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An Independence Index of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education: European and Latin American countries compared

Abstract

This contribution presents an assessment of the *de jure* independence of Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs) operating at the national level in the field of higher education and which are public in nature (or are commissioned by public authorities). Considering more than 40 countries in Europe and Latin America, we present a multidimensional index based on formal statements derived from agencies' constitutive norms and regulations. This *de jure* index includes three clusters: the first one takes into account the agency relation with political principals, measuring the provisions for shielding agency head and board members, and how accountable are agencies to the executive; the second one focuses on the social accountability dimension that agencies present; and the third one approaches the scope of responsibilities the agency is granted. The paper discusses the methodology employed for the elaboration of QAAs' independence index, as inspired by previous indexes prepared for the measurement of independence in regulatory agencies operating in fields such finance, utilities or social risks. The aim of the new index is to integrate an assessment of the level autonomy of QAAs versus politicians, their accountability mechanisms to societal actors and their decision-making powers to provide a comprehensive measure of formal capabilities of agencies to act independently. Such an analysis will allow a better understanding of the role that these agencies have in higher education policy regimes across Latin America and Europe.



Introduction¹

Since the late 1980s, quality assurance has been a key concern for states and has become a regular strategy of higher education policy. A renewed interest in public intervention in higher education – based mainly on considerations about the importance of higher education in economic development – contributed to the introduction of new instruments to steer this sector (Paradeise *et al.* 2009). At the same time, states seemed increasingly willing to step away from direct intervention in the management of higher education (Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004), in spite of the fact that, in most countries, governments continued largely to fund higher education and provide basic regulatory frameworks. More recently, they also introduced multiple incentives as instruments to steer university outputs. However, the management of evaluation and accreditation – as well as the oversight of quality monitoring of higher education institutions and degree programs, which became central to the policy agenda – was progressively separated from the executive, enabling the rise of the quality assurance agencies (QAAs) in a short period of time to take charge of these supervisory activities.

Overall, these changes have led to what Roger King calls the emergence of the ‘higher education regulatory state’ (2007). Actually, such trends are much in line with the ‘regulatory governance’ surge that rapidly expanded in most policy areas after the late 1980s as a way to cope with political and economic transformations in many countries in the new context of rising globalization (Jordana and Levi-Faur 2004). The regulatory reforms introduced in multiple policy areas concentrated on creating or expanding markets, but it was not always the case. Reforms were also introduced in other cases to improve quality and safety related to consuming (e.g. food safety and environment), or to control risks associated with human activities (e.g. nuclear and health), and expanded over different countries and regions in the

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world thanks to fast diffusion procedures (often based on emulation mechanisms). Hence, recent reforms in higher education – to the extent they show a regulatory nature, based on instruments like quality levels, standard-setting, or self-assessment methods – are part of the broad transformation of public policy instruments that societies experienced during the age of globalization (Koop and Lodge 2017, Lodge and Wegrich 2012).

In the context of higher education, quality assurance is understood as a planned and systematic review process of a higher education entity or a particular degree program to determine whether acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced (Van Vught and Westerheijden 1993). Therefore, in this field, regulatory functions normally entail setting standards, monitoring and follow-up activities, and applying enforcement where required (Hood et al. 2001; Scott and Hood 2004, among others). Negative or feeble program accreditation -as well as denying licensing to higher education institutions (HEIs)- are powerful regulatory tools to discipline those not satisfying existing quality standards.

Under these circumstances, it is not a surprise that quality assurance agencies rapidly became the standard procedure to implement these changes. They emerged in many countries as autonomous public bodies, established by governments to develop and implement new instruments for higher education. This institutional transformation was prompted by the policy prescriptions and funding offered by global institutions such as the World Bank or UNESCO, and the rationale was based on the need to separate providers of higher education and quality supervisors to bestow credibility on the new system. To the extent that many countries had a large number of public universities, establishing separate agencies emerged as a solution to avoid political interferences in the assessment of higher education quality. The diffusion of these agency characteristics was also facilitated by the establishment of global and regional networks of quality assurance agencies, such as INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education) or ENQA (the European Network of Quality Agencies) (Blackmur 2010).

Although there is abundant research on quality assurance, this literature has not paid much attention to the process of *agencification* and the implications of the utilization of new regulatory instruments. This research gap may be due to the lack of analysis from a regulatory perspective in this field; in fact, as King (2007: 412) argues, 'regulatory research generally appears less interested in higher education in comparison with other sectors'. Maybe for this reason, we know little about the logic of country adoption of this agency model in particular

cases, or about variations of the institutional design of QAAs that are quite visible across countries and regions. Not many studies focus on higher education policy from the perspective of regulatory governance, nor on the characteristics of quality assurance agencies, in particular about their organizational constraints or the daily practice of its legal autonomy. Despite this lack of attention, it should be noted that there is not any intrinsic regulatory ‘exceptionalism’ with respect to higher education. More importantly, analyses of the ‘higher education regulatory state’ would benefit from a greater application of broader regulatory concepts and theory (King 2007).

Taking these relevant gaps into account, this paper examines the formal characteristics of QAAs after the process of global diffusion that led to their establishment, involving the transformation of governance in higher education. As we have described above, in recent decades, the process of regulating quality in higher education by QAAs has broadly diffused globally. Now, the predominance of quality agencies is a common feature across national quality assurance frameworks worldwide. Still, there are no significant studies that focus on these processes of agencification at global level, and on what is significant and particular compared to other sectors where similar processes occurred. Therefore, there is a need for a more comprehensive comparative analysis of the characteristics of QAAs across countries and regions. Moreover, we should inquire if there are countries that exhibit specific ‘regulatory styles’ in the field of higher education, creating different modes of regulatory governance (King 2007; Dobbins and Knill 2014). As King points out, the literature should be investigating whether something particularly distinctive about higher education is reflected in common patterns of quality regulation across countries.

Against this backdrop, this study sheds light on the formal characteristics of agencies involved in the regulation of higher education through the analysis of the legal rules under which they operate. We elaborate an independence index of QAAs and compare the results obtained for European and Latin American countries across different dimensions of this index (that we identify as clusters). We plan to discuss whether independence provisions have been adopted for agencies in the sector of higher education, and also if there is a ‘general model’ of agency independence, or if there are significant variations across countries and regions – following different traditions and influences, some of them very particular of the higher education sector. To answer these questions, we build this study on a novel database that presents a picture of the institutional and organizational characteristics of QAAs. The database includes only public or hybrid QAAs that operate at the national level and have a general scope for most countries



in the world. We excluded subnational agencies, fully private ones and others that evaluate only a specific type of studies. In this paper, we calculate the independence levels only for European and Latin American agencies, where detailed data on their institutional configurations was easier to obtain.

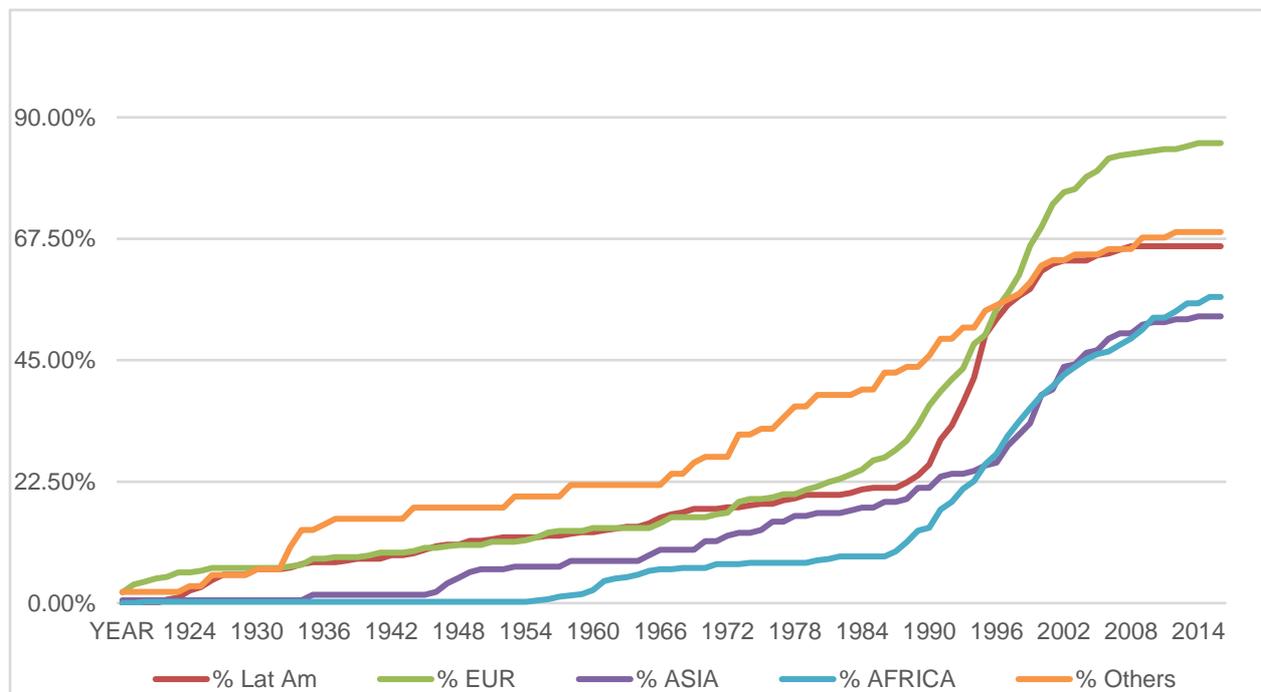
In the following section, we describe the rise and evolution of QAAs and develop a conceptualization on agency independence. The subsequent section describes the research design, specifically, the process of data collection and codification. Finally, we present the results of the independence index of QAAs across Latin American and European countries, followed by a discussion.

The rise and evolution of QAAs

QAAs were shaped by two different influences. One relevant source of inspiration was the existence of long-lasting traditions of program and university accreditation by private agencies. These were influential particularly in the USA, where accrediting bodies for universities were established as early as the late 1800s (Rhoades and Sporn 2002). On the other hand, since the late 1980s, there was a worldwide expansion of the independent agency model as a new institutional design able to enhance the credibility of decisions in many different areas of public policy. Regulatory agencies extended to a large number of countries and to new areas of regulation, such as the provision of public services or the control of social risks. They transformed the structure of public administrations worldwide, providing a new framework for the expansion of regulatory policies in different sectors (Jordana *et al.* 2018). The global scope of the diffusion of these agencies was impressive. They reached multiple policy sectors (electricity, water, sanitation, telecommunications, roads, rail, ports and airports, finance and health, among others), creating isomorphic pressures that became very widespread, also traveling from one sector to another (Jordana *et al.* 2011). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate these trends over different sectors and countries over the last one hundred years, making visible the mushrooming of new agencies in recent decades – not all independent, only separated from ministerial bodies. These results, which do not include QAAs, are based on a sample of 16 sectors and 85 countries from all regions of the world (Jordana *et al.* 2011).

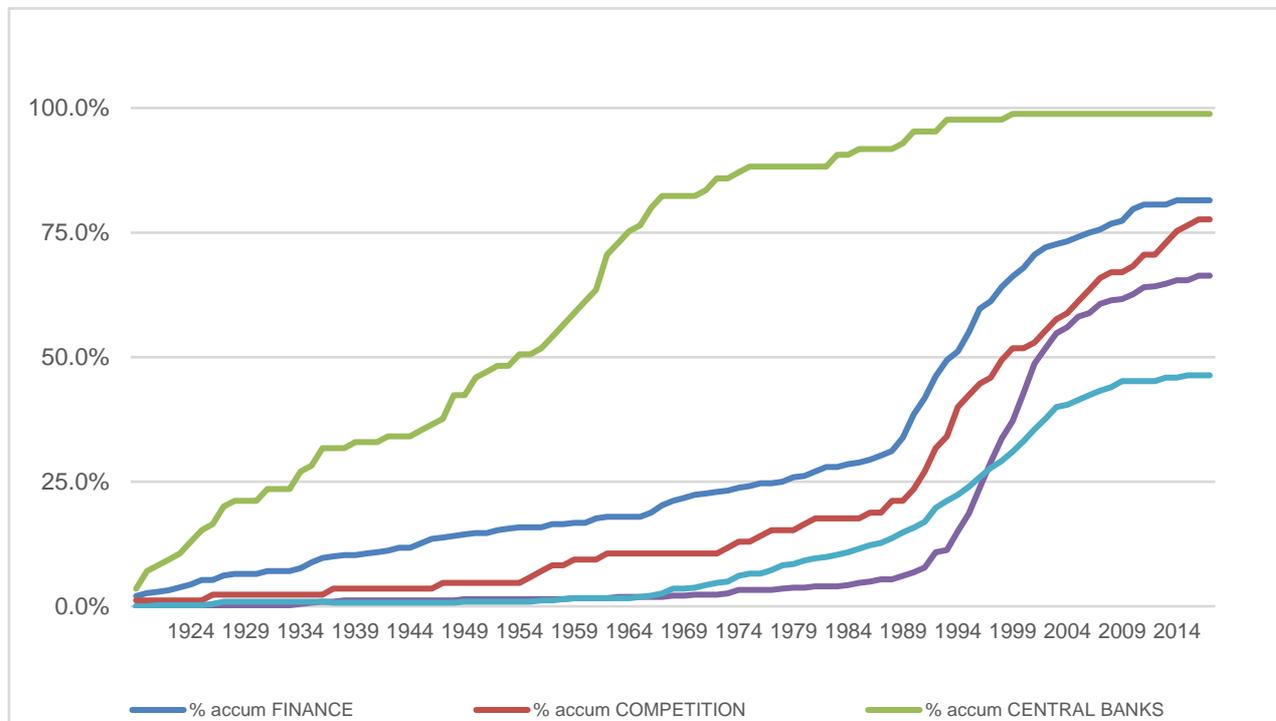
Against this backdrop, it is not a surprise that quality in higher education emerged as an increasingly regulated area, where states shifted away from direct control of activities towards delegating the supervisory tasks to decentralized institutions. In fact, it is well established that, in many countries, the authorities regulating quality in higher education have also taken the form of independent or semi-independent public agencies. The new higher education policies that embraced a strong regulatory approach were not isolated from these new trends in governance, and the diffusion of autonomous agencies for quality assurance became another fragment of the general transformations that occurred at that time (Jarvis 2014). Thus, since the end of the 1980s, the model of quality assurance agencies (QAAs) focusing on the supervision of higher education institutions (HEI) – separated from the government – was progressively adopted by many countries, as can be seen in Figure 3. Within 30 years, by the 2010s, almost all countries had created such agencies (most being formally separated from parent ministries in the executive) to supervise higher education quality.

Figure 1: Country coverage – regulatory agencies (85 countries, 16 sectors)



Source: Jordana *et al.* (2011, updated dataset).

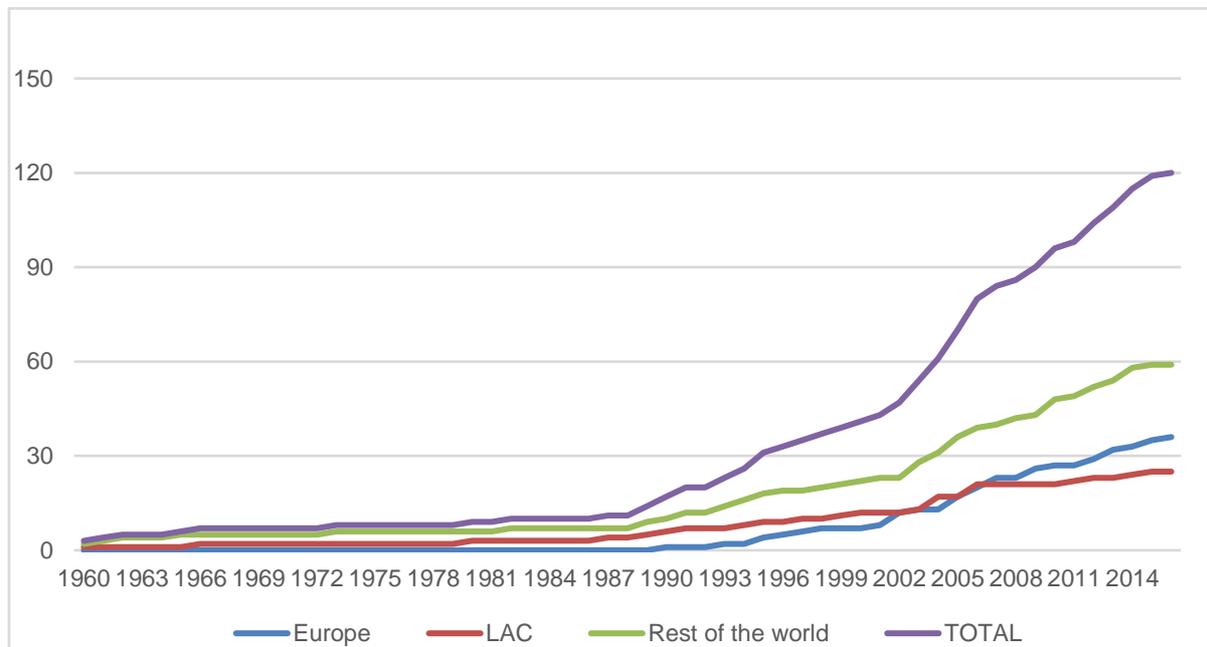
Figure 2: sector coverage – regulatory agencies (85 countries, 16 sectors)



Source: Jordana *et al.* (2011, updated dataset).

In Europe, the Bologna Process, which was launched at the end of the 1990s and paved the way for the establishment of a European Higher Education Area, prompted countries to adopt a governance design for QAAs that highlighted their independence. Actually, this is not very different to what happened in many other sectors, where regulatory instruments are intensively used and the EU has some more regulatory capacities (Egeberg and Trondal 2017), although in the quality assessment case there are no specific EU norms making obligatory the establishment of national agencies. It is also important to state that, quite often, the process of creation of QAAs was not a single move. Many countries created entities that, initially, were not fully capable of coping with the challenges the educational regulatory reforms opened. This led in many cases to organizational reforms, institutional fluctuations, or layering processes to empower quality assurance agencies with the necessary tools and capabilities to accomplish their mission. A fine-grained adjustment to each country's administrative settings was required, but also the political economy of the higher education sector – with its multiple actors and varied interests – created a policy battlefield in which institutional reforms were often not fully successful, or delayed long time.

Figure 3: creation year of QAAs



As usual, these newly created institutions adopted different names according to the administrative culture in each country. They were called evaluation committees, accreditation councils, or quality assurance agencies, among other names. However, they performed very similar functions and made use of similar assessment instruments. In countries such as the United States, these QAAs remained privately owned, but in most countries, they were public agencies, operating outside the ministerial hierarchy with different degrees of political autonomy. In fact, the case of private accreditation agencies refers to a traditional model of self-regulation that American HEIs developed earlier in the twentieth century, as initiatives to control quality and to point the finger at those not achieving it. This was as much a system to prevent intrusions in the HEI sector as an original manifestation of the US regulatory state in the field of higher education, reflecting its early development, much before the rest of the world (Anderson 1962, Levi-Faur 2013). Nonetheless, when the regulatory state model expanded at the end of the century, their institutional capacities were already more developed and bureaucratic structures in higher education policy largely established. They were also the drivers of governance innovations, making more challenging the emergence of direct initiatives of universities to impose quality settings by self-regulation, separately from the state capacities.

Assessing independence in QAAs

Independence has been normally understood as agencies' capability to decide on matters of their responsibility without (political) interferences (Jordana *et al.* 2018: 527). From this perspective, independence can be "determined by the scope and the extent of the agency's decision-making competencies" (Verhoest *et al.*, 2004: 101). This study assesses three dimensions of the concept of independence: political autonomy, social accountability and range of responsibilities. To do this, we focus on formal agency characteristics by adapting the analytical tools developed by the specialized literature on the independence of national regulatory authorities to the case of QAAs (see, for example, Hanretty and Koop 2012, Irion and Ledger 2013, Jordana, Fernández-i-Marín and Bianculli 2018).

When it comes to the debate of QAAs in Europe, the quest for independence has been quite widespread and promoted as one of the agencies' recognized standards, rather than formal directives from the EU, given also the broader scope of the European QAA network. In fact, according to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) document, adopted in 2005, a QAA must be able to demonstrate: '*[i]ts operational independence from higher education institutions and governments is guaranteed in official documentation (e.g. instruments of governance or legislative acts)*' and that '*[t]he definition and operation of its procedures and methods, the nomination and appointment of external experts and the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence*' (ENQA 2005: 25). Since then, the ESG has been implemented quite successfully in agencies that pertain to 46 countries (Alzafari and Ursin 2019), and agency independence has become a very relevant identity trait of most QAAs.

Yet, beyond the European realm, we know little about the institutional and organizational characteristics of these entities in other regions, as not many studies delve into the process of agencification in other parts of the world or into what extent there is a single institutional model, or how agency independence is understood and implemented in different parts of the world, not to mention the effective, *de facto*, day-to-day practice of independence provisions of QAAs. The academic work we can find is scarce (for example, Woodhouse 2004, Yung-Chi *et al.* 2015), and includes several reports performed by international organizations like the World



Bank (2017) or Fernández Lamarra (2006) on particular regions, as, for example, in Latin America. Still, the establishment of networks in several regions or sub-regions has become widespread (<https://www.inqaahe.org/qa-networks>), contributing to the circulation of quality assessment standards as well as practical experiences and initiatives all around the world.

On the one hand, at a global level, the 2016 revised edition of the INQAAHE *Guidelines of Good Practice* includes only a general statement regarding the recommended governance and governance structure of quality agencies: 'the composition of the decision-making body and/or its regulatory framework ensures its independence and impartiality' (INQAAHE 2016). On the other hand, in 2000, Brennan and Shah pinpointed the existence of an independent agency as a feature of regulation of quality frameworks in Western countries, stating, based on a comparative analysis, that most QAAs are nominally independent of government. Interestingly, they also found an enormous variation in the institutional models of quality assurance at national level, such as countries with more than one agency, like Canada, Germany or Mexico (Billing 2004). Nevertheless, since then, there has been a significant absence of comparative studies delving into the institutional and organization characteristics of agencies in this particular field. For this reason, we systematically compare Latin American countries and European ones as to their levels of formal agency independence across the three dimensions identified.

Political autonomy dimension

Scholars specializing on agency independence have paid attention to examine control mechanisms that political principals have over agencies' governing bodies, specifically, agency board members and heads. From this perspective, the main concerns rely on the analysis of to what extent formal rules allow agencies leading bodies to take decisions without political interferences, and to measure how are defined the appointment and renewal mechanisms of such bodies to allow an autonomous behavior. This is probably the most relevant dimension for agency independence, according to the literature (Gilardi 2002, Hanriety and Koop 2013), and we allow an extra weigh to it. In our index we separate this dimension into three sections: those variables about the agency head, those referring to the board members, and a third one on the formal requirements to account for agency activities to the executive.



Social accountability dimension

We also examine formal mechanisms of social accountability in QAAs. Accountability is assumed as a set of answerability mechanisms carried out by an actor who provides explanations about her/his decisions and actions, and enforceability mechanisms that allow a forum to evaluate and sanction such decisions and actions (Schedler 1999, Brandsma and Schillemans 2013). Governance reforms that have transformed the way in which societal actors—such as stakeholders and citizens at large—interact with public institutions highlights the need for examining new modes of hybrid accountability (Mizrahi and Minchuk 2018). With the aim to examine societal involvement, we follow Goetz and Jenkins (2001: 369) who emphasize that there are key institutional characteristics that could allow citizens engagement, such as the “legal standing for non-governmental observers within institutions of public sector oversight”, and “a continuous presence for these observers throughout the process of the agency’s work”. When it comes to QAAs, social accountability implies formal procedures for the participation of stakeholders (such as consumer’s office and student’s employer), and a wide range of societal actors (such as students and alumni) through, for instance, consultation procedures. We expect that more formal requirements about social accountability of QAAs will provide additional anchorages to balance their decision-making processes, improving agency independence versus the executive.

Range of responsibilities

Finally, we investigate as our third dimension the range of responsibilities performed by QAAs, specifically, those focusing on assessment and accreditation of teaching, programs and institutions. In regard to that, we pay particular attention to three aspects of agencies’ scope and responsibility: first, the range of higher education areas that the QAAs cover (for instance, if they encompass only graduate studies or also other levels such as postgraduate or PhD). Second, the specific quality processes put in place by the QAAs (such as accreditation of institutions and/or programs or assessment of professors or research, among others). And, third, the different types of capabilities that these agencies enjoy, such as the capacity to elaborate its own regulations and norms; to impose economic sanctions; to grant or revoke licenses to operate in the market both from institutions and/or programs; or to make recommendations and/or to follow-up after (for instance, starting a new process of evaluation a year after making recommendation to see if the HEI has effectively followed QA’s advice).



These layers of the agencies' scope are relevant to their independence, as having a wider scope and more responsibilities delegated will contribute to make the agency stronger, compared to an agency with limited scope, that would be more dependent on the executive for managing key regulatory instruments, such as the capacity to impose sanctions or to revoke licenses.

Dataset and codification

Data collection and sample

We first elaborated a database of QAAs throughout the world. The data collection process proceeded in two phases. In the initial stage, a mapping exercise of the global universe of agencies was conducted; this included a preliminary sample of 151 countries and 253 agencies, most of them members of international networks or similar initiatives. The list of full members of the INQAAHE was used to identify these QAAs and then the list was revised to ensure that all agencies had an organizational structure separate from the ministry. It was also updated with the agencies that are affiliates of the following regional networks: ENQA, Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN), Ibero-American Network for Accreditation of the Quality of Higher Education (RIACES) and Acreditación Regional de Carreras Universitarias del Sur (ARCUSUR). These agencies were classified using three criteria: territorial scope (subnational, national or international), material scope (all types of studies or sectorial), and legal status (public, private or hybrid).

At a second stage, this initial sample was reduced to build a global database of QAAs covering 105 countries and including 122 public or semi-public agencies that operate at national or international level and that have a general scope (all kinds of studies). Therefore, subnational agencies, private agencies and agencies that evaluate only a specific type of study were excluded from the final sample. As a result, we constructed a novel dataset containing 60 variables that encompassed, among other factors, the year of establishment of the agencies, the instruments used by QAAs to measure and foster quality in high education, their major institutional characteristics, and some basic organizational and managerial variables (particularly their levels of political autonomy, organizational autonomy and accountability mechanisms). To construct the database, we used information on the characteristics of each institution publicly available on the websites of the agencies, as well as legal repositories in



each country. In most cases, the information about many of the variables selected was expanded and compared with the legal provisions for those institutions (i.e. laws, decrees, regulations, and statutes) when those sources were available.

Other information collected included the reports and websites of multilateral and international organizations in which the agencies are involved, their communications with professionals and wider audiences, and other sources, such as case-oriented studies in secondary literature. Still, we encountered significant problems gathering data in some cases, particularly in the regions of Africa and Asia, due to the poor information provided on the agency websites and the absence of legal repositories. For this reason, we limited our analysis to agencies from Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, where most data were available. Further efforts are required to complete a worldwide analysis of QAAs' characteristics.

Index on political autonomy of QAAs

On the basis of the methodology developed in Jordana *et al.* (2018) – also inspired by the contributions of previous authors, such as, for example, F. Gilardi (2002), who explores regulatory agencies' level of independence – we introduced a novel index to assess and compare the level of formal independence of QAAs. In practical terms, our index refers to autonomy from the executive, not from universities or other stakeholders (although this should be addressed in a further version of the index). We aimed to remain close to the parameters established in our previous indexes on regulatory agencies, to allow possible comparisons, but also tried to adapt our index to the particularities of QAAs. In any case, we understand that this attempt is just a starting point. It would require further adjustments and the potential inclusion of some other variables to completely capture the special characteristics of QAAs compared to other regulatory agencies.

As previously stated, our index of agencies' independence is based on three clusters that capture different aspects of QAAs' formal characteristics in respect to their capability to act autonomously in their policy area. We include 38 variables, and these variables show different set-ups. While some are ordinal, others are dichotomous. In any case, all are aligned to our expectations of creating more autonomous capacities for those in charge of the agency. It is also appropriate to state that most of the variables have already been tested in previous indexes that measure the autonomy of regulatory agencies.



The first cluster of variables refers to agency autonomy from the executive branch. It is divided in three sections. The first and second sections include, respectively, measures related to the appointment of the agency head and the agency board, and how they are institutionally protected to make independent decisions without political interference. Within this cluster, we also include a third section regarding the degree of direct accountability to the executive (as more accountable, less independent). The measurement of formal autonomy of QAAs is composed of 16 variables, such as the rules for their appointment, removal and dismissal; their professional requirements; duration in office; or obligations to submit information to the executive on internal operations, among others (Table 1).

A second cluster of selected variables (10) relates to social accountability. Here, we include variables mainly focused to measure factors from how agencies account for activities and decisions to different types of social actors and stakeholders. Social accountability is important for an agency's political autonomy, as far as it provides elements of legitimacy for its behavior, in particular when this is not backed by the executive (Table 2). Finally, a third cluster of variables (12) encompasses the range of responsibilities of the QAAs. We assume that a more independent agency will have more responsibilities delegated than a weak agency, as far as it would be more dependent on the political will of the executive to advance its initiatives (Table 3).

In the tables below, we identify all the variables corresponding to each cluster, and then display the range of possible values for each variable. All results obtained for these variables represent formal characteristics, as identified in legal documents that defined the institutional and organizational nature of the agency. Once we collected the information from the sources (taking as reference year the end of 2017), we identify a value for each variable observed in each case, and we then we normalize [0–1] these values for each variable. We opted for not pondering the variables within each cluster, but to give them equal value in preparing the cluster indexes. Only in the case of the first cluster with three sections do we ponder the first and second section more heavily (40% each one) than the third one (20%). Finally, we normalize results from the three clusters to obtain a concise index of QAAs' independence.

To this purpose, we assign 50% of the value to the first cluster (political autonomy), and 25% to each the other two clusters. This choice is based on the relevance of the first cluster for the decision-making procedures of the agency, while the other two complement the capacities of the governing bodies. Obviously, there is some apriorism in opting for this option, but we rely on similar ponderations commonly used to assess the independence of regulatory agencies

(for example, Gilardi 2002). Considering that, we acknowledge that it would be interesting to ponder variables within each cluster according to previous information about their factor loading to explain a particular dimension, as suggested by Hanretty and Koop (2012). However, as this can be controversial, we opted not to include such ponderation this time.

Table 1. Political autonomy cluster

| Variable | Categories/Indicators | Numerical coding |
|---|---|------------------|
| Agency head | | |
| Agency head term of office - (years) | Number of years from (continuous variable, from 0 to 6) | 0-6 |
| Agency head appointment | (QA) Board | 5 |
| | Legislative only | 4 |
| | Legislative-Executive | 3 |
| | Executive Collectively | 2 |
| | President or Prime minister | 1 |
| | Minister (policy sector) | 0 |
| Agency head dismissal | Not possible | 3 |
| | Only for non-policy reasons | 2 |
| | Related to political changes | 1 |
| | No provision reason | 0 |
| Agency head renewal | Not possible | 5 |
| | Once | 4 |
| | More than once | 3 |
| | Not limited | 2 |
| | Possible, but not defined | 1 |
| Agency head professional requirement for appointment | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Agency board | | |
| Agency board term of office - (in years) | Number of years from (continuous variable, from 0 to 6) | 0-6 |
| Agency board appointment | (QA) Board / Open Competition | 5 |
| | Legislative only | 4 |
| | Legislative-Executive | 3 |
| | Executive Collectively | 2 |

| Variable | Categories/Indicators | Numerical coding |
|--|------------------------------|------------------|
| Agency board dismissal | President or Prime minister | 1 |
| | Minister (policy sector) | 0 |
| | Not possible | 3 |
| | Only for non-policy reasons | 2 |
| | Related to political changes | 1 |
| Agency board renewal | No provision reason | 0 |
| | Not possible | 4 |
| | Once | 3 |
| | More than once | 2 |
| Agency board professional requirement for appointment | Possible, but not defined | 1 |
| | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Holding offices in government | Not allowed | 3 |
| | Not specific provisions | 2 |
| | Required for some members | 1 |
| | Required for all members | 0 |
| Accountability to the executive power | | |
| To submit an "annual plan" | No | 1 |
| | Yes | 0 |
| To submit an "annual activity report" | No | 1 |
| | Yes | 0 |
| To submit an "annual budget" | No | 1 |
| | Yes | 0 |
| To submit an "annual financial report" | No | 1 |
| | Yes | 0 |
| Who revises agency decisions | None (Judiciary) | 2 |
| | Other agencies | 1 |
| | Minister | 0 |

Table 2. Social accountability cluster

| Variable | Categories/Indicators | Numerical coding |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|
| The QA has an appeals commission | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Civil society accountability- open consultations | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Civil society accountability- consumers office | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Civil society accountability- Public hearings | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Civil society accountability- Advisory council | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Stakeholder's involvement- students and their organizations | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Stakeholder's involvement- faculty (professors and/or researchers) | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Stakeholder's involvement- students employer's | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Stakeholder's involvement- Administrative staff | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Stakeholder's involvement- Alumni | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |

Table 3. Scope of Responsibility of QAAs cluster

| Variable | Categories/Indicators | Numerical coding |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|
| Activities covered by QA- Graduate | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Activities covered by QA- Postgraduate | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Activities covered by QA- PhD | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Activities covered by QA- Research | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Quality processes put in place by the QA— Registration new institutions | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |

| | | |
|---|-----|---|
| Quality processes put in place by the QA— Accreditation of institutions | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Quality processes put in place by the QA— Accreditation of courses/programs | Yes | 1 |
| | Not | 0 |
| Quality processes put in place by the QA— Assessment of teaching staff | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Quality processes put in place by the QA— Assessment of quality systems | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Capacity to elaborate norms | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Capacity to impose economic sanctions | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |
| Capacity to grant or revoke licenses | Yes | 1 |
| | No | 0 |

Results for European and Latin American Countries

Although we expected that due to the presence of presidential regimes, Latin American QAAs were more dependent towards the executive-branch (Jordana and Ramió 2010), our preliminary analysis of the results provided by the cluster on political autonomy show that differences among European and Latin American agencies are not very important. For example, with regard to agency head and board members' autonomy, the average results in each region are quite similar. As to accountability to the executive, Latin American agencies are slightly less accountable than European ones. However, the average result for the political autonomy cluster is the same.

More relevant differences appear in the other clusters. In both cases, European agencies have been granted with more formal mechanisms of social accountability and higher level of responsibilities —than their Latin American counterparts. In the case of social accountability, European agencies show, on average, almost a double value in the index (0,50 vs. 0,26) than Latin American agencies do, probably meaning that they have activated more mechanisms to account for their activities to stakeholders and societal actors. In the case of the responsibilities index, differences are also significant, as European agencies show a much larger value – meaning that political powers have delegated more responsibilities to them for the assurance of quality in higher education.

TABLE 4. Results Europe vs Latin America

| | | Agency head | Board Members | Executive Accountability | POLITICAL AUTONOMY CLUSTER | SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY CLUSTER | RESPONSABILITIES CLUSTER | QAAs INDEPENDENCE INDEX |
|---------------|---------|-------------|---------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| EUROPE | Average | 0,60 | 0,61 | 0,54 | 0,60 | 0,50 | 0,62 | 0,58 |
| | Std Dev | 0,16 | 0,14 | 0,30 | 0,14 | 0,20 | 0,09 | 0,09 |
| LATIN AMERICA | Average | 0,62 | 0,59 | 0,58 | 0,60 | 0,26 | 0,47 | 0,48 |
| | Std Dev | 0,20 | 0,18 | 0,34 | 0,16 | 0,20 | 0,13 | 0,11 |

As to internal differences within each region, we observe that they are relatively low, and quite similar when comparing European agencies and Latin American ones. In fact, there is more internal variation among Latin American agencies when we observe the components of the political autonomy cluster, but not a very large one. What is surprising is variability in accountability toward the executive, both in Europe and Latin America. Within each region, it seems that some countries request agencies to be accountable to the executive, while others do not care about this. In further versions of this paper, we should examine more in detail the sources of this variation across regions. As to the other two clusters, we observe a similar internal variation when we focus on the social accountability, and much less variation regarding responsibilities, although here standard deviation is very low in both regions.

Figure 4. QAAS INDEPENDENCE INDEX

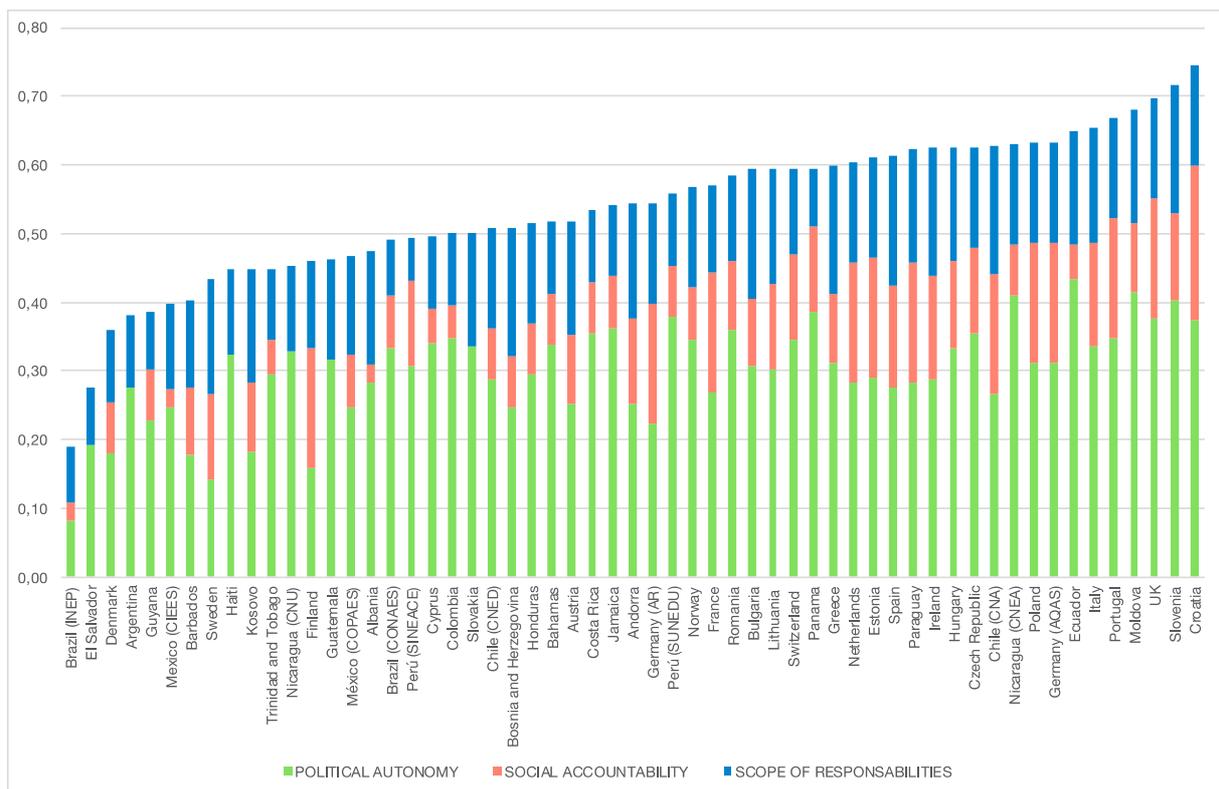
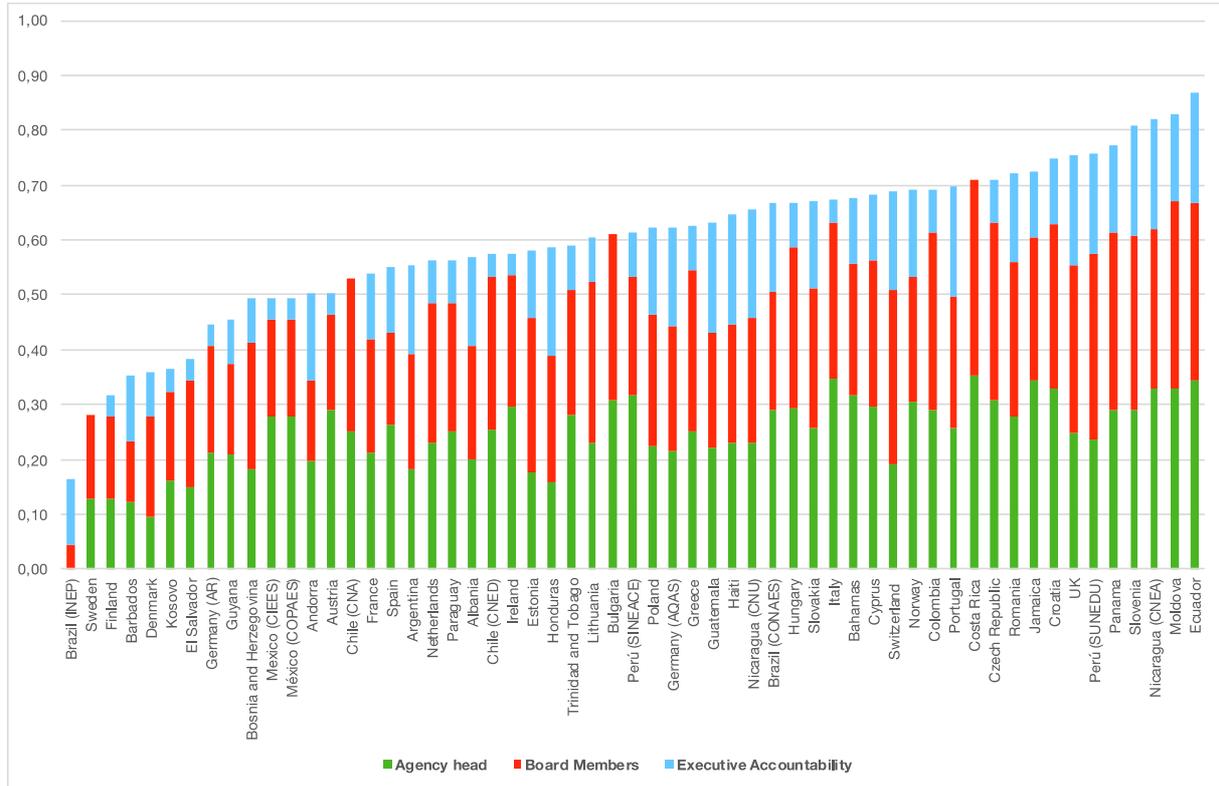


Figure 5. POLITICAL AUTONOMY OF AGENCIES



Concluding remarks

From our analysis, we provided a detailed assessment of QAAs' independence in Europe and Latin America. The results show significant variations across agencies and countries, although signs of convergence in institutional designs also emerge quite visibly. Contrary to our expectations, Latin American agencies – on average – do not score lower than European QAAs in the political autonomy index. As to the European cases, while some Western European agencies, such as those in Scandinavian countries – for example, Denmark or Finland – show low scores, other agencies, such as those in the UK, Croatia or Slovenia, have QAAs with higher levels of political independence in our index. In Latin America, we also observe cases of significant political autonomy; for example, some agencies in Chile, Peru or Ecuador.



We also confirm that the three clusters we used to elaborate the independence index do not covariate, as they do not show significant correlations among them. There is only a small correlation between more responsibility and more social accountability (the correlation between both clusters is 0.33, $p < 0.05$). In this sense, we argue that they capture different contours of the independent behavior of agencies, at least regarding how this is formally designed. Significant differences between European and Latin American cases as to the second and third clusters (social accountability and scope of responsibilities) show that the capacity of the European agencies to establish bargains with different stakeholders might allow more pluralism and extended networking capacities, facilitating a stronger reputation for the QAAs.

An important issue to highlight is that a significant level of agency independence in our index does not mean stronger independence from universities. On the contrary, we observed that in a number of cases, particularly in Latin America, universities seem to have a leading role in the decision-making of QAAs (traditional public universities, in some cases). Consequently, QAAs are probably well protected from political interference, but do not always have at the same time preventive measures to avoid the direct involvement of universities in agency decision-making when defending their own interests and views about how quality assurance procedures have to be managed and developed. Further versions of the index should also consider this dimension.

It is worth mentioning that our index focuses on examining formal rules that allow political autonomy of QAAs; hence, our scope does not cover an assessment of the performance of higher education systems in such countries or a discussion about their institutional design as a whole. However, it is easy to identify that the US system is stronger in Latin American countries than in Europe, specifically in those countries that have closer ties with the US, such as Mexico. Particularly, we observe that these are not simply mimetic adaptations; more precisely, we note that influences and reference models are adjusted to the countries' administrative traditions, where, in most cases, the role of the state is much stronger than in the US. On the other hand, although the Bologna Declaration and the Lisbon Strategy in the European Union demanded an acceleration in the development of external quality assurance systems, our results do not seem to indicate that European countries have introduced QAAs with the same institutional models. In other words, there is not a clear evidence that European countries have converged towards a more homogeneous model of QAAs, compared to Latin American agencies.



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