for higher education organizations nationwide.
– The digitalization of processes and remote work has demonstrably improved management efficiency and effectiveness, leading to increased satisfaction among universities, as reported in interviews.

Standard 6

– Through collaborative projects, the DEA and Communications department effectively reach key audiences, enhancing a stakeholder-focused public information policy.
– SINAES has been instrumental in Costa Rican higher education, demonstrating a strong ability to convene sector stakeholders through diverse initiatives, foster debate and reflection, and significantly contribute to the sector's development.
– The exemplary engagement of stakeholders in designing accreditation evaluation processes, such as the distance assessment model and para-university career evaluations, showcases the coordinated efforts of various SINAES divisions.

Summary of requirements

Standard 2

– Create mechanisms for the review of the decision-making process to avoid significant waiting delays for accreditation resolutions by the HEIs.
– Proceed with the publication and implementation of the new accreditation model.

Standard 3

– Redefine the internal policies or regulations that govern the CNA to incorporate procedures that facilitate consensus-building in situations where initial agreement is not reached.

Result by standard

STANDARD	EVALUATION
1. Legitimacy of the External Quality Assurance Provider (EQAP)	Substantially compliant
2. The EQAP Framework for External Review of quality of the TEPs	Substantially compliant
3. The ECAP's Review of the TE Providers: Evaluation, Decision-Making and Appeals	Substantially compliant
4. Internationalization and External Relations	Fully compliant
5. Integrity, Disclosure and Transparency	Fully compliant
6. Stakeholder role and engagement	Fully compliant

Recommendations for improvement

The panel recommends:

Standard 1

- Strengthen existing mechanisms to streamline the decision-making process on the technical evaluation instruments developed by the SINAES technical staff and approved by the CNA.
- Define a strategy aimed at planning for the increase in demand for accreditation applications driven by the growing value given to this recognition, as well as the four-year reaccreditation cycle inherent to the model. This will allow the DEA to respond in the immediate future with the necessary operational capacity to address this challenge.
- Promote amending the Law that grants the SINAES the ability to design public policies that benefit quality assurance in the higher education system.
- Strengthen the equity and consistency of evaluation processes for accreditation purposes by adapting them to the various types of HEIs that exist in the country.

Standard 2

- Implement mandatory training for peer evaluators, focused on ensuring the consistency of evaluation judgments to reflect the principles of freedom and autonomy of institutions, as well as the reality of the national context.
- Establish mechanisms to increase participation in the peer evaluators training, which, according to the information collected in the interviews, is reaching only 10%.
- Accelerate the implementation of the 360° review and evaluation model of accreditation processes.
- Review and adjust the reaccreditation model to respond to the increase in demand for accreditation for new and existing academic programs without sacrificing the process's effectiveness and efficiency.

- Review the reaccreditation methodology to focus on aspects not previously evaluated during the accreditation process, such as aspects included in the improvement plans and the changes implemented after the program was accredited, to make the reaccreditation process more efficient and effective.
- Strengthen the mechanisms that offer follow-up to universities and offer effective feedback on improvement plans arising from the accreditation or reaccreditation process.

Standard 3

- Review the guidelines and internal mechanisms of the CNA to ensure that the decision-making process is impartial, rigorous, and transparent. Ensure that the approach to decision-making and the measures to impose follow-up recommendations are consistent with the information collected during the accreditation process.
- Establish mechanisms, within the framework of the regulations, so that, when final decisions are made, the work developed and the professional contributions of the peer evaluators are valued, especially those focusing on the curricular design and academic-specific recommendations.
- Review the "Appeal for Reconsideration" procedure to clearly define the timelines and the decisions made by the CNA to lessen the delays.
- Guarantee decision-making in accordance with the provisions of the regulations.
- Opportunity to review Law No. 8256, "SINAES Law" to increase transparency and provide the public with more information about accredited academic programs.
- Establish mechanisms that enhance the weight of the work carried out by the peer evaluators during the accreditation and renewal of accreditation processes, especially in relation to their experience on discipline-specific aspects of the program.

Standard 4

- Evaluate the assignment of specialized personnel to manage international agreements to strengthen this strategic area and maximize its benefits for the organization and the higher education system.
- Draft an explicit internationalization policy that identifies the relevance of the international projection for SINAE and the instruments and actors of the institution that will take part in it. Regardless of the existence of internationalization as a strategic objective of the PEI 2023-2027.

Standard 5

- Explore incorporating information on recommendations for improvement into the publicly available reports of accredited academic programs on its website to enhance transparency and accountability.
- Define measures to strengthen its research and analysis capacity for studies focused on improving the effectiveness and efficiency of its accreditation processes. This would help optimize the time dedicated to these core activities,

allowing for an increase in the number of reports and research documents produced.

Standard 6

− Define mechanisms aimed at improving the decision-making process both in terms of reconsideration appeals that affect the closure of some accreditation processes, as well as in the approval of new evaluation instruments.

APPENDIX 1: GLOSSARY

In Spanish	In English
CNA	National Accreditation Council
CONARE	National Council of Rectors
CONESUP	National Council of Private University Higher Education
CSE	Higher Education Council
DEA	Division of Evaluation and Accreditation
DSAG	Division of Management Support Services
EAV	Virtual Academic Meetings
EQAP	External Quality Assurance Provider
GEA	Evaluation and Accreditation Manager
GI	Information Management
IES	Higher Education Institutions
INQAAHE	International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
ISGs	International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education
INDEIN	Research, Development and Innovation Division
MEP	Ministry of Education
PAO	Annual Operating Plan
PEI	Institutional Strategic Plan 2023-2027
PGR	Attorney General's Office
PETIC	Information Technology Strategic Plan
RIACES	Ibero-American Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education
SIACES	Comprehensive Accreditation System for Higher Education
SINAES	National System of Accreditation of Higher Education

APPENDIX 2. EXTERNAL REVIEW COMMITTEE AND VISIT AGENDA

Role	Name	Position	Institution	Region
President	Mag. Rafael Llavori	Deputy Director of International Quality Academic programs	PROEDUCA, Educational Group	Spain
Expert	Dr. Maura J. Pereira -León	Teacher Director of the Internal Quality Assurance System	University of Houston Metropolitan University of Education, Science and Technology (UMECIT)	United States Panama
Secretary	Dr. Karen Belfer	Executive Director	Ontario College Quality Assurance Service	Canada
Observer	Dr. Olga León	Director	Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education	Mexico

International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) – Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (RIACES) to the National System of Accreditation of Higher Education (SINAES).

Day 1 Monday, February 24	Activity/meeting
7.15 a.m. (Exit from the Lobby)	Transportation Hotel Radisson-Ministry of Public Education, Torre Mercedes Building
8.30 - 9.30 a.m.	Meeting with representatives of the Ministry of Public Education
9.45 a.m.	Transport from MEP to SINAES
10.30-11.30 a.m.	Visit SINAES Facilities
11.40a.m.	Transportation SINAES-Radisson Hotel
12.15-13.15 p.m.	Lunch
13.30-14.30 p.m.	SINAES Council and Executive Directorate
14.45-15.00 p.m.	PANEL
15.10-16.00 p.m.	Division of Management Support Services
16.15-16.30 p.m.	PANEL
16.30-18.00 p.m.	SINAES national peer evaluators
18.00-18.30 p.m.	PANEL

Day 2	Activity/meeting

Tuesday, February 25	
8.30-10.00 a.m.	Rectors or vice-rectors of Higher Education Institutions with experience in evaluation and accreditation processes.
10.00-10.30 a.m.	PANEL
10.30 a.m. -12.00 p.m.	Directors of Technical Quality Units of Higher Education Institutions.
12.00-13.00 p.m.	Lunch
13.30-15.00 p.m.	Representatives of student associations of accredited careers.
15.15-17.00 p.m.	Representatives of professional associations and other entities.

Day 3 Wednesday, February 26	Activity
8.00-8.45 a.m.	International peer evaluators (virtual meeting via Zoom)
8.45-9.00 a.m.	PANEL
9.00-10.15 a.m.	Evaluation and Accreditation Division Staff
10.15-10.30 a.m.	PANEL
10.30-11.00 a.m.	Staff of the Executive Directorate, Internal Audit and Secretariat of the National Accreditation Council
11.00-11.15 a.m.	Staff of the Research, Development and Innovation Division.
11.15-11.30 a.m.	PANEL
11.30 a.m. -12.10 p.m.	Executive Director and Directors of DEA, DSAG and INDEIN
12.15-13.15 p.m.	Lunch
13.15-13.30 p.m.	PANEL
13.30-14.15 p.m.	Recall to the Executive Director or the SINAES Staff if necessary.
14.30-15.00 p.m.	PANEL
15.15-16.30 p.m.	Oral summary of the evaluators' report to the National Council for Accreditation and Executive Management.

APPENDIX 3: International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education, ISGs

Module 1: Reference Standards

STANDARDS		GUIDELINES
1. LEGITIMACY OF THE EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE (EQAP) PROVIDER	**1.1 Mission, governance and organization:** EQAP is a recognized and credible organization, trusted by key stakeholders: government, higher education service providers (TEPs) and the general public. Its governance, structure and operations enable effective and efficient operations in line with its mission.	1.1.1 EQAP has an established legal basis and is recognized by the main stakeholders: government, education and training service providers and the general public. EQAP is guided by principles of good practice in the formulation of its policies and practices (e.g. independence, objectivity, autonomy).
		1.1.2 EQAP has a clearly articulated mission statement and set of objectives that explicitly state that external quality assurance in higher education is a key function of the organization, describe the purpose and scope of its activities, and can be translated into verifiable policies and measurable performance indicators. The interest of students and society is at the forefront of their aspirations.
		1.1.3 EQAP has a well-articulated governance model, consistent with its mission and objectives, and appropriate mechanisms to engage relevant stakeholders at the relevant levels of governance and management.
		1.1.4 The composition of its decision-making body and/or its regulatory framework guarantee trust, independence and impartiality in decision-making. A clear policy and appropriate mechanisms to prevent conflicts of interest are applied to its staff, decision-making body and external evaluators.
		1.1.5 EQAP's organizational structure allows its external review processes to

		be carried out effectively and efficiently.
		1.1.6 EQAP's activities are based on sound strategic planning. Appropriate mechanisms have been put in place to assess their progress, impact and plans for future development.
	1.2 Resources: EQAP has adequate resources – physical, financial and human – to carry out its mission.	1.2.1 EQAP has appropriately trained and qualified staff to enable effective and efficient external evaluation in accordance with its mission statement and methodological approach. Staff have the necessary skills to carry out the functions associated with external quality assurance. EQAP offers systematic opportunities for the professional development of its staff.
		1.2.2 EQAP has established, maintains and enhances a strong pool of qualified external reviewers, supported by the necessary recruitment, onboarding, training and professionalization opportunities.
		1.2.3 EQAP has adequate physical, virtual, and financial resources to meet its goals and carry out the activities arising from its mission statement and objectives. Their approach to financing inspires confidence and sustainability in operations. It is equipped with the necessary technological resources to efficiently carry out its processes, including a database of external evaluators, a respective platform to manage its evaluation procedures, etc.
	1.3 Internal Quality Assurance and Accountability: EQAP has policies and mechanisms for its internal quality assurance that demonstrate	1.3.1 EQAP has a clear policy for its own internal and external quality assurance linked to planning, financing and organizational performance. The results are evidenced through robust accountability measures available to

	a continuous effort to maintain and improve the quality and integrity of its activities.	the technical education community and the society it serves.
		1.3.2 EQAP has strong internal quality assurance mechanisms that allow it to review its own activities to respond to the changing nature of higher education, the effectiveness of its operations, and to maintain its relevance and contribution to the achievement of its objectives.
		1.3.3 EQAP regularly conducts a self-assessment of its own activities, including consideration of its own effects on the system(s) in which it operates and its core values. Evaluation is based on the collection and analysis of reliable data to inform decision-making and generate improvements.
		1.3.4 EQAP's plan for internal and external evaluation of its policies and practices identifies and integrates its practices in the review of various service delivery modalities (e.g. distance education provision, hybrid education) and UNESCO ISCED levels 4 to 8, as appropriate. For example, when evaluating graduate academic programs, the necessary dimensions, such as research capacity, should be at the core of the evaluation, focusing on the links between research and learning through an integrated approach to external review of quality assurance.
		1.3.5 The EQAP is subject to external reviews at regular intervals, ideally not to exceed five years. Evidence of the required actions is implemented and disseminated.
		1.3.6 There is strong evidence of a strong and well-established quality culture that drives improvement, relevance and confidence in EQAP.

		Testing is present in all EQAP functions, in accordance with its mandate.
2. THE EQAP FRAMEWORK FOR EXTERNAL REVIEW OF TEP QUALITY	**2.1 The relationship between EQAP and higher education providers (TEPs):** EQAP recognizes TEPs as primarily responsible for quality and relevance and for providing support to promote trust and credibility.	2.1.1 EQAP recognizes that institutional and programmatic quality and quality assurance are primarily the responsibility of higher education providers themselves and respects the specific characteristics of each TEP.
		2.1.2 EQAP ensures that the core values of higher education are respected and promoted: equitable access, accountability, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and social responsibility.
		2.1.3 EQAP promotes the development, proper implementation and continuous improvement of the TE IQA system in accordance with the understanding that the primary responsibility for quality assurance lies with suppliers.
		2.1.4 EQAP is aware of the level of workload and related costs that its procedures will impose on TEPs and strives to make the procedures as cost-effective and time effective as possible.
		2.1.5 The EQAP provides higher education providers with clear guidance on the requirements for self-assessment and external review processes.
	2.2 EQAP standards for external quality review: The standards value diversity of provisions and promote trust, relevance, quality improvement of ET provisions, and thus promote a culture of quality.	2.2.1 EQAP recognizes and values supplier diversity and translates this institutional aspect into standards that take into account TEP's identity and mission.
		2.2.2 The standards adopted by the EQAP have been the subject of reasonable consultations with stakeholders and are reviewed at regular intervals to ensure their relevance to the needs of the system.

		2.2.3 The standards explicitly address the areas of a TEP's activity that fall within the scope of EQAP (e.g. governance and management, program design and approval, teaching and learning processes, admission, progression and certification of students, research and community engagement) and the availability of necessary resources (e.g. finance, staff and learning resources).
		2.2.4 The rules take into account and provide for effective internal monitoring of the results of external reviews.
		2.2.5 EQAP has a clear policy that specifies how the standards and types of evidence necessary to demonstrate compliance must be applied.
		2.2.6 EQAP standards adequately address and promote academic integrity.
	2.3 The EQAP external review process: The external review framework has a clear set of procedures for each type of review.	2.3.1 EQAP conducts an external review process that is guided by a publicly available and reliable methodology that ensures the independence, trust, relevance to the existing context and credibility of its procedures. Where appropriate, EQAP must demonstrate its ability to conduct reviews in both virtual and face-to-face mode with the support of a specially designed methodology. This distinction must be clear to avoid misconduct problems.
		2.3.2 EQAP has published documents that clearly articulate TEP expectations in the form of quality standards and procedures for each step/phase of the external review.

		2.3.3 The external review process is carried out by a group of experts in accordance with the characteristics of the provider or service under review. Experts can provide information from a variety of perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students, employers, or professionals. Experts represent a balance of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as appropriate to EQAP's mission.
		2.3.4 The EQAP has clear specifications on the characteristics and selection of external reviewers, who should be supported by appropriate training and relevant materials such as guides/manuals and manuals for evaluation.
		2.3.5 External review procedures include effective and comprehensive mechanisms to prevent conflicts of interest and to ensure that all judgements resulting from external reviews are based on explicit and published criteria.
		2.3.6 The EQAP system has mechanisms in place to ensure that each TEP or program is evaluated consistently, even if external panels, teams or committees differ.
		2.3.7 EQAP conducts the external review within a reasonable time to ensure that the information is up to date.
		2.3.8 The EQAP ensures that higher education providers have the opportunity to correct any factual errors that may appear in the external review report.
		2.3.9 The EQAP provides clear guidance to providers in implementing each step within the external review procedure, soliciting evaluation/feedback from the

		public, students, and other constituents, or preparing for external review as necessary and appropriate.
	2.4 Regular systemic reviews: EQAP conducts regular systemic/thematic reviews to inform its stakeholders and the general public about systemic issues/developments and trends.	2.4.1 Where appropriate, EQAP conducts regular systematic and thematic reviews within the domain in which it operates and publishes reports on trends and impacts for wider use by stakeholders.
		2.4.2 EQAP prepares and regularly disseminates integrated system-wide reports on the overall results of quality control processes, impacts on the effectiveness evaluation system and its performance, and any other relevant activities.
3. THE EQAP REVIEW OF TE PROVIDERS: ASSESSMENT, DECISION-MAKING AND APPEALS	**3.1 Evaluation:** Evaluation by an external panel is based on clearly articulated and publicly available criteria and methodology.	3.1.1 The evaluation criteria are clearly articulated and supported by a sound methodology.
		3.1.2 The evaluation criteria and methodology are applied consistently in all cases.
		3.1.3 EQAP provides full and clear disclosure of its policies, procedures, criteria and methodology for the evaluation and judgement of ET performance, made available to the public prior to implementation.
	3.2 Decision-making: EQAP has established policies and procedures that ensure fair and independent decision-making in review cases.	3.2.1 EQAP's decisions take into consideration the results of both the supplier's internal review process and the external review panel, while considering any other relevant information, provided that it has been communicated to the supplier.
		3.2.2 EQAP decisions are based on published rules and procedures and can be justified only by reference to such rules and procedures.

		3.2.3 EQAP's decision-making process is impartial, rigorous and transparent. The approach to decision-making and the actions to impose recommendations for follow-up by TEPs are uniform across all procedures.
		3.2.4 EQAP makes its decisions and/or review reports public. The content and scope of the reports are in line with the cultural context and applicable legal and other requirements.
		3.2.5 The EQAP has mechanisms in place to facilitate fair public understanding of the reasons behind the decisions taken.
	3.3 Appeals and Grievances: EQAP implements clear policies and procedures for appeals and grievances.	3.3.1 EQAP has established procedures to deal with complaints about its procedures or operations on a consistent basis.
		3.3.2 EQAP has clear and published procedures for handling appeals related to its external review and decision-making processes.
		3.3.3 Appeals are conducted by an independent panel or commission that is not responsible for the original decision and has no conflicts of interest. Appeals do not necessarily have to take place outside of EQAP.
4. INTERNATIONALIZATION AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS	**4.1 Internationalization:** EQAP has a solid internationalization strategy that leads to greater effectiveness and efficiency in its operations.	4.1.1 EQAP is governed by a *principle of internationalization* in its functions and operations that are applicable to it and that are in line with its mission.
		4.1.2 EQAP is open to international developments in quality assurance and higher education in general and has mechanisms in place to enable it to learn about and analyze the main trends in the field, thereby enhancing its relevance.

		4.1.3 EQAP collaborates with other quality assurance bodies at international level where possible in areas such as the exchange of good practices, capacity building, decision review, joint projects and/or staff exchange.
	4.2 External relations: EQAP effectively promotes its collaborations with key actors in national, regional and international contexts.	4.2.1 EQAP coordinates and communicates appropriately with other national, regional and international governmental and non-governmental organizations in the monitoring of its provisions.
		4.2.2 EQAP's external relations, partnerships and collaborations promote its mission and the successful implementation of its strategies.
5. INTEGRITY, DISCLOSURE AND TRANSPARENCY	**5.1 Integrity:** The EQAP operates with integrity and professionalism and adheres to ethical and professional standards.	5.1.1 EQAP has a clear policy and procedures to uphold integrity in its functions and manifests it in an open and transparent manner. Integrity is an integral part of the organization's culture and is consistently respected in all modalities of service delivery (face-to-face, remote, hybrid, cross-border).
	5.2 Disclosure: EQAP ensures disclosure at different levels of its activity in accordance with the culture in which it operates.	5.2.1 EQAP's policies and procedures on external evaluation of higher education providers and arrangements support the appropriate disclosure of its reviews and related outcomes/decisions, based on consideration of local and regional cultures, while ensuring alignment with international best practices.
		5.2.2 EQAP publishes its policies and decisions and disseminates reports on the results of its quality control processes. EQAP publicly discloses decisions about EQAP resulting from any external review of its own performance.
	5.3 Transparency: EQAP has robust systems in place to	5.3.1 EQAP's policies and procedures on external evaluation of providers and higher education provisions underpin

	ensure transparent and reliable operations.	the principle of transparency in the treatment of reviews and decision-making.
		5.3.2 EQAP has a robust information management system that enables transparent, efficient, data-driven and reliable decision-making. EQAP has a data collection and reporting process on its review/accreditation activity for all types of modalities and reviews (e.g. online/distance education provisions, cross-border education, short programs) that are consistent and comply with national/government requirements.
6. STAKEHOLDER ROLE AND ENGAGEMENT	**6.1 Role of stakeholders:** EQAP is clear on the expectations of each stakeholder group.	6.1.1 The EQAP clearly defines its internal and external stakeholders along with full statements of expectations and level of impact for each stakeholder group.
	6.2 Stakeholder engagement: EQAP ensures meaningful and impactful stakeholder engagement in its roles.	6.2.1 EQAP policies ensure the proactive involvement of stakeholders in matters related to standards, procedures, reviews and decision-making. EQAP, where appropriate, should demonstrate an inclusive approach to stakeholder participation, for example in its procedures in terms of ensuring geographical and gender balance, and other non-discriminatory policies.
		6.2.2 To ensure meaningful participation, EQAP has specific induction, training and professionalization measures, which are consistently implemented and regularly improved as needed.