

**Independence, accountability and responsibilities of Quality Assurance  
Agencies in Higher Education: European and Latin American  
countries compared**

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## **Abstract**

This contribution examines three characteristics of the institutional design of public Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs) that operate at the national level in the field of higher education. In order to do so, we examine three *de jure* dimensions to explore the capabilities of regulatory agencies: 1) the agency's capacity to act independently from political principals, specifically, its relationship with the executive; 2) the agencies' social accountability ; and, 3) the scope of responsibilities the agency is granted. In addition, we also explore the role of representativeness and expertise in QAAs decision-making bodies, something particularly relevant in quality assurance. Our empirical analysis is based on formal agencies' constitutive norms and regulations for more than 40 countries in Europe and Latin America. The analysis allows us to compare the characteristics that these agencies have in higher education policy regimes across Latin America and Europe, and to discuss their variations.

**Keywords:** quality assurance agencies, higher education policy, regulation, governance, Europe, Latin America.

## **Introduction**

Since the late 1980s, quality assurance has been a key concern for states and has become a regular strategy in higher education policy. A renewed interest in public intervention in higher education – based mainly on considerations of 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 seem 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 funding higher education and providing basic regulatory frameworks. However, the management of evaluation and accreditation – as well as the oversight of quality monitoring of higher education institutions and degree programs – has progressively separated from the executive, enabling the rise of quality assurance agencies (QAAs) to take charge of these supervisory activities in a short period of time.

Overall, these changes have led to what Roger King (2007: 414) calls the emergence of the 'higher education regulatory state'. In fact, 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 current context of rising globalization (Jordana and Levi-Faur 2004). The regulatory reforms introduced in multiple policy areas concentrated on creating or expanding markets, but this has not always been the case. Reforms were also introduced in other cases to improve quality and safety related to consumption (e.g. food safety and environment), or to control the risks associated with human activities (e.g. nuclear and health), and expanded over different countries and regions in the world due to fast

diffusion procedures (often based on emulation mechanisms). Hence, recent reforms in higher education are part of the broad transformation of public policy instruments that societies have experienced during the age of globalization (Koop and Lodge 2017, Lodge and Wegrich 2012).

Under these circumstances, it is not a surprise that QAAs have rapidly 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 and UNESCO, and the rationale was based on the need to separate providers of higher education and quality supervisors in order to bestow credibility on the new system. To the extent that many countries have a large number of public universities, establishing separate – but mainly public – agencies emerged as a solution to avoid political interferences in the assessment of higher education quality. The diffusion of these agencies' characteristics was also facilitated by the establishment of global and regional networks of QAAs, such as the INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education) or the ENQA (European Network of Quality Agencies) (Blackmur 2010).

Although there are some relevant studies delving in the process of agencification in the field of quality assurance of higher education (for example, Beerkens 2015; Billing 2004; Temple and Billing 2003; Woodhouse 2004; Yung-Chi Hou et al. 2015), this literature has not paid sufficient attention to the institutional characteristics of QAAs, as well as the specific implications of utilizing new regulatory instruments in that sectors. In fact, as King (2007: 412) argues, 'regulatory research generally appears less interested in higher education in comparison with other sectors'. For this reason, we know little about the logic behind country adoption of this agency model in particular cases, or about

variations in the institutional design of QAAs which 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 QAAs, in their organizational constraints or the daily practice of their legal autonomy. Hence, analyses of the 'higher education regulatory state' would benefit from a greater application of broader regulatory concepts and theories (King 2007).

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the formal characteristics of QAAs after the process of global diffusion that led to their establishment. In particular, this study sheds light on the political independence, the social accountability and the scope of responsibilities of agencies involved in the regulation of higher education through the analysis of the legal rules under which they operate. First, we create an index for each one of the three dimensions examined and compare the results obtained for QAAs in European and Latin American countries. Second, we discuss whether there is a 'general model' of agency regulatory governance, or if there are significant variations across countries and regions. Third, we also consider the role of expertise and representativeness as two competing principles for the design of agencies' governing bodies, and examine their implications for agencies' political independence and accountability. To answer these questions, we build this study using a novel database that examines 57 European and Latin American agencies, where detailed data on their institutional configurations was easier to obtain.

As we have described above, in recent decades the process of regulating quality in higher education by QAAs has spread 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 *agencification* processes at global level, or on what is significant and particular compared to other sectors where similar

processes occur (with a few exceptions, as for example Seyfried and Phlenz 2018). 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 exhibiting specific 'regulatory styles' in the field of higher education, creating different modes of regulatory governance and developing different institutional agency designs (King 2007; Dobbins and Knill 2014). As King (2007) points out, the literature should be investigating more deeply whether something particularly distinctive about higher education is reflected in common patterns of quality regulation across countries.

In the following section, we describe the rise and evolution of QAAs and develop a conceptualization on the three characteristics of agencies' institutional design. The subsequent section describes the methods - specifically, the process of data collection and codification. Finally, we present the results of these three indexes of QAAs across Latin American and European countries, followed by a comparative discussion. An approximation of how expertise and representativeness shapes QAAs independence is also introduced, and final conclusions address the implications of the results.

## **Theoretical and Analytical Framework: Independence, accountability and responsibilities of QAAs**

### ***The rise and evolution of QAAs***

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 performing follow-up activities (e.g. Hood *et al.* 2001; Scott and Hood 2004). 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.

The institutional design of QAAs have been influenced by two different factors. 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 has been a worldwide expansion of the independent agency model as a new institutional design, supported by normative arguments such as their ability to enhance the credibility of decisions in many different areas of public policy, or to avoid conflicts of interest within the public sector. Regulatory agencies extended to many 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 resulting from the dispersion of these agencies 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 (Jordana *et al.* 2011). Figure 1 illustrates these trends in different sectors over the last one hundred years, illustrating the mushrooming of new agencies in recent decades – not all fully independent, but 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).

[Figure 1]

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising 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. As higher education policies became more complex and universities more diversified, outsourcing assessment to bodies independent from the executive was a logical step, as their supervision was seen as a non-political task and therefore not part of the state's 'core business' (Westerheijden 2008, cited in Beerkens 2015b).

However, it is important to highlight that although universities can have their own interest, they present some differences vis-à-vis other regulatees. On the one hand, the importance of innovative knowledge in modern societies places universities as 'knowledge institutions' in a central position (Weber and Bergan 2005). On the other, the generally not for profit nature of higher education differentiate universities from corporate actors. The fact that public universities are non-profit organisations that are forced by law to reinvest any possible benefit or surplus in the organisation itself offers the state the guarantee that the organisation will not drift from its obligation of upholding the public good (Amaral and Magalhães 2007).

Therefore, new higher education policies that embraced a strong regulatory approach were not isolated from those 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, as in the field of regulation and governance, in higher education literature, agencies were praised for being



independent from the government and from its regulatees (Dill & Beerkens, 2013). In fact, Beerkens (2015b) insisted on the importance of these structures being independent of political control, in order to guarantee their legitimacy vis-à-vis universities, while at the same time being independent from them, to avoid “regulatory capture”. Also using similar arguments as the general literature on agencification, the rationale behind the creation of these structures was that they may contribute to credible commitment towards quality assurance, as government policies and priorities may change constantly (Ewell 2008).

Thus, since the end of the 1980s, the model of agencies separated from the government focusing on the supervision of HEIs was progressively adopted by many countries, as shown in Figure 2. 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. Despite this model being almost universally applied, we do not know much about how uniformly was implemented, as there are no many studies delving into the institutional characteristics of quality agencies worldwide. One of the few is Billing (2004), who argued that, although there is no “general model” of quality agencies, the majority of its elements, particularly its regulatory instruments and methodology and instruments, are present in a majority of countries.

Conversely, the literature has paid more attention to the problems and pitfalls associated with agencification both from the point of view of universities and agencies themselves, particularly regarding institutional fragmentation. From the perspective of agencies, a consequence of fragmentation were the tensions that these actors face when having to respond to different societal demands: they should guarantee the fulfilment of minimum quality requirements in universities, but they also should ensure transparency

and improve their internal quality (Beerkens 2018). From the perspective of the regulatees, this fragmentation may lead to regulatory fatigue, as they have to report to different actors (Westerheijden 2007).

[Figure 2]

In Europe, the Bologna Process—which was launched at the end of the 1990s—paved the way for the establishment of a European Higher Education Area, and prompted countries to adopt a governance design for QAAs that demonstrated their independence (Seyfried and Phlenz 2018). As usual, these newly created institutions adopted different names according to the administrative culture in each country. They were termed evaluation committees, accreditation councils, or quality assurance agencies, among other names. Regarding their functions and use of assessment instruments, there are studies that show common patterns in some European subregions. For instance, Temple and Billing (2003) argued that in Central and Eastern Europe the dominating concern of quality assurance agencies was control, rather than quality enhancement. 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 who were failing. 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).

### *Assessing governance structures of QAAs*

At a global level, the 2016 revised edition of the INQAAHE *Guidelines of Good Practice* includes only a general statement regarding the recommended governance structure of quality agencies: ‘the composition of the decision-making body and/or its regulatory framework ensures its independence and impartiality’ (INQAAHE 2016). Nevertheless, when it comes to the debate of QAAs in Europe, the quest for independence has been widely promoted as one of the agencies’ recognized standards, rather than as any formal directive 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. 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 on particular regions, as, for example, in Latin America (Fernández Lamarra 2006). In a comparative analysis, Brennan and Shah (2000) investigated the existence of independent agencies as a feature of the regulation of quality frameworks in Western countries, identifying a wide variation in the institutional models at the national level —such as countries with responsibilities distributed in more than one QAAs, such as Canada, Germany or Mexico (Billing 2004). Nevertheless, since then, there has been a significant absence of comparative studies assessing the institutional and organization characteristics of agencies in this particular field. For this reason, we systematically compare three formal dimensions of QAAs across Latin American and European countries.

This study is focused on the three dimensions of agencies' governance structures: political autonomy, social accountability and range of responsibilities. According to the literature examined above, these three dimensions are of particular importance for understanding the governance of the higher education sector. As argued by Beerkeens (2015b), in the higher education domain, regulation takes place in the triangle of the political demand (parliament, government), regulator (agencies) and regulatees (universities). Therefore, for adequate grasping the governance dimensions of agencies, it is necessary to examine both their political independence *vis-à-vis* its principal, the executive, as well as their social accountability, paying attention to how they report to and incorporate in their decision-making universities and other societal actors, such as stakeholders and citizens at large. Finally, it is also crucial to look at their range of

responsibilities, specifically, those focusing on assessment and accreditation of teaching, programs and institutions, as they ultimately define the ‘regulatory space’ -in the words of Roger King (2007)- that these actors have. To do this, we focus on a formal agency’s characteristics by adapting the analytical tools developed by the specialized literature on the independence of national regulatory authorities in the case of QAAs (see, for example, Hanretty and Koop 2012; Irion and Ledger 2013; Jordana et al. 2018).

*Political independence (from the executive branch) dimension*

Independence has been normally understood as agencies’ capability to decide on matters of their responsibility without interference by the government (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' (Verhoes et al. 2004: 101), but also by the rules about how decision-making itself works. Scholars on agency independence have paid attention to examine the control mechanisms that political principals (specifically, the executive power and its respective ministries) have over two crucial agencies' governing bodies: agency board members and heads (e.g. Gilardi and Maggetti 2011). From this perspective, the main concern relies on analysing to what extent formal rules allow agencies' leading bodies to make decisions regarding their mandates and responsibilities without political mandates or influences (e.g. Gilardi 2002; Hanretty and Koop 2013).

Against this backdrop, we focus on examining political independence from the executive branch. To do this we rely on previous studies (Gilardi 2002; Jordana et al 2018) that have paid attention to indicators such as the measurement of how defined the appointment and renewal mechanisms of such bodies are with the aim of allowing autonomous

behavior from the executive branch. According to the literature, this is probably the most relevant dimension for agency independence (e.g. Hanretty and Koop 2012), which can be separated into three sections: the analysis of mechanisms that allow political autonomy of the agency head, the board members, and the formal requirements that 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 for 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 an examination of 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, we assume that social accountability can include formal procedures for the participation of stakeholders (such as consumers offices and student employers), and a wide range of societal actors (such as students and alumni) through, for instance, consultation procedures.

### *Range of responsibilities dimension*

Finally, as our third dimension, we investigate the range of responsibilities performed by QAAs, specifically, those focusing on assessment and accreditation of teaching, programs and institutions. In regards to that, we pay particular attention to three aspects of an agency's scope and responsibility: First, the range of higher education areas that the QAAs cover, that is to say, if they encompass only graduate studies or also other levels such as postgraduate and PhD studies. Second, the specific quality processes put in place by the QAAs, such as accreditation of institutions and/or programs, and the assessment of professors and research. 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 QAAs' advice). These layers of agencies' scope are relevant to their governance dynamics, as having a wider scope and more responsibilities delegated will contribute to making the agency stronger, compared to an agency with a limited scope, which would be more dependent on the executive for managing key regulatory instruments, such as the capacity to impose sanctions or to revoke licenses.

## **Methods**

### *Sample and data collection*

At a first stage of our research, we identified 122 public or semi-public agencies that

operate at the national level and that have a general scope (all kinds of studies), and constructed a novel dataset containing data that encompassed, among others, the instruments used by QAAs to measure and foster quality in high education, their major institutional characteristics, and some basic organizational and managerial variables (see online Appendix 1). Departing from this larger database of QAAs, we selected a total of 57 agencies from European and Latin American countries to be included in the institutional analysis of this paper. To construct the database, we used information on the formal characteristics of each institution publicly available on the websites of the agencies, as well as legal repositories in each country. In addition, the information of the variables selected was expanded and compared with the legal provisions for those institutions (i.e. laws, decrees, regulations, and statutes). 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.

***Assessing formal governance structures of QAAs: Independence from the executive, social accountability and scope of responsibilities***

On the basis of the methodology developed in Jordana et al. (2018) —also inspired by the contributions of previous authors, such as Gilardi (2002), who explores regulatory agencies' level of independence— we assess and compare the three dimensions that capture different aspects of the formal characteristics of QAAs: agencies' level of political independence from the executive branch, social accountability and scope of responsibilities. We include 35 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 and accountable agencies, as well as more capacities for those in charge of the agency.



The first dimension of variables refers to political independence from the executive branch. It is divided into three sections. The first and second sections include, respectively, measures related to the term of office, appointment, removal, dismissal, and professional requirements of the agency head and the agency board, and how they are institutionally protected to make independent decisions without political interference. Within this dimension, we also include a third section regarding the degree of direct accountability to the executive (our expectation is that the more accountable they are, the less independent they are). This section includes variables that identify whether the agency in question has the formal obligation to submit information —such as an annual plan, annual activity report, annual budget— to the executive, and who are the actors responsible for revising agencies’ decisions. This measurement of formal political independence of QAAs is composed of 13 variables (see Table 1).

We acknowledge that one might be critical about the coherence in the categories included in each variable. For example, one might question why in the case of appointment we assigned different values to the categories “legislative” and “legislative-executive”; why we distinguish if the appointment is made by the executive collectively, the president or the prime minister or by one minister only; and why we assigned higher values to long term of office. Since our focus relies on independence from the executive, the identification of the involvement of the legislative branch is important as its main purpose/nature is to monitor and control the implementation of legislation by the executive branch. In a similar line, we distinguish if appointments are made collectively, as we expect higher levels of debate in more collectively decision-making bodies —such as in multi-party coalition cabinets—, while decisions who rely on one main actor —the president/prime minister may result in lower levels of contestation. As decisions made by a single cabinet minister are based on a hierarchical authority exercised by the head of

the executive branch, we expect lower levels of political independence. As regards the scores for terms of office, it is worth noting that one of the institutional settings for ensuring more independence from the executive is to define different cycles --different from electoral periods-- for the duration of regulatory mandates (Majone, 2016). Thus, the separation of regulatory competencies into mandate cycles of different lengths is useful when it is hoped to isolate the regulator from the influence of political parties and pressure political groups and to provide incentives for greater policy continuity (Fernández et al. 2016).

A second dimension relates to social accountability. Here, we include variables mainly focused on how agencies account for activities and decisions to different types of social actors and stakeholders. Social accountability is very relevant for an agency's political autonomy, as far as it provides elements of legitimacy for its behavior, particularly when this is not backed by the executive. This dimension includes 10 variables regarding agencies' interactions with societal actors through hearings, public consultations, advisory forums, as well as variables related to interactions with students and their organizations, students' employers, researchers and professors, administrative staff and alumni (see Table 2). We acknowledge that further research may include the role of other types of stakeholders, such as professional organizations, as they can have an important role in the dimension of social accountability. However, since the participation of professional organizations is based on their intermediary nature (Levi-Faur & Starobin, 2014), our study is focused on examining direct ways of social accountability.

Finally, a third dimension of variables encompasses the range of responsibilities of the QAAs. This dimension is crucial as we may assume that a more autonomous 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. This dimension includes variables on agencies responsibilities, such as those relating to accreditation of courses/programs and institutions and the assessment of teaching staff and quality systems. We also included some additional variables about agencies' capacity to make their own decisions, as for example licencing universities. This measurement of agencies' scope of responsibilities includes 12 variables (Table 3).

In the tables below, we identify all the variables corresponding to each dimension, 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 define the institutional and organizational nature of the agency. Once we collected the information from the sources (taking the end of 2017 as our reference year), we identify a value for each variable observed in each case. Thereafter, results for each variable are normalized and then aggregated to elaborate an index —on a scale from 0 to 1— for each dimension, giving equal value to all variables (partly exceptuating the independence dimension). Descriptive statistics of each dimension are also included in Annex 2.

In the case of the first dimension --and on the basis of previous studies on agencies' political independence (Jordana et al, 2018; Hanretty and Koop 2012)--, we assigned a higher value to the first two dimensions. In particular, we ponder the first and second section more heavily (40 percent each) than the third one (20 percent). We acknowledge that previous studies on agencies' formal independence have highlighted some problems in the elaboration of indices, such as the "arbitrary weighting of items scores" (Hanretty and Koop, 2012:2). For example, in their study on formal independence of national regulatory agencies, Hanretty and Koop (2012) reduce multiple indicators of independence to a single latent trait. In a more recent study, Jordana et al (2018) develop a Bayesian model —a model that corrects the flaws highlighted by Hanretty and Koop

(2012), and that helps to treat missing data in a better manner. However, it is worth noting that in both studies, the authors also identify correlation between their corrected measurements and previous —unweighted— indices of formal independence from politicians (Gilardi 2002).

We recognize that future research may benefit from the analysis of more sophisticated procedures of weighting. However, our objective is to provide a solid basis for assessing crucial characteristics of agencies' governance. For now, we justify the use of higher weights to both sections on agency head and agency board, and lower pondering to the section on accountability to the executive since Hanretty and Koop (2012: 13) find that “items relating to the agency head and board have relatively high weights”, while “items relating to the running of the organization have less weight”. In a similar line, Jordana et al (2018) also demonstrate that “items relating to agency heads and boards have high weights in the final score of independence, whereas items relating to the running of the organization contributed less”.

[Table 1]

[Table 2]

[Table 3]

***Results: Comparing governance characteristics of European and Latin American agencies***

At first glance, we expected that Latin American QAAs were going to be more dependent on the executive-branch due to the presence of presidential regimes (Jordana and Ramió 2010). However, our results show that the differences among European and Latin American agencies are very small on the dimension of political independence. For example, with regards to the political independence of agency head and board members, the average results for these two sections in each region are quite similar (see table 4). In fact, the average result for the whole political independence dimension is the 0,57 in Europe and 0,58 in Latin America, with a very similar range of variation.

More relevant differences appear in the other two dimensions. In both cases, European agencies have been granted more formal mechanisms of social accountability and higher level of responsibilities than their Latin American counterparts. When we analyze the correlation among the three dimensions, the analysis shows that they do not have significant correlations between them. There is only a small correlation between more responsibility and more social accountability (the correlation between both dimensions is 0.33,  $p < 0.05$ ).

[Table 4]

### *Political independence from the executive branch*

In figure 4 we focus more closely on the dimension of political independence of agencies. Here we observe that 46 -out of the 57- agencies show values between 0.49 and 0.75, which is almost 80 percent of the cases. However, as Figure 3 shows, there is a wide variation across the clusters examined. These results suggest that more institutional differences exist across this dimension, possibly related to the influence of the administrative culture in each country, and how its political institutions shape the agency's design (Ennser-Jedenastik 2016; Jordana and Ramió 2010). Another relevant observation is regarding accountability to the executive: consequently, among the quartile of agencies having less independence, most of them have strong levels of accountability to the executive.

Regarding 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 dimension, but not much. What is surprising is the variability in accountability towards the executive, with larger standard variation both in Europe and Latin America, when compared to agency head and board member sections (see table 4). Within each region, it seems that some countries formally request agencies to be accountable to the executive (such as Slovenia, the UK, Ecuador or Nicaragua), while others do not request such formal dependence (as for example Brazil, Sweden or Finland).

[Figure 3]

### *Social accountability*

In the case of social accountability, European agencies show, on average, almost a double value in this sub index (0.50) than Latin American agencies do (0.26), which shows they have activated more formal mechanisms to account for their activities to stakeholders and societal actors.

That is to say, on average European QAAs have incorporated more formal mechanisms to inform and justify their decisions to a wide range of stakeholders in comparison to their Latin-American counterparts. For example, the formal rules of national agencies in Croatia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK have been granted with mechanisms to guarantee open processes of consultation, as well as the involvement of different type of societal actors such as students organizations, professors and/or researchers, student employers, alumni, and administrative staff. The results in European agencies contrast greatly with those obtained by those of Latin-American, since only two agencies (Chile and Paraguay) achieve a score higher than 0.50 (see Figure 4).

[Figure 4]

### *Range of responsibilities*

In the case of the responsibilities index, the differences are also significant, as European agencies show a much larger value (0.62 in European QAAs) than their Latin American counterparts (0.47 in Latin American agencies), meaning that political powers

have delegated more responsibilities to them for the assurance of quality in higher education. On average, European QAAs have been granted with more responsibilities than Latin American agencies, having competences on different aspects such as quality accreditation of courses/programs, institutions, and teaching staff, among others. This result suggests that European agencies are more likely to operate more widely and define implementation strategies with more flexibility than many Latin American cases, which appear to be designed as single-purpose agencies in many cases (see Figure 5).

[Figure 5]

All in all, our study provides evidence that differences between European and Latin American cases are significant as to the second and third dimensions (social accountability and scope of responsibilities), which suggests that the capacity of the European agencies to establish bargains with different stakeholders might allow for more pluralism and extended networking capacities, facilitating a stronger reputation for their respective agencies. Moreover, the larger scope of responsibilities granted to European agencies shows that the delegation of regulatory instruments and the supervision of quality assurance policies implemented is stronger in Europe.

### ***Representativeness and expertise in QAAs***

Beyond the main features we observed from the results of the three indexes on agencies' institutional characteristics, there is an important aspect that we should discuss. In fact, the political independence dimension measures how independent from the



executive the agency is, but it does not control for if the agency also remains independent from other actors, or if it has some particular linkages to relevant stakeholders, such as universities. For this purpose, we have carefully examined the composition of the agency board in our sample of cases (irrespective of the name employed), and how each board member is appointed. From the results obtained, we observe that two very different logics regarding how members join board are present among QAAs: on the one side, we find agencies where expertise was the key criteria in selecting experts -aiming to bring experienced people to the board; on the other side, there are agency designs where including people representing different bodies and stakeholders is adopted as a key criteria. For the latter logic, there are cases where universities are clearly dominating the board.

It is not difficult to come up with the perception that two different understandings about the nature of the agencies and how they work emerge here. While the expertise board model is closer to the principles of regulatory agencies that focus on delegating power to specialists and professionals, the representativeness board model is closer to the view of delegating power to universities and other stakeholders, considering that constrained self-regulatory approaches can be embedded within a broader conceptualization of independent agency design. Yet when we observe in detail the actual designs of the agencies, we also observe significant variations in how these models are implemented in practice in each country. For example, it could happen that agencies relying strongly on the representativeness model may internally delegate quality assessment decisions to specialized committees composed by experts. Also, we may find that in those agency boards adopting the expert model, the selection of experts can be shaped by stakeholders, in particular universities or university associations. These are, however, two possible institutional configurations, but there are many more options implemented.

From table 5 we observe that both the expertise and the representativeness models are quite spread out, although there are a few more cases of the expertise board model. In fact, we find agencies with a certain model irrespective of the involvement of the universities in the agency. One interesting thing is that not all cases fit clearly into a single model: some agencies show hybrid characteristics, as they combine expertise and representativeness in their boards. We also find other strategies to articulate the expertise and the representativeness logic: in some countries, they established two agencies, each one having a board dominated by a single model. In other cases, there are external councils where a representative logic prevails, which remains in charge of selecting experts for the agency board.

In fact, the variety of institutional agency designs is quite broad, and we might observe that in many cases there exists subtle mechanisms to articulate both logics, within (from the establishment of advisory stakeholders' councils to specialized expert committees) or even outside the agency itself (as for example with the involvement of larger national educational councils). Not all cases, however, remain involved in the articulation of such equilibria. Some agencies, particularly those strictly based on the expertise model (with a low role of universities), tend to avoid any representativeness logic, even combining mechanisms outside the board model.

### **Concluding remarks**

From our analysis, we provided a detailed assessment of three crucial institutional characteristics of QAAs in Europe and Latin America. The results show 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 independence index. As to the

European cases, while some Western European agencies, such as those in Scandinavian countries (i.e. Denmark and Finland) – show low scores; other agencies, such as those in the UK, Croatia or Slovenia, have QAAs with higher levels of political independence. In Latin America, we also observe cases with high levels of political independence, for example, QAAs in Chile, Peru or Ecuador.

An important issue to highlight is that a significant level of political autonomy within an agency in our index does not correlate with a lack of representation of universities within agencies' management structures --that is, their boards--. On the contrary, we observed that in a number of cases, universities seem to have a leading role in the decision-making of QAAs (traditional public universities, in some cases). We observed this clearly when analyzing the composition of the agency boards, where we found two opposite models: either based on expertise or representativeness. The former is probably related to traditions of self-regulation in HEI policy that came back to some countries many years ago, which is actually reinforced by private self-regulatory US models that created hybrid models of quality assurance delegation to autonomous public universities – in charge of supervising private HEIs. On the other side, the latter is probably more influenced by regulatory agency models that were strongly dispersed throughout the world a few years before.

As our study is limited to the comparison of the formal institutional design of QAAs, we also acknowledge that our results do not reflect the performance of the political-administrative systems of the countries examined nor the performance of their respective HE systems. Hence, further research may investigate to what extent different models of higher education (for example, market-oriented models, or state-oriented models) are more likely to have QAAs with higher —or lower— levels of formal political independence, accountability and responsibilities. In a similar perspective, further

analysis may analyze whether specific political-administrative traditions (for example, liberal tradition or corporatist/conservative traditions, or levels of inter-organizational trust) are more likely to adopt specific instruments to evaluate higher education quality.

It is also worth mentioning that our scope does not cover a discussion about their institutional design as a whole. However, it is easy to identify that the influence of 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. Specifically, 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. On the other hand, although the Bologna Declaration and the Lisbon Strategy in the European Union demanded an acceleration of the development of external quality assurance systems, our results do not seem to indicate that European countries have introduced QAAs adopting identical institutional models. In other words, there is not clear evidence that European countries have converged towards a more homogeneous model of QAAs, compared to the case of Latin American agencies.

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