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## Quality by Association Across North-South Divides: United States Accreditation of Mexican Institutions of Higher Education

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**QUALITY BY ASSOCIATION ACROSS NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDES: UNITED STATES ACCREDITATION  
OF MEXICAN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

A Dissertation Presented

by

GERARDO BLANCO RAMÍREZ

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Education

Educational Policy and Leadership: Higher Education Administration

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## **DEDICATION**

To Regina, for making the quality of higher education in the Global South so deeply important to me. And to Regina's parents and grandparents.

To Diệp.

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To Diệp, my loving and supportive partner, thank you; the best is yet to come.

## ABSTRACT

### QUALITY BY ASSOCIATION ACROSS NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDES: UNITED STATES ACCREDITATION OF MEXICAN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

SEPTEMBER 2013

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Institutional accreditation in higher education presents a dual reality: Accreditation is intended to hold colleges and universities accountable through external evaluation and, at the same time, accreditation constitutes an opportunity for higher education leaders to assess, improve, and communicate the quality of their undertakings. In an increasingly global field of higher education, quality practices become diffused across national boundaries. U.S. institutional accreditation is one of the quality practices embraced around the world; institutions of higher education, particularly in the Global South, aspire to obtain U.S. institutional accreditation. While important, this phenomenon has gone largely unexamined in research. This study follows an ethnographic case study approach to explore in-depth how a Mexican institution of higher education engaged in the process of institutional accreditation with a U.S. regional accrediting agency.

One Mexican university located only a few miles away from the U.S.-Mexico border was selected as the site for conducting this case study. The university obtained initial institutional accreditation in 2012, which presented a valuable opportunity for conducting the study. After analyzing line by line nearly 500 pages of documents and conducting thirteen interviews with faculty and administrators from the university, this project presents findings organized around

four major themes: (a) Reputational value is a central motivation to pursue U.S. accreditation given that, through accreditation, the institution in Mexico becomes connected to internationally recognized universities; (b) while desirable from many perspectives, the accreditation process triggers a set of intra-organizational dynamics and stressors, chief among them is a complex division of labor in which faculty members are necessary yet distanced from decision making; (c) compliance with highly challenging—yet perceived as fair—standards legitimizes both accreditation process and the U.S. accreditors that are perceived as reluctant players in a process mainly intended to assist emergent systems of higher education; and (d) language and translation are significant concepts to understand the accreditation process as they also establish power relations in which proximity and similarity to the U.S. grants power to the candidate institution.

Based on the empirical findings, different interpretations of U.S. institutional accreditation are discussed along with the implications of the study for policy, practice, and further research.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

If “research is more thinking than doing,” as Knight (2002, p. 16) suggests, then, this research project began back in 2005 when I became involved in the U.S. accreditation of a Mexican institution of higher education for the first time. Ever since, I have been fascinated by the complexity of issues involved in the translation—moving from one place to another—of quality practices in higher education. Institutional accreditation is one of the most distinctive U.S. processes for ensuring quality in higher education and is considered the world’s “gold standard” of quality assurance (Jackson, Davies & Jackson, 2010, p. 9). It is hardly surprising that institutional leaders from around the world seek to obtain this important institutional credential even though their motivations have remained largely unexamined by scholars of higher education and other social fields.

During my first encounter with U.S. institutional accreditation in Mexico, I learned that accreditation is a high-stakes process that goes far beyond reputational competition—even if reputational competition is crucial to understand this phenomenon. Institutional accreditation is frequently construed as the gateway for institutions of higher education in nations across the Global South, like Mexico, to enter the league of world-class institutions. Nonetheless, the gateway is not without gatekeepers. This study explores the complexities of U.S. institutional accreditation in the Mexican context, and more broadly, the complexities of internationalizing quality practices. This study also reports and discusses the findings of a case study intended to explore the struggles and accomplishments undertaken at a Mexican university in pursuit of U.S. institutional accreditation. Moreover, this study is about exploring what kind of process accreditation is, and about complicating and problematizing quality in higher education—which is too often taken for granted and left undefined.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The quality of higher education institutions is no longer assumed. In their earliest years, universities were affiliated to prestigious institutions, including the Church or the monarchy, and enjoyed their protection and recognition (Lemaitre, 2011; Thelin, 2004). For many years, colleges and universities enjoyed not only autonomy but also the deference of government officials and the public (Zumeta, 2001). Things have changed substantially: Public funding for higher education has been reduced, different stakeholders place conflicting pressures and demands on higher education systems, and increasingly, costs are transferred on to students (Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2011; Zumeta, 2001). University administrators are more than ever before forced to respond to government mandates, the public, and—increasingly—market pressures. Different stakeholders demand quality but they have different expectations or interpretations of quality; these interpretations frequently remain unexamined. University administrators are pressured to show evidence of the quality of their institutions; different mechanisms are at their disposal. Accreditation, which constitutes an instance of external quality assurance, has become the most common mechanism to demonstrate institutional quality to external constituents.

With the advent of globalization, with ever growing segments of the population accessing higher education, and with the expansion of higher education in all regions of the world, preoccupations about higher education quality have become commonplace (Lemaitre, 2002; Singh, 2010). Quality assurance is, consequently, an international endeavor and a key component of higher education policies in nearly every country, given that students and scholars move across national and regional boundaries at unprecedented rates (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2010; Harvey, 2004b). Since the 1980s, most nations have developed quality assurance mechanisms, many of which follow on the footsteps of a handful of nations

that belong to the Global North (Billing, 2004; Kells, 1999; Stensaker & Harvey, 2006). In fact, an astonishingly high number of countries tend to simply copy quality assurance procedures or borrow policies from other countries (Kells, 1999; Morley, 2003).

Additionally, quality assurance and accreditation have geopolitical implications because they are related to national competitiveness (Lemaitre, 2002; Singh, 2010) and may determine a country's place in the global knowledge economy (Maldonado-Maldonado, 2011). As a result, the stakes of higher education are higher than ever. At the same time, global competition in higher education does not take place on an even field (Marginson, 2008). Countries in the Global South—those nations that have experienced the aftermath of colonization by European or Western powers (Grovoqui, 2011)—face a clear disadvantage for competing in the global system of higher education. In the midst of such a challenging scenario, higher education institutions in the Global South need to make choices about what quality mechanisms to employ and about how best to respond to the accountability pressures coming from their governments, transnational organizations, and from an increasingly competitive market.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study analyzes the internationalization of quality practices in higher education by looking in-depth at one higher education institution in Mexico that has obtained accreditation by a United States regional accrediting agency. Following a qualitative single-case study design, this project illustrates the much larger phenomenon of cross-national quality assurance provision because other institutions in Mexico, and many more all across the Global South, pursue U.S. accreditation. The present study analyzes the organizational dynamics—such as collaboration, competition and compliance—within an institution of higher learning in Mexico and explores experiences and perspectives of campus leaders as they engage with the

institutional accreditation process established by a regional accreditation agency based in the United States.

Exploring the internationalization of quality practices in higher education, as illustrated by the case of a Mexican university pursuing U.S. institutional accreditation, serves a larger purpose: This study is intended to complicate and problematize assumptions about quality in higher education. U.S. accreditation, as it will be discussed later, is not compulsory—especially for non-U.S. institutions—therefore, the significant number of universities that pursue this U.S. institutional credential calls for exploration. This case study will show that campus leaders of non-U.S. universities are willing to go to great lengths to secure U.S. accreditation for their institutions. Accreditation must mean a great deal to them; based on contemporary research we simply do not know what accreditation means to these university administrators. This study sets out to explore the meanings attributed to U.S. accreditation.

### **Research Questions and Propositions**

This study begins under the premise that accreditation is a deliberate exercise of individual and group agency—the ability to act purposefully but within boundaries—in a particular college or university, oriented to accomplishing a set of goals, some of which are stated and some of which are implicit. As an exercise of agency, accreditation is simultaneously enabled and constrained by a particular set of social, historical, and political contexts. Accreditation reflects assumptions about quality and value in higher education and enacts a strategy, namely a theory of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974); such theory of action involves goals, actions, and outcomes. The interplay of these three elements—goals, actions, and outcomes—in context, constitutes the core of this study. As a result, the main research question of this study is:

How do university leaders in Mexico exercise institutional agency and construct value as they participate in U.S. institutional accreditation?

The following secondary questions further narrow the scope of inquiry:

1. What are the intended and unintended consequences of the accreditation process for the institution? What are the stated and unstated goals for entering the accreditation process? How do these goals affect action?
2. What institutional actions and actors are at play in the process?
3. How do campus leaders evaluate the accreditation process?
4. What is the role, if any, of Mexico's colonial past in selecting this particular form of quality assurance and accrediting agency?
5. What are the assumptions about quality and value in higher education implicit in the U.S. accreditation process?

Given the genre and assumptions that guide this study, I do not intend to test a hypothesis; instead, this study presents and elaborates the following argument: The pursuit of U.S. institutional accreditation on the part of college and university leaders in the Global South constitutes an exercise of agency. However, agency is bounded and constrained by its social, historical and cultural context. For this reason, ideas about Global North and Global South are crucial for analysis. Additionally, the notion of accreditation as an exercise of agency is insufficient to understand the puzzle that U.S. accreditation of non-U.S. universities poses because agency needs to be directed toward achieving goals or satisfying desires.

A theory of value is needed to complement the argument. Graeber (2001) suggests that value has three distinct but interrelated dimensions. Economic value i.e. what people are willing to pay for something, is possibly the most familiar form of value. Social value, or rather values, is what individuals hold dear and desirable in a given social context. Finally, value in the

linguistic—or rather semiotic—sense, is a difference that carries meaning. This last notion is important because U.S. institutional accreditation involves quality assurance but implies that this particular kind of quality assurance is unlike the domestic mechanisms available to candidate universities, and similar to the ones that prestigious U.S institutions partake in. Therefore, semiotic value, understood as this meaningful difference (Oswald, 2012), carries analytical significance for this study. In fact, the idea of differentiation is likely the key to understand reputational competition in higher education, which has received substantial attention lately (Marginson, 2004; 2006; 2007a). In addition, a multifaceted notion of value also requires a multifaceted notion of quality in higher education.

Through this case study, I argue and illustrate that the pursuit of U.S. institutional accreditation by universities in the Global South constitutes an exercise of agency oriented to positioning the candidate institution in a relationship of mimicry (Bhabha, 1994) in relation to elite universities from the Global North. U.S. accreditation is not only an exercise of position taking (Marginson, 2007a) but also of construction and further differentiation of a hierarchical global system. As an example, a university in the Global South cannot be Harvard but it can aspire to be like Harvard. Universities in the Global South can aspire to be like those in the Global North and these aspirations exemplify mimicry. This process of performing like elite institutions from the Global North involves a complex number of intra-organizational dynamics that I will untangle in the following chapters.

### **Significance of the Study**

Three questions may assist in appraising the significance of this study: Why accreditation? Why U.S. accreditation? Why Mexico? First, institutional accreditation is the most established form of quality assurance in higher education (Alstete, 2004; Eaton, 2009). Second, the United States has the oldest accreditation system in the world (Dill, 1997; Reisberg, 2011),

and the U.S. is the largest abroad provider, some would say exporter, of quality assurance and accreditation (Ewell, 2008). Third, while adopting U.S. accreditation is already a large and growing phenomenon, Mexico is one of the earliest adopters of U.S. institutional accreditation, dating back to the 1950s (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA], 2013a; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools [SACS], 2012).

Even if issues of quality and accountability in higher education are increasingly salient, it remains unclear what constitutes quality, how quality can be fostered, and whether quality assurance promotes improvement (Harvey & Newton 2004; 2007; Newton 2010; Law 2010); further, it remains unsettled who is authorized to define quality. Consequently, new research should provide nuanced descriptions of how quality practices in higher education, and institutional accreditation in particular, influence the life of colleges and universities. Research that bridges the existing gap between policy ideas and on-the-ground practice (Newton, 2010) is needed more and more. Such research must connect local practices and individual actions with the larger phenomenon of globalization and internationalization of higher education.

Few studies have explored the symbolic and political dimensions of international quality assurance in higher education, despite some notable exceptions (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002; Skolnik, 2010). This gap in the research has led to overestimating rational-bureaucratic motivations for promoting quality practices, to the detriment of more complex and sophisticated understandings that account for political and cultural motivations. Furthermore, given the significant disparities that exist among higher education national systems in the Global North and the Global South (Marginson, 2004), research that pays attention to relations of power across national systems may prove useful. This project pays attention to the political and symbolic dimensions of accreditation and to the disparities embedded in the internationalization of higher education by providing nuanced descriptions of the practices and

actions related to quality assurance on the ground and from the Global South perspective, illustrated through a Mexican university recently accredited by a U.S. regional agency.

This project is, additionally, intended to fill an existing void in the literature because, as the upcoming chapter will illustrate, the vast majority of the literature on quality in higher education is produced in the Global North or is written from a Global North perspective. This reality furthers existing inequities given that, traditionally, peoples from the Global South have been construed as consumers, not producers, of knowledge and as subjects—not agents—of research (Smith, 1999). As a Mexican national who has familiarity with both the Mexican higher education system and U.S. quality practices, I am able to cross some of these boundaries and present perspectives that take into account both perspectives.

### **Overview of the Methods**

Given that the research questions and purpose of the study focus on the particular, qualitative research methods are best suited for carrying out this project (Stake, 2010). The overall strategy of inquiry for this study would be best described as a case study informed by ethnographic principles conducted under social constructivist assumptions (Creswell, 2007) and with an intended use of enlightenment (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The case study strategy is appropriate because the study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and with its real-life context” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). By ethnographic principles, I refer to placing emphasis on shared language and culture (Creswell, 2007), attention to the perspective of participants, and the centrality of description (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The unit of analysis of the case study is Mexican higher education through the in-depth study of a single institution.

Consistent with qualitative case study strategies, as discussed by Stake (2005) and Yin (2009; 2011), various strategies for data collection are utilized in this project: document and artifact analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. Utilizing a wide

spectrum of data sources strengthens the study's trustworthiness (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rossman & Rallis; Yin, 2009). The data analysis and interpretation process emphasize description of the settings, identification of patterns, comparison and transparent representation (Creswell, 2007; Tedlock, 2005). The use of coding, in the tradition of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005; 2006; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), provides a tool for systematically organizing the data analysis process.

This project involves exploring group and individual agency in a high-stakes context that is filled with competition and inequities. Issues of power and vulnerability in representation are a substantial component of this process of inquiry. Ethics and trustworthiness in research are complementary and inseparable elements (Rallis, Rossman & Gajda, 2007; Rallis & Rossman, 2012). Furthermore, representation involves power (Rallis, 2010) and hence, power and representation must be negotiated between researcher and participants in dialogical manner. Some of the methodological decisions in this project are intended to protect participants from potential harm and burden and to equalize power differentials. For instance, I utilize pseudonyms to obfuscate the identity of the Mexican university and the U.S. accrediting agency, and the participants within those organizations, in an effort to protect their privacy. In addition, I will present findings in a separate chapter from my subjective—yet systematic—interpretations. These choices reflect my interest in protecting participants and reducing their participation burden.

### **Definitions**

The upcoming chapter will provide a discussion of how the key concepts utilized in this project are defined in the literature. In the interim, here are the most frequently used concepts in this project, organized from the general to the specific:

Quality Assurance: An all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluation (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of higher education system, institutions, or programmes... (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg & Pârlea, 2004, p. 48).

Accreditation: A voluntary process conducted by peers via nongovernmental agencies to accomplish at least two things—to hold one another accountable, on a periodic basis, to achieve stated, appropriate institutional or program goals; and to assess the extent to which the institution or program meets established standards. The major purposes of the process are to foster improvement and to identify, for public assurance, institutions and programs that seem to be achieving stated goals and meeting agreed-upon standards (Kells, 1995b, p.11).

Institutional Accreditation: The accreditation of the whole institution, including all its programmes, sites, and methods of delivery, without any implication as to the quality of the study programmes of the institution (Vlăsceanu, et al., 2004, p. 20).

The purpose of this study is to complicate and problematize taken-for-granted ideas about quality and accreditation; therefore, these definitions are not only provisional but also contested. However, it is often beneficial to begin with a discussion of the prevailing state of the art in the field.

### **Overview of the Chapters**

Chapter two presents three complementary frameworks for analyzing quality practices in higher education. First, the *organizational* framework includes technical, political, symbolic, and systemic perspectives for studying quality. Secondly, the *international* framework pays attention to the increasing integration and harmonization of quality practices and policies across national boundaries. Thirdly, the *postcolonial* framework explores the historical underpinnings of the prevailing status quo of internationalization of higher education quality assurance. Together, these three frameworks set the stage for the empirical study of U.S. accreditation of Mexican institutions of higher education. Chapter three continues the discussion initiated here about the research design and methods of the study. It also presents the conceptual framework.

Chapter four presents the findings of the study, with an emphasis on description and the data that participants shared. In contrast, chapter five revisits the main themes from chapter four but with an emphasis on conceptual interpretation. Chapter six discusses the implications of this study for practice, policy, and further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### FRAMEWORKS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION, A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Accreditation is a complex concept open to multiple interpretations and agendas; in addition, crossing national boundaries exacerbates the already complex dynamics of quality assurance. In this chapter, I review and organize literature on institutional accreditation and quality assurance in relation to the study of U.S. institutional accreditation in Mexico. This discussion begins with how accreditation is defined in the literature. An initial review of the literature identifies the connection between accreditation and larger concepts—such as accountability, quality assurance, and quality management (Eaton, 2009; Kells, 1995b). Using the definitions of those concepts as a point of departure, the rest of this chapter summarizes how higher education scholars have investigated accreditation and quality assurance and the central issues these scholars have identified.

This literature review is organized in three major sections that set the stage for the empirical study of U.S. institutional accreditation in Mexico: organizational frameworks, international frameworks, and postcolonial-critical frameworks. The organization of this chapter presents an argument: accreditation and quality assurance are best understood through the use of multiple perspectives, given that accreditation is an organizational activity embedded in an international field that is characterized by historical and contemporary inequities.

#### **Definition of Concepts**

Definitions of accreditation are largely driven by their context; my purpose in providing definitions here is to offer some shared language that can help in setting a foundation for analysis. The definitions I present should not be taken as the last and definite word on the topic, but rather as an initial step because the language of quality

in higher education is contested. A classic definition of accreditation that is still referred to in contemporary literature (e.g. Alstete, 2004) suggests the following:

Accreditation is a voluntary process conducted by peers via nongovernmental agencies to accomplish at least two things—to hold one another accountable, on a periodic basis, to achieve stated, appropriate institutional or program goals; and to assess the extent to which the institution or program meets established standards. The major purposes of the process are to foster improvement and to identify, for public assurance, institutions and programs that seem to be achieving stated goals and meeting agreed-upon standards (Kells, 1995b, p.11).

Other definitions are very similar to the definition above:

The process by which a (non)governmental or private body evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole or of a specific programme in order to formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined minimal criteria or standards. The result of the process is usually the awarding of a status (a yes/no decision), of recognition, and sometimes of a license to operate within a time-limited validity (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg & Pârlea, 2004, p.19).

A process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement (Eaton, 2009, p.79).

All three definitions suggest that accreditation is both a process and the outcome of that process. Put another way, an institution undergoes accreditation (process) and an institution obtains accreditation (product). Second, accrediting agencies—governmental, non-governmental, or private—undertake accreditation. Third, the object of accreditation is usually either a program or an institution. Fourth, the result of the process takes the shape of a formal decision and such a decision stems from observed compliance with certain criteria (Law, 2010). In sum, the elements contained in the process of accreditation are: establishing standards, self-study, peer review, and decision. Law (2010) defined accreditation in terms of its function: “accreditation determines whether an institution or a programme meets threshold quality criteria” (p. 70).

In addition to accreditation, other concepts need to be defined, including institutional accreditation, quality assurance, and quality management. Vlăsceanu, Grünberg & Pârlea (2004) developed a glossary of quality assurance terms and some of the definitions included in it may clarify the different levels of specificity and relations among those important concepts:

*Institutional Accreditation:* The terms refer to the accreditation of the whole institution, including all its programmes, sites, and methods of delivery, without any implication as to the quality of the study programmes of the institution (p. 20).

*Quality Assurance:* An all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluation (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of higher education system, institutions, or programmes... (p. 48).

*Quality Management:* An aggregate of measures taken regularly at system or institutional level in order to assure the quality of higher education with an emphasis on improving quality as a whole. As a generic term, it covers all activities that ensure fulfillment of the quality objectives and responsibilities and implements them through quality planning, quality control, quality assurance, and quality improvement mechanisms (p. 49-50).

Accreditation has a dual connection: on the one hand, it is a form of external quality assurance; on the other, the actions that institutions undertake in order to become and remain accredited are part of an institution's quality management. As the following figure illustrates, accountability, while difficult to define, has to do with the responsibility placed on universities to respond to their many stakeholders (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011; Zumeta, 2001). As indicated in chapter one, accountability is one of the major forces that shapes the policy environment in higher education. Pressures for accountability lead to the development of quality assurance, i.e., particular mechanisms to evaluate and monitor higher education. Accreditation is the most widely recognized form of quality assurance and can be applied to specific programs or to entire institutions. Campus leaders within these institutions are responsible to develop strategies and specific actions intended to obtain and maintain institutional and program accreditation, and to

respond to other forms of quality assurance.

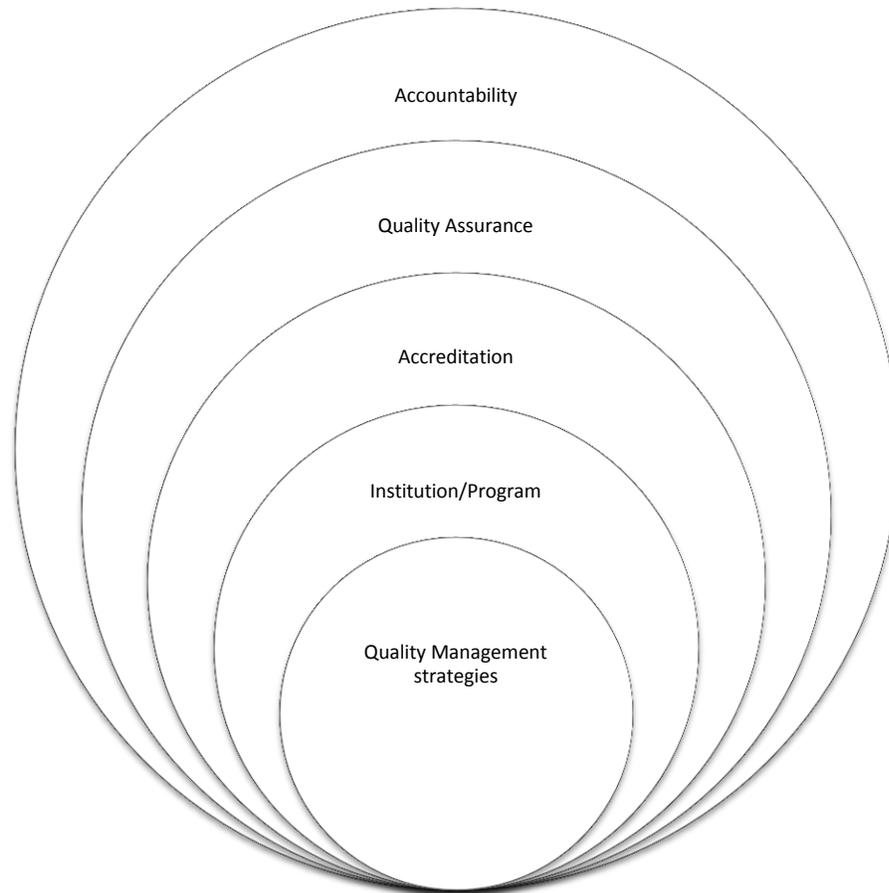


Figure 1: Relationships among main concepts in the study

It is clear that *quality* is the central concept that gives cohesion to the definitions I presented above; an exploration of quality is needed. However, before exploring the concept of quality in higher education, a brief historical overview of accreditation seems to be necessary, given that the temporal dimension is critical for understanding higher education.

### **Historical Background of Accreditation**

A historical analysis of accreditation requires paying particular attention to the U.S. experience for two reasons: First, the activity of U.S. accrediting bodies in Mexican higher

education is at the core of the present research project; second, the United States has the longest tradition of institutional accreditation—which extends for over 100 years (Eaton, 2009).

Accreditation of institutions and specialized programs of study has been part of the historical development of higher education in the U.S. (Kells, 1995b). Few motivations existed in early American higher education to engage in accreditation or other forms of quality assurance, given that only a few institutions existed at the time and they were operating in a rather independent fashion (Alstete, 2004). However, as the higher education system grew larger, more complex, and increasingly diversified, accreditation began to develop (Brittingham, 2009). One could say that accreditation took off as the stakes of higher education became higher. Increased access to higher education and stratification of institutions are often identified as the driving forces toward the development of quality assurance mechanisms (Singh, 2010).

Accreditation in U.S. higher education progressed through different stages of development. Alstete (2004, 2007) divides the development of U.S. accreditation into three generations and provides a useful comparison of approaches to accomplish that analysis. Brittingham (2009) took a different approach to analyzing the historical evolution of American accreditation, indicating that accreditation has evolved in response to changes within the higher education system and the historical process of U.S. higher education. Of most importance, Brittingham's analysis suggests that transplanting quality assurance mechanisms from one country into another is counter-intuitive, given that accreditation, at least in the U.S., has evolved as a result of specific changes in that national system.

The ideas about the historical development of U. S. accreditation that Alstete (2004, 2007) and Brittingham (2009) present separately complement each other. The focus of Brittingham's analysis—responding to changes in the external environment of higher education—could also be applied to each of Alstete's historical periods. Brittingham emphasizes

that accreditation has developed as an adaptation to a changing external environment. Applying Brittingham's framework to Alstete's work leads to the conclusion that the first generation of accreditation unfolded as an effort to maintain legitimacy for the system as a whole, given that new institutions were rapidly emerging and the systems was becoming further diversified. The second generation of accreditation would be a response to the massification of American higher education that followed World War II, and the emphasis on measurable objective standards would also coincide with the prevailing paradigms at the time. The third generation of accreditation can be seen as a response to further diversification of American higher education. Given the notion of accreditation as an adaptive response to a changing environment, how accreditation will change in response to technology and an increasingly globalized environment for higher education is an open question.

### **The Elusive Concept of Quality**

As noted above, the concept of *quality* is ambiguous. However, some scholars attempt to provide working definitions. For example, according to Vlăsceanu, Grünberg and Pârlea (2004), quality is defined as:

A multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional missions and objectives, as well as to the specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline. Quality may thus take different meanings depending on: (i) the understanding of various of different constituencies or stakeholders in higher education (quality requirements set by student/university discipline/labour market/society government); (ii) its references: inputs, processes, outputs, missions, objectives, etc.; (iii) the attributes or characteristics of the academic world which are worth evaluating; and (iv) the historical period in the development of higher education (p. 46).

This definition of quality is comprehensive, but has a significant conceptual limitation: a lack of alignment across components. For the definition to be coherent, the different elements that comprise quality need to be aligned, i.e. students, the public, employers, and different

levels of government would need to agree on the purposes, outputs, and standards of higher education. Clearly, such an expectation is unrealistic within a low-consensus field (Braxton & Hargens, 1996). As a result, definitions of quality have become a catch-all umbrella terms with limited usefulness. Harvey and Newton (2004; 2007) argue that quality is an elusive concept, pointing out that much of the literature on quality assurance avoids a clear or actionable definition of quality.

Historically, Astin (1980) presents one of the earliest attempts at defining quality in U.S. higher education. He postulates the existence of five different views of quality: mystical, reputational, resources, outcomes, and value added. The *mystical* view argues that the complexity and ambiguity that characterize higher education is such that quality cannot be defined or measured. The *reputational* view is based on agreement or consensus about the quality of a given institution; i.e., if people agree on an institution being of high quality, then, the institution must be of high quality. University rankings provide a timely example of reputational assumptions about quality. The *resources* view is based on inputs—ranging from the students, to the faculty, to the facilities—that an institution has in order to accomplish its mission. The assumption in this approach is that, the better the resources or inputs, the higher the quality a college or university possesses. The *outcomes* view follows a production metaphor: quality is to be judged by an institution's products. Students, publications, grants, and so on are examples of such products. Finally, the *value-added* perspective follows economic principles and proposes that quality should be assessed based on the benefits an institution provides to students.

Following this analysis, Astin (1980) proposes an alternative view: that quality is “a continuing process of critical self-examination that focuses on the institution's contribution to the student's intellectual and personal development” (p.8). Astin's conceptual exploration of quality makes a valuable contribution to the field for it provides a critical analysis of different

approaches and the limitations related to each approach. His greatest contribution consists of emphasizing the need for “critical self-examination” (p. 13) when discussing quality.

Developing a somewhat different perspective from Astin’s, Stensaker (2007) summarizes some frequently used ways to categorize approaches to quality. One approach equates quality to value, compliance with specifications or requirements, fitness for purpose, or meeting consumer expectations (Harvey & Green, 1993). Another view that has become commonplace in the literature conceptualizes quality according to five different approaches: quality as “exceptional, quality as perfection, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money, and quality as transformation” (Stensaker, 2007, p. 99; Vlăsceanu, Grünberg & Pârlea, 2004, p. 46; Westerheijden, Brennan & Maassen, 1994). Those notions raise a few questions: If we take quality as perfection, what ideal is it to be compared against? If we embrace quality as exceptional, are we implying that not all institutions can reach quality? If we take a fitness for purpose approach, who is to establish the purpose of higher education, or does it depend on the particular type of institution? These questions show sufficient limitations to warrant further conceptual exploration of quality in higher education.

The above discussion of the literature supports Harvey and Newton’s (2004; 2007) assertion about the elusiveness of the quality and the evident absence of definitions of quality. Arguably, defining quality is not so much a matter of discovery but a matter of meaning construction. I argue that definitions of quality need to be developed from the ground up and in dialogue with active participants:

A quality is something we possess, something that also emanates from an object or service. We could, of course, deconstruct any object, service or person, for that matter, into a set of qualities: we could specify all the attributes that make the object of attention what it is. The more complex the object of attention, the longer and the more multidimensional is the list...the university is not a thing but an ever-changing, multifaceted text that is being read and reread, not by policy makers but by the active participants (Harvey & Newton, 2004, p. 233).

If quality, as I argue, is subject to meaning construction and interpretation, quality exists as the result of interpretive interactions. These interactions happen within organizations, and the following section discusses the organizational context for understanding higher education quality.

### **Organizational Frameworks**

The study of higher education from organizational perspectives has long been recognized as an effective way to understand decision making and interactions in colleges and universities (Berger & Milem, 2000; Peterson, 2007). It is reasonable to expect that perspectives stemming from the study of leadership, management, and organization in higher education would inform accreditation and quality assurance. This terrain is extensive and highly diversified because quality is a broad concept and quality assurance has received much attention in the last 20 years within higher education research. Academic and professional journals devoted to the topic are now available including *Quality in Higher Education*, *Quality Assurance in Education*, and *Planning for Higher Education*, to mention a few, in addition to numerous books and monographs. Within such a proliferous topic, some scholars have paid attention to the mechanisms involved in accreditation and how accreditation works (e.g., Alstete, 2004, Eaton, 2009); others have discussed how accreditation activities are organized or fall under the jurisdiction of a given agency (e.g., Brittingham, 2009; Kells, 1983). Yet other scholars have paid attention to the power struggles involved in self-review processes (e.g., Morley, 2003) while others deconstruct quality assurance from a critical point of view (e.g., Stensaker, 2007). In addition, the scholarship I included in this review varies in terms of its level of specificity—ranging from quality assurance, in general, to institutional accreditation, in particular.

One of the challenges in reviewing literature is the diversity of purposes, methods, and foci of the different sources included in the review (Hart, 2011). There are many possible and

potentially valuable ways of organizing the scholarly works that comprise a review of the literature: by research methods used, by chronological order, by discipline, and so on. As my review of the literature on accreditation and quality assurance progressed, different approaches in the scholarship about these topics became clearly identifiable. Some studies pay attention to the structural elements of accreditation (Alstete, 2004; 2007; Eaton, 2009; Kells, 1995b; Lubinescu, Ratcliff & Gaffney, 2001). Other authors focus on exploring the power relations associated with the accreditation process (Harvey 2004a; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Lemaitre, 2002; Morley, 2003; Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). Some looks at the symbolic aspects of accreditation (Barrow, 1999; Stensaker, 2003; 2007). A fourth category looks at accreditation in relation to the higher education external environment, particularly at the international level (Brennan & Shah, 2000b; Van Damme, 2002). Consequently, a multi-dimensional perspective is helpful to organize the literature on accreditation and quality assurance.

Different multidimensional perspectives are present in the literature. For example, Bolman and Deal (2008) developed a widely known model with four dimensions: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Their focus is on organizations in general, not necessarily on higher education, even though their model has influenced this field greatly. As another approach, Bush (2003) proposed a typology of educational leadership and management models with six categories. Further, Birnabum (1988) identified five models for organizational behavior in higher education: bureaucratic, collegial, political, anarchical, and cybernetic. And Berger (2000) and Berger and Milem (2000) developed a multidimensional model for organizational behavior in higher education that builds on Birnbaum's work and is comprised by five dimensions: bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic. Based on these multidimensional models, particularly Berger and Milem's (2000), I discuss quality and accreditation from four different organizational perspectives.

## **The Bureaucratic Dimension of Accreditation**

The bureaucratic dimension analyzes structural aspects of organization, including the division of roles and responsibilities (Berger & Milem, 2000). This dimension emphasizes the rational aspects of decision making (Estler, 1988) and underscores rational goals (Bolman & Deal, 2008) but often overlooks the political activity that takes place within organizations (Berger, 2000). When this model is applied to quality in higher education, accreditation as a technical activity with rational purposes and goals is a central assumption. That is why some authors use the term technical, instead of bureaucratic. For instance, Estler (1988) refers to the technical aspects of organization because her focus is on understanding decision making and, in a bureaucratic organization, such processes utilize technical-rational ways of processing information (March, 2006). The literature generated in the United States usually follows such an approach, for example Eaton (2012), Lubinescu, Ratcliff and Gaffney (2001), and Kells (1995b). This scholarship provides a useful introduction to the topic and clarification about issues of jurisdiction and the stages of the accreditation process.

### **Boundaries and Jurisdiction**

Kells (1983) and Kells and Parrish (1979) made some of the earliest efforts to analyze accrediting bodies in the United States and their connections with institutions of higher learning. One boundary is focus or purpose. That is, accreditation in the United States can be either institutional or specialized; specialized accreditation is often referred to as program accreditation (Kells, 1995b). In addition, U.S. accreditation has geographic boundaries: regional or national. When focus and geography are combined, we see the three types of accrediting agencies in the US: Regional, national, and specialized (Eaton, 2012). *Regional* accrediting agencies conduct comprehensive reviews of all aspects on the organization and generally focus on degree granting institutions. They are responsible for setting standards, and for determining

the outcomes of institutional accreditation processes (Alstete, 2004). *National* accrediting agencies usually focus on non-degree granting *single purpose* institutions—for example, faith-based colleges. *Specialized* accrediting bodies accredit specific programs or schools, e.g. Medical or Law Schools (Eaton, 2012).

There are six regional accrediting agencies in the United States: Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA), New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools SACS), and Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) (CHEA, 2013b). Each agency is responsible for setting the standards and procedures for accreditation within their specific geographic area. In addition, some of these organizations accredit institutions outside the United States. The work of these agencies outside of the US constitutes the focus of this study and is discussed at length in the second section of this chapter.

### **Managing Quality Processes**

While there are differences in the procedures for accreditation among the different accrediting bodies, some general stages can be identified as part of the process: The self-study, a visit by the evaluation team, preparation and submission of a report, a response to the evaluation team's report by the applicant institution, and a decision by the regional accrediting agency. These elements are common to the accreditation process, regardless of specific regional body (Eaton, 2012; Kells, 1995b; Martin & Stella, 2007).

The mechanics of accreditation involve not only the actions that accrediting agencies conduct, known as *quality assurance*, but also the actions that an institution or program seeking to obtain or renew accreditation undertakes—known as *quality management*. Accreditation sets in motion a set of processes within a college or university that reflects the institution's

background, purpose, internal challenges, resources, and organizational patterns (Kells, 1995). However, little attention has been given in current literature to the responses, strategies, and leadership within colleges and universities as they engage in accreditation. As an example, in a recent edited collection on accreditation (O'Brien, 2009), only one article (Bardo, 2009) paid attention to the impact of accreditation on institutional organization and leadership. Furthermore, while a recent monograph on accreditation (Alstete, 2004) paid attention to the organizational aspects within the institution in relation to accreditation, the monograph followed a prescriptive approach outlining steps to achieve accreditation rather than providing an analysis of the effect that accreditation has within institutions. These examples illustrate that existing literature lacks a nuanced description and analysis of what happens within an institution when it engages in accreditation or other forms of quality assurance. As an exception to this assertion, Harvey and Newton (2007) present one of such few analyses.

From a technical-bureaucratic perspective, quality initiatives are often reduced to a series of steps with clearly identifiable actors, actions, and predictable outcomes. Consequently, the study of quality from this perspective concerns itself with exploring the stages of quality assurance (Kells, 1995; Martin & Stella, 2007; Eaton, 2009) and with discussing the issues of jurisdiction and distribution of responsibilities domestically or internationally. For instance, Kells (1995b), Eaton (2009), and Martin and Stella (2007) discuss different iterations of the stages that comprise accreditation efforts. While valuable, much of the technical literature on quality is intended to guide practitioners of quality management (e.g., Alstete, 2007, and Kells, 1992; 1995b). The prescriptive nature of this kind of work leaves little space for critique or reflection.

Bureaucratic or technical approaches to quality are useful and necessary but arguably insufficient. Rationality accounts for only part of the decisions and practices involved in quality assurance and management. For example, given that the presumed causal connection between

quality assurance and improvement in higher education is not free from debate or contestation (Harvey & Askling, 2003; Harvey & Williams, 2010), one might question why quality assurance policies have continued and even grown. The contribution of bureaucratic perspectives on accreditation is undeniable. However, a solely technical analysis of accreditation is severely limited because issues of power are embedded in the accreditation process. As a result, the following sections explore accreditation from alternative perspectives.

### **The Political Dimension of Accreditation**

The outcomes of accreditation may influence resource allocation (Eaton, 2009; 2012) and multiple stakeholders are involved in the accreditation process (Brennan & Shah, 2000a), potentially holding different interests. Given these assertions, the analysis of quality practices in higher education from a political point of view may prove fruitful because the political perspective looks at organizations as collections of coalitions and individuals who hold different interests and agendas (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Within the organization, these groups and coalitions compete for scarce resources (Berger, 2000; Bolman & Deal, 2008). While some aspects of political activity, such as competition, tend to be overrated, the significance of alliance building, negotiation, and collaboration are equally important for understanding and analyzing political activity (Berger & Milem, 2000).

### **Sources of Political Activity**

Even though the definition of accreditation presented above emphasizes the voluntary nature of the process (Kells, 1995b), the consequences of not being accredited are such that the voluntary nature of the process is questionable. Accreditation influences an institution's ability to receive certain resources and may impact the employability of graduates (Alstete, 2004). Given that institutions of higher education compete for resources and students (Marginson, 2004), the implications of not being accredited can be serious and easily translated into negative

financial impact. Some authors suggest that accreditation is, in practice, becoming compulsory (Lubinescu, Ratcliff & Gaffney, 2001). Skolnik (2010) conceptualizes accreditation processes as fluctuating between political and technical ends of a continuum:

There are three factors in particular that contribute to the political nature of QA [quality assurance] in higher education. These are the differences of opinion among stakeholders as to what constitutes quality in higher education; the pressures toward conformity within academe; and imbalance of influence among different stakeholders in QA. (p. 7).

Quality assurance influences how power is distributed within a particular college or university and how decisions are made within institutions (Brennan & Shah, 2000a). For example, an accreditation process can be used as an argument to transfer resources to strengthen a particularly weak unit within the organization, or a department with good reviews may improve its position within the overall organization.

An additional level of political activity related to accreditation brings the conversation back to accountability. Harvey and Newton (2004) point out that accountability is the most utilized rationale for external quality assurance. Accountability is understood, from such a perspective, as a mechanism to ensure adequate use of resources and to limit institutional autonomy (Kristensen, 2010). Nonetheless, accountability, like quality, is an elusive term:

Accountability is the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer questions about how resources have been used, and to what effect. Accountability to others takes many different forms in different societies, with respect to different actions and different kinds of support (Trow, 1996, p. 310).

Accountability about resources is only part of the concept. Two other levels of accountability must be considered as well: accountability to students for the quality of their experience, and distributing public information about institutions to assure various publics that the institution deserves their trust (Harvey, 2007; Harvey & Newton, 2004).

Pursuing this line of analysis, Harvey (2004a) conducted a study of the political dimensions of institutional accreditation and identified that accreditation involves power shifts,

not only within a given college or university, but most importantly, power shifting away from academics into an increasingly managerial and bureaucratic set of actors. Harvey and Newton (2004; 2007) indicate that academics are not those who drive the process of quality assurance:

The preponderant form of external quality assurance reveals how processes hijack and mystify quality as part of a politically motivated, ideological, compliance structure. It disempowers the academic community, forces them to respond to bureaucratic requirements, imposes judgments based on perfidious views and questionable performance indicators and stifles creativity to the extent that, as part of the academic process, 'quality' no longer has anything to do with academic endeavour: knowledge creation and student learning. (p. 237).

The previous scenario coincides with what Gumpert (2000) describes:

The contemporary accountability climate has in effect squeezed public higher education into a vise, even as various legislative and state actors have taken it upon themselves to dissect the enterprise, inspecting slices of academic life/work/teaching/learning under a microscope. The assessment paradigm has an apparently unlimited reach, imposing an organizational and individual performance metric on every aspect of higher education (p.69).

### **The Micropolitics of Accreditation**

The perspective of micropolitics suggests that a constant struggle for power and resources takes place within organizations at very local levels. Micropolitics pays attention to the quotidian dynamics of power differences and competition; it provides a valuable angle for analyzing accreditation because, as Harvey and Newton (2004) contend, the political aspects of accreditation have been concealed and the politics of quality has been understudied. Studies like the one by Morley (2003), which provides thick descriptions of how accreditation and quality assurance unfold in concrete higher education institutions, contribute to understanding the centrality of informal relationships in addition to formal structures. The peer review process itself has been analyzed as a political device by which compliance and control are assured not only vertically but also horizontally, a process that involves an exchange of social capital (Morley, 2003). These notions about the politics of quality depart from the seemingly

benevolent or neutral technical dimension of accreditation and provide a more critical analysis of the phenomenon. As Morley suggests, “peer review can be a form of domination packaged as equality” (2003, p.121).

### **Summary of the Political Dimension**

In summary, a political perspective for the study of quality in higher education recognizes that power struggles are part of quality activities, ranging from the development of policies to the everyday implementation of quality management. This perspective also acknowledges that different stakeholders have competing interests. As a result, studying quality in higher education from a political perspective requires paying attention to how quality influences power distribution within universities (micropolitics) and also the sources of different agendas and interests in the shaping of national and international quality assurance policies.

While political perspectives provide a valuable angle for understanding quality, even when we add the political and technical perspectives together, we do not achieve a full picture of quality endeavors in higher education. Technical perspectives emphasize rational decision making; political perspectives emphasize power struggles. Nonetheless, it is possible that some influences on quality assurance and quality management are neither power oriented nor technical-rational. A most promising development in the study of quality in higher education is the increasing recognition of the importance that legitimacy and symbolic activity play in the development of quality practices. Hence, symbolic perspectives for the study of quality in higher education are discussed next.

### **The Symbolic Dimension of Accreditation**

The lack of consensus about definitions of quality opens up the possibility of multiple and conflicting interpretations. Moreover, the possibility of different interpretations and

meanings about accreditation in turn opens the door for a significant amount of symbolic activity:

This lack of agreement, both concerning definitions and organizational practices, draws attention to the symbolic dimension of quality, and the fact that, although it is a rather poorly defined and loose concept, it has still been a very fashionable one, attracting a lot of interest (Stensaker, 2007, p. 100).

Symbolic assumptions about organization emphasize the importance of culture, symbols, rituals, and analogies that are used to make sense of ambiguous situations (Bolman & Deal 2008). The widespread popularity of symbolic models is a reaction to the excessive emphasis on rationality that other models suggest (Berger & Milem, 2000). Symbolic perspectives recognize the loose coupling that exists between events and meanings, while acknowledging the importance of cultural activity within organizations (Berger & Milem, 2000; Bolman & Deal, 2008). Organizational culture incorporates values and ideas that the members of an organization share, the norms they develop, and the ceremonies that express those values and norms (Bush, 2003; Tierney, 2008). Yet, organizational culture is not monolithic as organizational culture serves integration, differentiation, and fragmentation functions (Martin & Siehl, 1983).

Organizational culture is manifested through specialized language, and access or membership in organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The use of specialized language and questions about insider/outsider status, as they relate to accreditation, make the symbolic perspective relevant for understanding quality assurance. However, the symbolic dimension of accreditation and quality assurance has received relatively little attention in theorizing and research. Even some of the studies that apply different perspectives or frames to analyze accreditation (e.g. Skolnik, 2010) do not consider the symbolic dimension. Arguing for an emphasis on the symbolic, Stensaker (2000) suggests that, in the current policy context that

demands increased accountability from colleges and universities, leaders in higher education institutions are likely to approach quality as symbolic compliance in order to remain in good standing. Stensaker (2000; 2003; 2007) further argues that quality management is a symbolic process because campus leaders re-interpret standards and expectations in order to comply with them.

The argument that Stensaker (2007) presents supports the notion of “dramaturgical compliance” (Barrow, 1999, p. 27). According to dramaturgical compliance, accreditation and other quality assurance mechanisms elicit a kind of staged compliance from college and university administrators, faculty, and staff that portrays them in a positive light and meets the expectations of the process—even if such compliance is not representative of the day-to-day operation of the organization. The ideas that Stensaker (2007) and Barrow (1999, discussed below) present are important, from the symbolic perspective, because one of the symbolic assumptions is that “activity and meaning are loosely coupled” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 253).

Stensaker (2007) argues that the attention that quality and accountability have received in research and practice constitutes a fad. Congruent with this assertion, Birnbaum (2000) discusses extensively the notion of management fads in higher education and points out that colleges and universities tend to borrow practices from businesses and from industry. Noticeably, higher education—Birnbaum observed—adopts those practices only after businesses have discarded them for being ineffective. In Birnbaum’s view, Total Quality Management (TQM) is a primordial example of a fad borrowed from the business world into higher education:

TQM/CQI [total quality management/continuous quality improvement] was perhaps the first management fad in higher education that provoked serious discussion not only of its technical merits, but also of its educational and social implications. And when examined from those perspectives, the disconnect

between the philosophy of the management process and the institution for which it was being proposed became more evident (p. 107).

The existing literature that utilizes a symbolic perspective for the study of quality points out the fashion and fad-like nature of quality endeavors (Stensaker, 1998, 2003, 2007; Birnbaum & Deshotels, 1999; Birnbaum, 2000). One feature of this fad-like adoption of business practices is the credibility they appear to lend to the institution, thereby granting 'legitimacy.' Legitimacy is one of the central themes of the symbolic dimension of quality. Thus, quality assurance practices are important because they grant institutions the appearance of legitimacy (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). As a result, metaphors of quality processes from a symbolic perspective tend to emphasize performance – invoking the dramaturgical notions mentioned above. These ideas are important for understanding quality because they emphasize the non-rational elements of human activity and shed light on the symbolic and cultural aspects of quality. The symbolic perspective on quality assurance holds great analytical and heuristic potential despite the relatively little attention this perspective has received. The symbolic dimension evidences that there is so much of human activity that rationality cannot explain and, therefore, is worthy of further exploration.

The next section focuses on systems, building another layer to the multi-dimensional analysis used in this study.

### **The Systemic Dimension of Accreditation**

The systemic dimension emphasizes the open-systems nature of higher education. At the core of systemic models is the idea that higher education organizations are permeable and change in response to the external environment (Peterson, 2007).

Colleges and universities can be aptly described as open systems with interacting components, the ability to import people, ideas, and resources through permeable organizational boundaries and transform them into educational and scholarly outputs (Berger & Milem, 2000, p. 293).

Conceptualizing higher education as an open system is important for understanding quality assurance and accreditation. The previous review of the evolution of accreditation in the United States reveals that accreditation has developed in response to environmental changes surrounding higher education (Brittingham, 2009). Consequently, an open-system analysis of quality assurance and accreditation is warranted.

Several scholars contribute to this perspective. For example, Birnbaum (1988) proposes a model to explain how colleges respond to their environment. This cybernetic model emphasizes that institutions of higher learning respond selectively to external influences. As another, Ewell (2007) compares quality to a game with multiple players—States, the federal government, accrediting organizations, and the media/market. Perellon (2007) presents a different angle, arguing that quality assurance is a policy domain under the influence of many different stakeholders; some originate inside the higher education system and some outside. From his view, internal influences include changes to the higher education system, e.g., expansion or shifts from elite to mass higher education. External factors include national policies or even government changes in a given country that impact the educational policy, e.g., reduced budget allocations for higher education. Finally, international influences can also impact quality assurance. Given the permeability of higher education from the open systems perspective, all of these possible influences and changes have the potential of exciting conflict and power struggles within colleges and universities.

In sum, the concept of accountability makes evident a connection between higher education and its external environment (Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2011; Zumeta, 2001). The external environment influences quality in higher education through societal expectations, government mandates, and professional norms (Berger & Milem, 2000). Noticeably, quality management has become a professional field (Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010).

## Neo-Institutional Theory

While general systems theory and classic institutional theory are examples of systemic approaches, neo-institutional theory—with its emphasis on human aspects of organization—is most appropriate for analyzing educational organization (Berger & Milem, 2000). Meyer (2010) posits that neo-institutional perspectives can be located along a continuum from realist to phenomenological points of view. Building upon the previous sections, one could argue that phenomenological variations of neo-institutional theory are the most compelling and useful for analyzing quality practices in higher education; the forthcoming discussion of neo-institutional models focuses on these phenomenological strands.

Within this perspective, the concept of *field* is central (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008). Earlier work by Berger and Milem (2000) emphasizes this point: “Organizations exist within fields or sectors, composed of similar or related organizations, and the relationships among organizations within a common field constrain and enable organizational behavior” (p. 297). According to Scott (2008), fields subsume a number of dynamics, including competition and collaboration. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) also discuss the concept of field; they suggested that once a field is established among a number of organizations, “powerful forces emerge that lead them to become more similar to one another” (p. 148). They explore those convergent forces under the label of *isomorphism* or tendency toward uniformity within a field. Further, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest that once a field is established, even though there is space for individual and group agency, organizations try to change themselves by moving toward convergence and uniformity – becoming isomorphic. A characteristic of this process is that organizations will become similar to other organizations that are perceived as being legitimate within the field even if that does not make them more efficient, i.e., isomorphism and efficiency

are loosely coupled. Thus, organizations within a field tend to mimic one another, changing towards similarity rather than differentiation.

The concept of organizational field holds great promise for this study because higher education has been described as an institution (Meyer, Ramirez, Frank & Schoffer, 2007). The same can be said about the phenomenon of quality assurance in higher education. Evidently, quality assurance practices present a similar tendency toward uniformity (Kells, 1999).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) contend that there are three mechanisms for isomorphic change: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Explain that their classification is analytical or conceptual, not always to be found in reality, they note that, in principle, different types of isomorphism can take place at once. Coercive isomorphism corresponds to pressures, such as governmental mandates, toward uniformity. Mimetic isomorphism takes place when organizations respond to ambiguity and imitate what other organizations do in response to a similar environment. Normative isomorphism is related to professionalization and the development of norms within fields.

Arguably, these three types of isomorphism are present in higher education quality practices. Policies and government mandates are examples of coercive isomorphism. Voluntary adoption of practices from other institutions is common (Kells, 1999; Law, 2010) and constitutes an example of mimetic isomorphism. The diffusion of quality ideas and “best practices” through professional organizations and conferences (Rhoads & Sporn, 2002) are examples of normative isomorphism. Arguably, the bulk of literature dealing with quality in higher education from a systemic perspective in recent years has emerged as a result of internationalization. That literature will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

### **Collegiality, the Missing Dimension**

The literature discussed thus far makes evident that analyses of quality assurance in higher education have been developed from bureaucratic, political, symbolic, and systemic perspectives. When comparing these approaches to existing multidimensional models of organization (Berger & Milem, 2000; Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 2008), it becomes evident that the human resource perspective is missing. The collegial perspective is the application of the human resource frame to higher education (Berger & Milem, 2000). Collegial models emphasize decision by consensus and are often normative in their approach.

Provided that peer review is a central feature of accreditation, it is surprising to find a lack of collegial models for the analysis of quality assurance. Perhaps collegiality runs contrary to increased accountability, given that collegial organizations need to be small in order to permit frequent interaction (Birnbaum, 1988; Bush, 2003), while accreditation and quality assurance usually are the result of massification and expansion (Brittingham, 2009; Singh, 2010).

Given that the collegial dimension in higher education quality constitutes uncharted waters, principles from outside quality in higher education are useful. House and Howe (2000) recommend democratic deliberation as a process to conduct evaluation. According to these scholars, democratic deliberation requires three conditions: inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation. Indeed, these three elements have the potential to improve the implementation of quality assurance. Sadly, the literature documents the opposite. Often, faculty members are not full participants in the process (Kells, 1999) or accountability translates as faculty disenfranchisement (Harvey, 2004a). Deliberation implies deep analysis of concepts and assumptions, which is frequently missing from quality assurance (Harvey & Newton, 2007) and dialogue requires equalizing power differentials. It seems unlikely for accreditors to give up the higher ground in the accreditation process. These realities constitute a real missed opportunity

because quality processes could be greatly improved by the process of democratic deliberation (House & Howe, 2000).

**Summary of Organizational Frameworks**

This section maps the conceptual terrain for understanding quality practices in higher education through organizational lenses. Like any perspective, organizational views are both generative and limited. Before moving on to explore other ways of understanding quality practices in higher education, a brief summary of the main issues and concepts from an organizational perspective seems to be necessary. Please consider the following table.

<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Main issues</i>	<i>Main concepts</i>
Bureaucratic	Jurisdiction	Stages of accreditation, quality management
Political	Resources allocation, compliance, accountability	Competition, negotiation, power, micropolitics
Symbolic	Interpretation, performance, legitimacy	Culture, symbolic compliance
Systemic	Stakeholders	Fields, isomorphic change
Collegial	Collaboration	Democratic deliberation

Table 1: Summary of Organizational Frameworks

Keeping in mind that accountability, quality assurance, and accreditation are complex concepts that activate a series of organizational processes, I next discuss how these organizational dynamics play out in cross-national settings.

**International Frameworks**

Internationalization of higher education is frequently conceptualized as the responses of colleges and universities to forces of globalization (Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009). The idea of internationalization as a response by colleges and universities to an inevitable process of integration—globalization—was first introduced by Altbach and Knight (2007) and, ever since, the idea has become the dominant consensus in the field. Internationalization is a relevant concept for the study of accreditation because the concept captures the dynamic

nature of quality, given that practices, information, and organization systems are transferred from one institution into another across regional and national boundaries (Kells, 1999).

Marginson (2010) emphasizes that the global dimension of higher education is a space that stems from human activity, i.e. a socially constructed dimension. As a result, international accreditation, and other forms of cross-national quality assurance, has created new territories: global networks and leagues of accredited institutions that share practices, technologies, and symbolic capital. These activities have led to the emergence of a global dimension in quality assurance.

As the world witnesses the development of a global dimension of higher education, new issues or variations on old unsolved issues appear. For example, questions about accountability and quality have taken new forms in recent years, given the changing and increasingly global context of higher education (Huisman & Currie, 2004). Those new phenomena include blurred national boundaries, higher education provision by foreign agencies, and the participation of new players—including businesses and for-profit educational organizations, along with the development of educational free trade regions. In this changing context, it is reasonable to expect that new questions about quality would emerge. Because many concerns about quality are related to the massification of higher education (Lemaitre, 2002; Singh, 2010), and because many of the changes under the umbrella of globalization in higher education involve new forms of massification, one would expect that globalization exacerbates the already contested field of quality assurance.

Harvey (2004b) gives a definition of international quality assurance:

Internationalisation of quality assurance involves the development of processes or procedures that enable recognition of programmes beyond the boundary of the country in which it has been validated and evaluation and recognition of programmes with no national boundaries (often internet providers) (p. 65).

This scholar outlines three competing approaches to the internationalization of quality assurance: mutual recognition, the development of international quality assurance agencies, and the establishment of supranational quality assurance agencies. In Harvey's (2004b) account, mutual recognition operates under the principle that national higher education systems and institutions retain ownership of quality assurance. Under such a principle, international quality assurance requires mutually recognizing processes while maintaining national and institutional boundaries. In the second approach, international quality assurance agencies could take different forms but they all would involve the creation of organizations that directly accredit programs or institutions. Some examples already exist, for instance in Europe and Central America (Harvey, 2004b). Unlike international agencies, the third approach suggests creating supranational agencies that would not accredit institutions or programs directly, but instead, they would accredit national quality assurance agencies. Singh (2010) has called this process the quality assurance of quality assurance. Harvey stresses that the establishment of a particular model or the coexistence of multiple models in competition with each other is unlikely to be determined by their practicality or technical considerations but rather as a result of political struggles.

### **Global Patterns in Accreditation**

As neo-institutional theory would predict within a given field, a tendency toward convergence across national systems for quality assurance is observable. A clear dominance of a "Northern" model is evident, too (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2010). Despite the vast differences in development, resources, and national cultures, one can observe clear similarities in quality assurance policies and practices in higher education around the world – moving towards isomorphism. With the expansion of quality assurance across the globe, it is possible to identify a significant amount of "borrowing" of policies and procedures (Morley, 2003, p. 19).

Much of this borrowing of policies and practices has been characterized as lacking critical analysis (Law, 2010).

In addition, much of the attention given to international quality assurance happens as a result of cross-national provision of higher education and student mobility. Knight (2007) discusses the importance of accreditation and quality assurance in light of recent developments in cross-border education which include branch campuses, dual degrees, and cross-national distance education. In addition, Knight highlights two important issues that are directly relevant for this study: the emergence of self-appointed quality assurance agencies, and the role that accreditation plays for marketing purposes:

Major investments are being made in marketing and branding campaigns in order to get name recognition and to increase enrolments. The possession of some nature of accreditation is part of the campaign and assures prospective students that the programmes/awards are of high standing. The desire for accreditation status is leading to a commercialization of the field of quality assurance/accreditation (Knight, 2007, p. 139)

As Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2010) and Knight (2007) suggest, increased attention to quality and quality assurance does not solve the serious issues related to quality—such as the uncritical transference of quality assurance models (Law, 2010), the marketization of accreditation, and the still missing definition of quality. However, providing an extensive summary of the literature on international comparative quality assurance is beyond the scope of this project. Moreover, Billing (2004) has already provided detailed comparisons of quality assurance patterns. He attempts to validate a general model for quality assurance developed by van Gught and Westerheijden (1993). Despite the potential value of such comparison, Billing's conclusion was rather inconclusive: "a 'general model' of external QA does not completely apply in all countries, but they also show that most elements of it do apply in most countries" (p.133). However, McBurnie and Ziguras (2007) provide a different perspective to the comparative study

of quality assurance; their approach focuses on issues resulting from increased internationalization in higher education. Their analysis brings attention to the increasingly important role of multilateral organizations, such as OECD and UNESCO, in developing quality assurance.

### **The Role of Multinational Organizations**

Multinational organizations influence agendas for international quality assurance. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have played significant roles in the development of policies related to the expansion and internationalization of quality assurance and are, to some extent, responsible for the resulting similarities that exist across regions (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). A paper prepared for OECD (Van Damme, 2002) explores different models for the developing of quality assurance mechanisms that would advance quality assurance and credential recognition. A sobering aspect of this paper was its stated purpose: “provide an analytical overview of trends and models in quality assurance arrangements that can contribute to transnational regulation of trade in higher education services” (Van Damme, 2002, p. 6). In that paper, education is conceptualized as a service to be traded across national borders, under the umbrella of general agreements on trade and services (GATS). The neoliberal undertones of the paper seem clear as the market logic and the need for trading education as a commodity are taken for granted.

However, despite the neoliberal undercurrents, Van Damme’s (2002) paper discusses different ways to develop a common frame to appraise quality in higher education for transnational trade. These models included promoting collaboration among national systems, the development of cross-national quality assurance projects, the development of an international accrediting process for existing accrediting agencies, and finally, the development

of an international accreditation system. These options are similar to the ones that Harvey (2004b) outlined, however, the perspective that Harvey advocated for, mutual recognition, in which local actors would retain control, is barely identifiable in Van Damme's proposal.

When comparing existing and emergent models for accreditation, Stensaker and Harvey (2006) conclude that, while accreditation serves a legitimizing function of higher education toward external constituents and despite its rapid growth, accreditation itself may be facing a legitimacy challenge. Other quality related mechanisms—e.g. rankings and reputational clubs of institutions of higher learning—are troublesome in their methods and potential effects (Marginson, 2007a; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). In sum, higher education faces a complicated scenario: At the global level, accreditation has encountered significant challenges—chief among them, the lack of a clear definition about what institutional quality is. Nonetheless, utilizing accreditation to determine an institution's quality is likely a better alternative than using other equally or even more questionable mechanisms like rankings or reputational associations.

### **Offshore Activities of U.S. Regional Accreditation Agencies**

While many concerns exist about the appropriateness of current forms of international quality assurance and about the widespread expansion of accreditation, quality assurance continues to grow rapidly. Ewell (2008) indicates that, even though quality assurance is a global phenomenon, the United States is the only country that can be considered a significant exporter of quality assurance—usually in the forms of accreditation. According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2008), U.S. accrediting agencies recognize 26 foreign colleges or universities in more than 20 countries, as of 2007. These data refer to independent foreign universities and not branch or satellite units of American institutions. The issue of branch campuses is much larger: 329 institutions in 87 countries (CHEA, 2008). In Mexico alone, either

through the recognition of Mexican institutions or American branch campuses, four different American regional agencies operate: New England, North Central, Southern, and Western (CHEA, 2008).

When recounting the evolution of the offshore activities that American accrediting agencies undertake, Ewell (2008) suggests that ensuring the quality of American branch campuses was the initial motivation for international involvement of American regional agencies. A second step in this process was accrediting foreign institutions. Ewell used Mexico as an example, where the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) has accredited Mexican universities for many years. Nonetheless, the example that Ewell provides contradicts the idea he tries to illustrate because at least two Mexican universities have been accredited by SACS since the 1950s—long before the first American branch campuses were established in Mexico. This discrepancy makes clear that some misconceptions about the internationalization of quality assurance are pervasive. Therefore this phenomenon requires critical and empirical exploration.

### **Accreditation and Quality Assurance in the Mexican Context**

Any discussion about higher education in Mexico should begin with the following cautionary note: “two of the most important characteristics of Mexico are its inequalities and contradictions” (Maldonado Maldonado, 2011, p. 243). Mexico is a complex environment and, as a result, a comprehensive overview of higher education in Mexico is far beyond the scope of this study. Even a comprehensive overview of quality assurance and accreditation in Mexico is too ambitious a task. Fortunately, multiple accounts of the establishment and development of quality assurance mechanisms in Mexico are available (Brennan & Shah, 2000a; Chapela Castañares, 2004; Didou Aupetit, 2002; Gonzalez, 1999; Kells, 1992). These authors provide different accounts of a similar storyline: Mexico arrived late—in the 1990s—to the quality

assurance movement. The adoption of quality assurance responded in part to external pressure to move along Mexico's international competitiveness through the North American Free Trade Agreement and membership in OECD (Didou Aupetit, 2002; González, 1999).

One characteristic about quality assurance in Mexico is the multitude of agencies and actors involved in the system. Based on the work of Lemaitre (2011), Brennan and Shah (2000a), and Didou Aupetit (2002), one can put together the pieces that constitute the accreditation and quality assurance puzzle in Mexico: The Inter-institutional Committee for Higher Education Evaluation<sup>1</sup> provides a voluntary review process of undergraduate and graduate curriculum for both public or private institutions. The Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education<sup>2</sup> groups accrediting agencies that conduct either institutional or specialized accreditation. The National Center for Higher Education Assessment<sup>3</sup> develops and implements standardized tests—entry and exit—used for admission to most public institutions and as benchmarks of institutional performance. Membership to the Mexican Federation of Private Higher Education Institutions<sup>4</sup> constitutes institutional accreditation. Finally, the National Council of Science and Technology<sup>5</sup> keeps a *registry of excellence* for graduate programs. Graduate programs listed in the registry must meet a set of quality criteria, so the registry provides yet another proxy for accreditation.

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<sup>1</sup> Comité Interinstitucional para la Evaluación de la Educación Superior (CIEES).

<sup>2</sup> Comisión para la Acreditación de la Educación Superior (COPAES).

<sup>3</sup> Centro Nacional de Evaluación para la Educación Superior (CENEVAL).

<sup>4</sup> Federación de Instituciones Mexicanas de Educación Superior (FIMPES).

<sup>5</sup> Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT).

To add to this convoluted system, public and private colleges and universities receive authority to grant degrees from the Department of Public Education<sup>6</sup> at either the federal or state level.

As a result of the convoluted scenario described above, any given institution in Mexico may be connected with numerous overlapping quality assurance organizations nationally and internationally. Furthermore, it is important to clarify that accreditation, whether it is institutional or specialized, and the authority to grant degrees are different issues and processes in Mexico (Kent & Ramírez, 1999). Because Mexico rests within the broader region of Latin America, it is useful to situate the country within this regional context.

### **History and Evolution of Quality Assurance in Latin America**

González (1999) and Lemaitre (2011) look at the Latin American context for quality assurance from a broad historical perspective. Appropriately, these authors take the colonization process of the region under Spain, as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, as the start point of their inquiry, thus augmenting the argument that higher education in Latin America cannot be separated from colonization (Altbach, 2011). The first universities in Latin America were founded under the Spanish crown, the Catholic Church, or both. The oldest institutions of higher learning in the region held royal and pontifical—papal—charters. The purpose of these institutions was educating leaders of church and government. Educating elites as public or religious leaders is a characteristic also present in U.S. higher education during the colonial period (Thelin, 2004). As a result of their endorsement by the most important authorities in the colony, universities in Latin America enjoyed prestige and recognition, in other words, “accountability, in this context, was a non-issue” (Lemaitre, 2011, p. 134).

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<sup>6</sup> Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP).

A drastic shift took place in Latin American higher education in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Universities and other institutions of higher learning were no longer highly regarded social institutions intended to educate the few for roles in the government and clergy. As one would expect, concerns about quality are a new phenomenon in the region (González, 1999) and have been an important element in the educational policy agenda for the region only since the 1990s (Chapela Castañares, 2004; Didou Aupetit, 2002). González (1999) and Lemaitre (2011) identify a number of factors contributing to this development: Expansion of higher education systems through the creation of new institutions of higher learning and increased enrollments; diversification of the system, not only in terms of student population but also institutional type; and privatization. It is nearly impossible to isolate each of these processes as they are deeply interrelated.

Kells (1996) contends that quality assurance in higher education in Latin America faces a twofold challenge. On the one hand, there is need for improvement-oriented quality assurance schemes for existing institutions. On the other hand, there is need for developing mechanisms to ensure minimal compliance as new institutions, mostly private, emerge in light of increased demand. Such an observation is particularly important in Mexico, given that accreditation and obtaining a license to operate and to grant degrees are separate processes.

All throughout Latin America, one can observe not only the development of national quality assurance mechanisms, but also how some institutions are seeking international accreditation. This trend is particularly observable within professional or STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) fields (Gacel-Ávila, Jaramillo, Knight & de Wit, 2005). Specifically in Mexico, a few private institutions accessed the U.S. regional accrediting system even before Mexico developed formally national quality assurance provisions (Kells, 1992). However, the motivations for pursuing U.S. accreditation remain unexplored empirically (Didou

Aupetit, 2002). While quality assurance has received increased attention, the quality assurance of internationalization activity has received little to no attention in Mexico (Gacel-Ávila et. al., 2005; Maldonado Maldonado, 2011).

Analyzing accreditation and quality assurance from an international perspective requires understanding power relations among and between countries (Didou Aupetit, 2002). This consideration is particularly important because the emergence of a global knowledge society “could exacerbate the divide between rich and poor countries, and rich people and poor people in those countries” (Singh, 2002, p. 173). The outlook for Latin America in this context seems unpromising because the region constitutes a periphery in the global landscape of the knowledge society (Gacel-Ávila et. al., 2005). After analyzing internationalization in Mexican higher education, Maldonado Maldonado (2011) contends that Mexico struggles to fit into the global knowledge economy because it remains as a user, not a producer, of knowledge. Thus, the global division of labor is ever more relevant, given that education has become a tradable commodity (Singh, 2002) and, as Mujica Márquez (2002) suggests, education has become subordinated to global mercantilism. If indeed accreditation is a prerequisite to global competition, Mexico has a lot of catching up to do (Didou Aupetit, 2002).

### **Unresolved Dilemmas in Global Quality Assurance**

A number of issues are present in the internationalization of quality assurance. While quality assurance is an ambiguous field, especially in international settings, much of the literature and policies related to international quality assurance presuppose the need for quality assurance and quality assurance agencies, rather than exploring whether these mechanisms are needed in specific contexts (Harvey, 2004b) and under which conditions. Kells (1999) documents multiple experiences in which countries implemented quality assurance models from other nations without reflecting upon the adequacy of such adoption or its potential consequences.

Conceivably, a lack of willingness among university leaders in developing nations to drive the process of developing quality assurance models is one of the causes of the prevailing situation (Kells, 1999). The majority of quality assurance systems are developed by initiative of the government or multinational organizations and then imposed on universities.

Rhoades and Sporn (2002) postulate that the business world has become a source of the ideas and language that shape quality assurance in higher education. Their analysis suggests that colleges and universities perceive business practices as models of success and, consequently, borrow certain notions such as looking at students and employers as customers of the university. These ideas have been, according to Rhoades and Sporn, central to the development of quality assurance systems. Given the lack of theorization on quality in higher education (Harvey & Newton, 2004; 2007), higher education borrows views on quality from business. The idea of quality defined as customer satisfaction (Bensimon, 1995) is an example of this trend. Rhoades and Sporn emphasize the importance of professional spaces—such as specialized journals and professional conferences—as mechanisms for the diffusion of quality assurance practices and ideas. Their analysis support the systemic view of quality assurance as it provides an instance of normative isomorphism.

Singh (2010) postulates that authority and jurisdiction in international quality assurance are multifaceted issues because they involve not only national and regional boundaries but also the recognition of accrediting agencies themselves. While the issue of jurisdiction is, to a certain extent, present within national quality assurance scheme, jurisdiction becomes even more complicated at the global level where there is not a recognized all-encompassing authority that can set boundaries or solve disputes. However, some commentators (Harvey, 2004; Singh, 2010) indicate that multinational organizations are now filling that void. As such, the role of

multinational organizations in shaping agendas for international quality assurance is increasingly recognized in existing literature (Blackmur, 2007; Stella, 2006).

Even if issues of jurisdiction can be solved, the issue of cultural sensitivity of quality assurance across national boundaries remains. When looking at the quality assurance efforts undertaken, for example, in the United Kingdom to appraise collaborative efforts between UK and foreign partners, Hodson and Thomas (2001) found that quality assurance presented a “lack of cultural sensitivity” (p. 101) and highlighted substantial challenges stemming from “cultural and historical differences at institutional, system, and national levels” (p. 107). As a result, assumptions, procedures, and practices may not be culturally relevant.

Taking the question about cultural relevance and cultural sensitivity to the next level, Harvey (2004b) indicates that current efforts in internationalization of quality assurance are characterized by “cultural blindness” (p. 70). Some proposals to address this issue include developing quality assurance mechanisms at the national level that are compatible with the national cultural attributes that Hofstede (1991) developed (Kells, 1999). Nevertheless, Westwood (2006) characterized Hofstede’s classification as deterministic, and therefore, complicit with the essentialism that all too often characterizes Western knowledge. There are simply no easy answers to the challenge that cultural differences pose for quality assurance.

In sum, quality practices in higher education continue to be transferred, mainly from North to South, at an ever growing pace. This increasing transfer of ideas and practices about quality in higher education may further exacerbate existing challenges, including the lack of widely-accepted definitions of quality. Additionally, international transfer of quality practices raises new issues including questions about jurisdiction, alternative models, and effective practices for quality assurance. Internationalization of quality assurance in higher education is frequently framed as a new and emergent phenomenon (Eaton, 2007; Ewell, 2008; Knight,

2007) connected to globalization and, therefore, requiring new models for analysis. The following section explores models that I argue may be generative for analyzing the internationalization of quality practices in higher education.

### **Postcolonial and Critical Frameworks**

The discussion of the literature presented thus far has unearthed a number of knowledge gaps that are relevant for studying U.S. institutional accreditation in Mexico: (a) a widely accepted definition of quality in higher education remains missing; (b) while the literature evidences different perspectives to analyze quality, studies of quality in higher education from integrated multidimensional perspectives are few or non-existent; (c) even though the involvement of some Mexican institutions in American accreditation is documented in the literature, the motivations for such involvement remain unknown and unexplored; (d) research on the internal dynamics of universities that undertake U.S. accreditation processes has been neglected in the literature and, as a result, there is much to be learned about the process of making quality related decisions; and finally, (e) the greatest gap in the literature consists of insufficient theorization about globalization in higher education.

This final section of the literature review explores quality assurance literature conducted from critical perspectives and higher education literature that analyzes internationalization of higher education attending to cross-national issues of power and inequity. Quality can be analyzed from positivistic, interpretive, and critical-dialectical perspectives (Harvey, 2007). This last approach engages in a contextualized analysis of power and situates phenomena within a social and historical context. By critical literature, I refer to literature that is not concerned with value-neutral approaches but rather evaluates the justice and goodness of social institutions and questions ideology (Ingram, 1990). Critical perspectives are necessary for studying the internationalization of quality practices, given that these practices are not value neutral; in

addition, campus leaders make major investments to obtain international accreditation, and students, faculty, and the larger society receive the impacts of quality-related decisions.

### **Problematizing Current Models**

The previous section discussed international frameworks for analyzing quality in higher education. The current consensus, represented by Altbach and Knight (2007), portrays globalization as a process of cultural and economic integration and internationalization as the response of institutions of higher learning to such process. Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009) question this prevailing consensus and denounce its deterministic undertones and basic assumptions. They suggest that globalization is not inevitable and that the relationship between agency and structure is much more interactive. They argue that the *glonacal* agency heuristic (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002) offers a more insightful analysis of globalization in higher education.

Marginson and Rhoades (2002) present the idea that any given institution of higher learning exists simultaneously at the global, national, and local levels. This *glonacal heuristic* (Marginson 2007a; 2004) focuses on individual and institutional agency and constitutes an important contribution to conceptualizing higher education. Marginson and Rhoades suggest that globalization is not a new process, and, tangentially, they make reference to the role that empires and colonization had in the worldwide diffusion of higher education. Further, Marginson (2008; 2010) argues that the global sphere of higher education is unequal; even though the *glonacal* perspective describes inequities and stratification of global higher education, such a model does not provide explanations of why such disparities exist. Understanding current inequities in higher education, the preeminence of American and European institutions of higher learning and higher education systems, and the apparently perpetual development lag of the Global South requires a critical analysis that accounts for

historical oppressive world-systems and their connection to contemporary realities. Postcolonial theory provides a sound conceptual foundation to conduct such an analysis.

While valuable and necessary, the organizational and international frameworks discussed earlier in this chapter are insufficient to understand why universities and governments in the Global North, and increasingly multinational organizations, set the agenda for policy development and—at the same time—enjoy higher levels of material resources and reputational value. The glonacal heuristic (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002) and the models of global flow in higher education (Marginson 2007a; Marginson & Sawir, 2005) are valuable, given that they have been constructed to recognize that influence in higher education is multidirectional yet unequal. Postcolonial theory presents the greatest hope if higher education research is not only to describe but also to explain the unequally multidirectional influences that shape globalization in higher education.

### **Quality Assurance and Colonization**

Terms like “colonized” and “empire” have been used to describe the expansion of quality assurance around the world (Singh 2010, p. 192). Likewise, “imperialism” and “colonization” have served to analyze the expansion of quality assurance (Lemaitre 2002; 2005). Specifically, Altbach (2003) described accreditation activities of U.S. regional agencies beyond their national boundaries as a process of “academic colonialism” (p. 5). Analyzing the globally convergent patterns of accreditation and quality assurance against such concepts as colonization and imperialism is insightful and provocative. Yet, a systematic discussion of the imperialistic and colonialist aspects of the expansion of quality assurance, in the context of contemporary globalization, is still missing.

Contributing to this discussion, Singh (2010) suggests that the stakes for quality assurance in higher education are higher than ever because the implications of quality

assurance are beyond the improvement of national systems; they are now attached to the economic competitiveness of nations and participation in the global knowledge economy. Singh characterizes these implications as “geopolitical” (p. 190). Arguing similarly, Huisman and Currie (2004) emphasize the increasing need for credential recognition, in the context of general trade agreements and the development of free trade zones. In this global market context, quality assurance and international credential recognition become a priority. In addition, there is pressure on all countries for participating in the global market and, as a result, for taking measures intended to develop national quality assurance mechanisms, according to legitimizing standards.

At first glance, participation in the emerging global knowledge economy and its required schemes of quality recognition appears to be voluntary. However, there is an undeniable presence of external forces that are promoting quality assurance agendas into new national contexts. For example, Morley (2003) suggests that quality assurance is “totalizing” and that “in time, no university in any national location will be able to escape the gravitational pull of the quality assurance discourse” (p. 21). Morley’s gravitational pull analogy has interesting implications for analyzing whether accreditation is voluntary. Her argument complicates the question about motivations to participate in the quality assurance global movement. Perhaps, participating in some form of quality assurance is not optional; recall the ideas about isomorphism discussed earlier in this chapter.

In addition to quasi-compulsory participation in global markets, another element points to the relevance of colonization as a heuristic for understanding the internationalization of quality practices in higher education:

The American accreditation scheme is being promoted in eastern and central Europe and in east Asia, much as the free market and structural adjustment,

unblended and unadjusted, have been foisted upon needful and relatively inexperienced but otherwise very different communities (Kells, 1995a, p. 18).

Morley (2003) and Kells (1995a) both recognize that the rapid expansion of quality assurance models developed in the global North are being promoted worldwide, via policies that multinational organizations develop. Higher education systems in the global South feel the need to adopt those models and practices. Extending this, Singh (2010) uses the terms “colonized” and “empire” (p. 192) to describe the expansion of quality assurance around the world. Similarly, Lemaitre (2002; 2005) uses the terms “imperialism” and “colonization” (p. 30) in order to analyze the expansion of quality assurance. And Altbach (2003) described accreditation of American regional agencies abroad as a process of “academic colonialism” (p. 5). However, Altbach (2003), Lemaitre (2002; 2005), and Singh (2010) all fail to base their analysis on conceptually sound discussions of colonialism; they resort to common-sense definitions of these terms. For example, while Lemaitre’s analysis is overall rigorous and certainly valuable, some of its points are debatable at best:

Imperialism means an explicit will to conquer markets through political domination, and I do not really see this happening today, not in the higher education field. Imperialism needs an empire, or a close substitute, to want to dominate. Imperialism, in a peculiarly comforting way, requires the presence of someone who wishes to impose its culture, its demands, its politics, its economic priorities on the rest, who may or may not try to resist this imposition. If there is any resistance, it is addressed against an identifiable foe...What we see now is different. There is an imposition of culture, politics and economic priorities, but what is not there is the identifiable foe, or the explicit will to conquer. We call this phenomenon 'globalisation', and in many cases, have an ambivalent reaction to it. (Lemaitre, 2002, p. 30).

While the distinction between globalization and colonialism deserves to be explored, Lemaitre (2002) prematurely dismisses imperialism as a way of describing contemporary phenomena related to quality assurance. Lemaitre does not acknowledge that globalization can be read from different conceptual perspectives—postcolonial studies being one of those viewpoints.

## **Postcolonial Theory**

The first caveat regarding the use of postcolonial theory in this study is that postcolonial theory is not a harmonized theory (Young, 2003); it is a discourse of contested and contesting perspectives and schools of thought that, nonetheless, share some common preoccupations (Gandhi, 1998). Postcolonial perspectives revisit the colonial encounter and explore the postcolonial condition. While fragmentation and paradoxes are clearly easy to identify, postcolonial inquiries share a commitment to unearthing and re-evaluating the colonial encounter (Gandhi, 1998). Re-examining the colonial encounter provides a new depth to the study of contemporary globalization. Evidently, colonization has long-lasting consequences that even today continue to influence nations' relative positions as either metropolises or provinces (Loomba, 2005).

Marxism and postmodernism are the loudest voices within postcolonial theory and constitute its theoretical roots (Gandhi, 1998). Nonetheless, both Marxist and postmodernist strands bring grievances against postcolonial theory: Marxists complain about its lack of structure; while poststructuralists lament the totalizing tendencies of certain postcolonial theorists and worry that postcolonial theory will become the next meta-narrative. My purpose in this section is not to provide a summary of postcolonial theory, as entire volumes have been devoted to that purpose (Gandhi, 1998; Loomba, 2005; Young, 2003) and classic readings are widely available (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1979; 1994). Instead, I present concepts and ideas stemming from postcolonial theories that contribute to understanding quality assurance in higher education from a global perspective. It is precisely because of postcolonial theory's complexity that I believe such analytic approaches provide a valuable framework for understanding U.S. institutional accreditation in Mexico.

### **A Postcolonial View of Globalization.**

Postcolonial theorists recognize that globalization is neither new, nor unexpected: “globalization did not simply erupt spontaneously around the world, but has a history embedded in the history of imperialism, in the structure of the world system, and in the origins of a global economy within the ideology of imperial rhetoric” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007, p. 102). Though contemporary imperialism is mostly economic in nature, culture also plays a central role:

Global culture is a continuation of an imperial dynamic of influence, control, dissemination and hegemony that operates according to an already initiated structure of power that emerged in the sixteenth century in the great confluence of imperialism, capitalism and modernity (p. 103).

Globalization is best understood as a world system and consequently, as an arrangement of relations that has deep historical roots (Behdad, 2005). Postcolonial theory has great potential for explaining the disparities that characterize relations of power and culture in contemporary globalization (Behdad, 2005; Gikandi, 2002; Loomba, 2005). Perhaps the greatest contributions that postcolonial theory can make reside in its conceptual ability to embrace complexity, ambivalence, and agency.

The United States relates to Latin America and the rest of the Global South in ways that can be fruitfully understood from a postcolonial perspective, given the widespread expansion of economic neoimperialism (Loomba, 2005; Rosenberg, 1998). Accordingly, it is impossible to deny the ongoing U.S. dominance in the economic, military, and cultural realms. Even though Mexico is not generally regarded as a former or current U.S. colony, American imperialism has long influenced Mexico and Mexican higher education (Maldonado-Maldonado & Cantwell, 2008). Furthermore, the U.S.-Mexico border has been a region of cultural and political contestation. Since 1848, when the U.S. took by a war of conquest half of Mexico’s territory

(Zinn, 2003), California and the region now known as the U.S. Southwest—which borders Mexico—has been conceptualized as a place of territorial and cultural dispossession (Anzaldúa, 1987). This reality led Acuña (1988) to refer to the region as an occupied territory within the U.S. Following these arguments, Lusk, Staudt and Moya (2012) have noted that “the US-Mexico border has been at the peripheral margins of the American society since the area was conquered by the United States during the US-Mexico War of 1846-1848” (p. 7).

In addition, throughout Latin America, U.S. power and influence have taken multiple forms:

Forms of power have thus been multiple and complex: simultaneously arranged through nation-states and more informal regional relationships; via businesses and communications networks and culture industries; through scientific foundations and philanthropic agencies; and through constructions of nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Joseph, 1998, p.5).

Salvatore (1998) posits that American power in Latin America rested on ideological foundations: the representation of Latin America as always emergent, always in need of help from the outside, paired with the representation of the United States as having a leading role within the region. Such a leadership role was justified by America’s “capital, expertise, ideas, and values” (Salvatore, 1998, p. 71). Salvatore argued that U.S. power was exercised throughout the region couched as an “enterprise of knowledge” (p. 94) where professionals—from educators to religious leaders to business people—played an important role. Deepening this perspective, Altbach and Peterson (2008) argue that higher education has served as an extension of American soft-power around the world; Latin America is a clear example of such a dynamic.

When discussing the offshore activity of American accreditation agencies, Ewell (2008) recognizes that accreditation provides a competitive edge to American higher education in light of increased competition around the globe. He admits that maintaining American

competitiveness abroad is one of the motivations of the activity that regional agencies undertake overseas. It may be worthwhile to contrast Ewell's idea of quality assurance as a way to maintain American higher education competitive with Tannock's (2007) work on American educational nationalism:

The United States does face growing competition for higher education offerings abroad in certain areas. For example, the distance education market for postsecondary education in Asia is increasingly being served by institutions in Australia and New Zealand. As a result, U.S. accreditation of programs and institutions operating in these areas needs to enable them to credibly claim high quality in relation to competitors whose quality has been recognized by a different agency and standard (Ewell, 2008, p.153).

Higher education in the US is structurally and culturally committed to promoting the interests of Americans. Its nationalism, moreover, like that of most other major social institutions in the US, has tended to be both militarist and imperialist. In direct parallel with their peers at the Pentagon, 'full spectrum dominance' in higher education by America over all other nations is commonly viewed by the country's academic leaders as being both a natural and desirable state of affairs in the world (Tannock 2007, p. 259).

The quote from Ewell (2008) above illustrates some of the ideas that Tannock (2007) discusses: It is possible to argue that the implicit goal in Ewell's discussion is to secure US superiority above the "growing competition" that other countries present. Particularly, Tannock's idea of *full spectrum dominance* is illustrated above as Ewell sets as the goal to ensure US superiority not only in traditional higher education delivery, but also in online learning, and accreditation. Certainly, this interpretation is exploratory but it serves to illustrate the taken for granted assumptions about what the higher education world order should be.

### **[Neo] Colonialism and [Neo] Imperialism.**

As previously discussed, some scholars interested in quality assurance compare the expansion of quality assurance practices to colonialism and imperialism (Altbach, 2003; Lemaitre, 2000; 2005; Singh, 2010). While their assertions are intriguing, they lack an

explanation of how the authors interpret and use terms. Loomba (2005) suggests that colonialism and imperialism are deeply interconnected even though they are distinct in emphasis: While colonialism has been a common phenomenon, modern colonialism was unique because it re-shaped the economies of the colonized territories in order to lock them into a pattern of dependency from their colonizers, in order to fuel capitalism in Europe.

Imperialism can be seen as either a political or economic system (Loomba, 2005; Smith, 1999). As a political system, “an imperial centre governs colonised countries” (Loomba, 2005; p. 11). On the other hand, imperialism is “an economic system of penetration and control of markets” (p. 8). It is this latter economic connotation of imperialism what leads to the idea that, even though most countries that experienced the process of colonization have gained political independence, imperialism is still a contemporary reality (Bush, 2006; Smith, 1999). In this economic sense, the United States can be considered an imperial power (Loomba, 2005; Said, 1979). However, it seems adequate to use imperialism as a heuristic, as Altbach (2003) did, in order to analyze the actions that U.S. accrediting agencies undertake abroad, especially due to economic reasons.

### **Knowledge, Representation and Discourse.**

The publication of *Orientalism* (Said, 1979) is regarded as the start point of postcolonial theory (Gandhi, 1998; Loomba, 2005). Orientalism, the title of Said’s book, suggests that the construction of knowledge about non-western societies served as an enabling element to the colonial enterprise (Loomba, 2005; Said, 1994). The representation of the colonized is not about discoveries or findings about these groups; it is a process of imposing a regime of truth and knowledge about the colonized (Doty, 1996). Said (1994) explains that Orientalism was an intellectual project of representation at the service of colonial powers. Because knowledge creation is a core component of cultural encounters (Fabian, 2009), the argument here is not

that colonized peoples did not create knowledge about themselves or about the colonization process but rather that the knowledge of colonizers supported and was supported by the process of colonization which allowed the colonizers' knowledge to come out on top. Within this paradigm, people from the Global South are seen as raw materials for knowledge creation, not as crafters of knowledge. Discourse is a central element for understanding the relation between knowledge and power: "Those who have power have control of what is known and the way it is known, and those who have such knowledge have power over those who do not" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007, p. 63).

### **Postcolonial Agency**

The above discussion of world systems and hegemonic knowledge construction poses the risk of presenting a deterministic framework for analysis. In order to avert that risk and remain consistent with the critical framework I articulate here, a discussion of agency is necessary. Postcolonial theory has a significant contribution to make in understanding agency because such theoretical perspectives pay attention to human agency even in situations of extreme despair, such as dispossession, occupation, and genocide. In one much-cited definition, "Agency refers to the ability to act or perform an action" (Ashcroft, et al., 2007). Postcolonial theorists emphasize that active and passive resistance coexisted with ruthless colonial domination (Young, 2003; Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007). Bignall (2010) provided a superb and profound discussion of postcolonial agency, noting that agency is "causal and purposefully directed, although never free from constraints" (p. 12).

Postcolonial agency—as a reaction to dominant colonial discourse—emphasizes how colonial subjects have exercised puzzling and creative (to colonizers) forms of agency and resistance even while those acts of resistance have been vastly ignored by Western thought and science (Prasad, 2003; Smith, 1999). In parallel, if reification is one of the potential limitations of

organizational perspectives (Berger & Milem, 2000), many discussions of globalization suffer from determinism and reification. In regards to the main topic of this project, agency, then, becomes central to understanding internationalization of quality assurance:

We reiterate that professionals are implicated in the quality assurance and strategic management practices that we studied. They are implicated in the implementation of these practices, and in the profusion and diffusion of these policies. The work of higher education policy scholars is part of those processes, as are the mechanisms by which we meet and disseminate our scholarship (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002, p. 385).

From a Global South perspective, agency plays a key role in the internationalization of quality assurance:

We translate the standards regional agencies use to accredit institutions in the US, and the benchmarks of the QAA in the UK. We know that we must adjust those standards to our national requirements but we also know that, in the world we live in, it is essential that our standards are not very different from those applied elsewhere (Lemaitre, 2002, p. 36).

The process that Lemaitre (2002, 2005) described is one of discerning essential from superfluous elements and making strategic choices. Lemaitre exemplifies the central role of agency in quality assurance processes even though power differences set the tone for international exchange.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presented three frameworks that set the stage for studying U.S. institutional accreditation of Mexican institutions of higher learning. The organizational framework conceptualizes accreditation and quality in higher education as a process that involves four primary dimensions: bureaucratic, political, symbolic, and systemic. However, the collegial dimension is conspicuously missing from current literature on the topic. The international framework suggests that quality assurance is increasingly an international endeavor not only because countries in every corner of the world follow similar patterns for ensuring quality, but also because the growing international provision of higher education poses

new challenges. Existing analyses of globalization in higher education acknowledge current international inequalities but do not explore the roots of these inequalities. Thus, understanding U.S. accreditation of Mexican universities requires locating the phenomenon in the context of globalization in higher education. Globalization is not a neutral or apolitical process but a continuation of previous forms of world organization.

Finally, postcolonial theory presents long suppressed accounts of how the world has come to be highly integrated and interdependent and yet so grossly disparate. Acknowledging the risks of oversimplifying or diluting individual voices and experiences, postcolonial theory explains how colonial discourse legitimized the exploitation and domination of the Global South and created images of Global South peoples as inferior to and dependent upon the Global North; postcolonial scholars see contemporary globalization as an extension of modern colonization. This perspective adds analytic power to this study.

The following chapter connects the concepts presented here with strategies to explore empirically U. S. accreditation of Mexican higher education institutions. The concepts discussed in the chapter guided the methodological decisions presented in chapter three.

## CHAPTER 3

### DESIGN AND METHODS

#### Introduction and Rationale

The previous chapter introduced three frameworks for understanding U.S. institutional accreditation in Mexico. This chapter builds on those frameworks and outlines the strategy I employed in order to explore empirically U.S. institutional accreditation in Mexico. Research has been described as a process of making sense of complex phenomena and making claims about a particular reality (Knight, 2002). Additionally, systematic inquiry requires documenting and explaining one's methodological decisions (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Consequently, this chapter presents a discussion of methodological choices involved in conducting this process of sense making. The main choices discussed here involve the overall research approach and genre, site and participants, data collection, and strategies for analysis and interpretation. Each of those choices rests on the foundation of the conceptual framework discussed next.

#### Conceptual Framework

Chapter two presented three different frameworks for analyzing U.S. institutional accreditation of Mexican institutions of higher education: organizational, international, and critical-postcolonial. I view those frameworks as complementary and cumulative. Accreditation is an organizational phenomenon; it takes place at a given college or university. Consequently, organizational models provide the start point for analysis. What happens inside an organization can be analyzed through different lenses—bureaucratic, political, symbolic, systemic. At the same time, any higher education organization exists at the global, national, and local level (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). These analyses of colleges and universities as complex organizations and as *glonacal* entities are widely accepted in contemporary higher education scholarship. I argue that organizational and international models constitute an important albeit

insufficient foundation for understanding the effects of contemporary globalization on higher education, especially in relation to the internationalization of quality practices and accreditation.

The central limitation of prevailing conceptualizations of globalization and internationalization in higher education (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002) is that they recognize the segmentation that characterizes the field but seemingly overlook the fact that all of the members of the top tier, i.e. elite research universities (Marginson, 2007a), are located in the Global North—a concept that is missing from their analysis. This study intends to begin to fill this gap by acknowledging and drawing on perspectives that show how the global field of higher education has been influenced by colonial discourse and how the world is still divided across Global North/South lines (Grovoqui, 2011). Incorporating concepts from postcolonial theory has at least two implications: exploring the role of colonial discourse, and acknowledging the complex dynamics that characterize Global North/Global South relations.

### **Integrating Frameworks**

Even though the role of colonization and imperialism has long been recognized as a critical element for the worldwide expansion of higher education (Altbach, 1998; 2011), contemporary analyses of globalization in higher education overlook that relationship. Higher education perspectives on globalization would be substantially enhanced by incorporating the concepts stemming from postcolonial theory that I discussed in the previous chapter. I propose the following points of integration:

1. Globalization is presented in the higher education literature as a process of economic and cultural integration while internationalization is conceptualized as the response by institutions of higher education to such process of change (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Globalization needs to be seen as a direct consequence of and

continuation of imperialism (Bush, 2006; Cole, 2005). Globalization and internationalization cannot continue being analyzed as ahistorical phenomena.

2. Altbach (1998) popularized the concepts of centers and peripheries for analyzing international higher education. While useful, these concepts appear to be neutral and convey the idea that any place could become a center. Superimposing the concepts of empire/colonies or metropolis/province (Loomba, 2005) over the contemporary world system of higher education might restore a historical perspective to Altbach's model for classifying educational regions in the world.
3. Marginson and Sawir (2005) discuss global flows in higher education and emphasize the multidirectional nature of these flows. Bhabha (1994) introduced the idea of hybridity, suggesting that both colonizer and colonized influence and transform each other as a result of their encounter. Hybridity in international education would acknowledge that Global North and Global South transform each other in complex and unequal ways.
4. The current discussion in international quality assurance in higher education emphasizes the existence of a global higher education field, some call it a market, (Marginson 2007a) in which policies are borrowed (Morley, 2003) or transferred (Kells, 1999). Bhabha (1994) suggests that one of the many adaptive strategies colonized peoples employ is to embrace and replicate the culture of the colonizer. Interpreting mimicry as an exercise of agency brings attention to the active roles that Global South individuals, including higher education leaders, exercise.
5. Relations between colonizer and colonized, and—by parallel—between Global North and Global South are complex. Contemporary scholarship in higher education lacks the language to discuss these relationships. Bhabha (1994) described

colonizer/colonized relations as ambivalent. Ambivalence is not, in this sense, indifference: Colonizer/colonized relations are often high stakes encounters that involve fear and fascination, “attraction toward and repulsion from” (Young, 1995). Ambivalence adds a layer of complexity to the analysis of world systems in higher education and emphasizes the idea that cultural encounters involve not just coming across something or someone different but that the encounter brings one’s identity and assumptions into question (Fabian, 2009).

6. Marginson and Rhoades (2002) refer to agency both as an organization and as the ability to undertake action. The entire postcolonial intellectual project focuses on unearthing the often ignored sense of agency of colonized peoples (Smith, 1999). These two ideas bring attention to the complex ways in which individuals and groups respond to their environments. Even if it is difficult to recognize, resistance and agency are present in response to globalization, including in the adoption of higher education practices and policies.
7. A pivotal element in recent literature in higher education globalization is the overarching discourse that situates the Global North and its institutions in relative superiority over the Global South. Said (1979; 1994) denounces such discourse which he calls Orientalism. Orientalism justifies the existing status quo and makes possible the discussion of colonization in higher education in neutral terms: “the European imperialist powers brought universities to their colonies, along with other accoutrements of colonialism” (Altbach, 2011, p. 16).

The following table summarizes the central points of integration between contemporary higher education scholarship and postcolonial theory:

<b>Concept in higher education</b>	<b>Concept in postcolonial theory</b>	<b>Synthesis</b>
Globalization as integration (Altbach & Knight, 2007) and flows of people, ideas and practices at a global scale (Marginson & Sawir, 2005)	Globalization as continuation of imperialism and colonization (Bush, 2006)	Globalization is an unequal system of economic and cultural integration resulting from modern colonialism
Centers/peripheries (Altbach, 1998)	Empire/colonies (Loomba, 2005)	Centers and peripheries are not part of a meritocratic global system but correspond to previous location within world-systems
Multidirectional flow (Marginson & Sawir, 2005)	Hybridity (Bhabha, 1994)	Encounters between individuals and higher education institutions across North/South boundaries is complex and mutually transformative
Isomorphic change, mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)	Mimicry and ambivalence (Bhabha, 1994); desire (Young, 1995)	The pattern of adopting Global North practices in Global South higher education is not at random but a predictable effort among individuals from the Global South to cope with built-in inequities on the global higher education system
Glonacal agency (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002)	Postcolonial agency (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007; Bignal, 2010; Young, 2003)	Agency is complex and often invisible/ignored, especially among Global South individuals
European university as universal model (Altbach, 1998; 2011)	Orientalism as legitimizing status quo (Said, 1979)	Global North universities relative advantage has ideological foundations.

Table 2: Summary of Conceptual Framework

Based on the integration of conceptual streams that inform this study, my initial perspective investigates globalization as an unequal system of economic and cultural integration resulting from modern colonialism in which higher education centers and peripheries are not part of a meritocratic global system but correspond to previous location within world-systems. Competition and collaboration in the higher education global field are influenced by a North/South divide and yet are mutually transformative as the result of a complex interplay of representation, fear, and fascination. While often ignored in accounts of global higher education

dynamics, individual and group agency is key for understanding outcomes, action, and motivations around quality in higher education.

The concepts from contemporary higher education and from postcolonial theory that I have discussed constitute a framework for analyzing the internationalization of quality practices in higher education, in general, and U.S. institutional accreditation in Mexico, in particular.

As figure 2 illustrates, I conceptualize higher education as a global field that encompasses relations of collaboration and competition and the multidirectional flows of ideas, practices, resources, and people (Marginson, 2004; Marginson & Sawir, 2005). The North/South divide (Grovoqui, 2011; Said, 1979) sets the tone for exchange within that system. Furthermore, postcolonial relations are at the center of North/South interactions where representation is based on stereotypes characterized by Northern superiority (Said, 1979; 1994). In addition, the cultural encounter produces emotions of fascination/fear and attraction/repulsion, among both colonizers and colonized (Bhabha, 1994; Young, 1995). The United States and Mexico are part of this system and belong to, respectively, the Global North and the Global South. Furthermore, the U. S.-Mexico border is a place for encounter where Global North and Global South overlap (Anzaldúa, 1994).

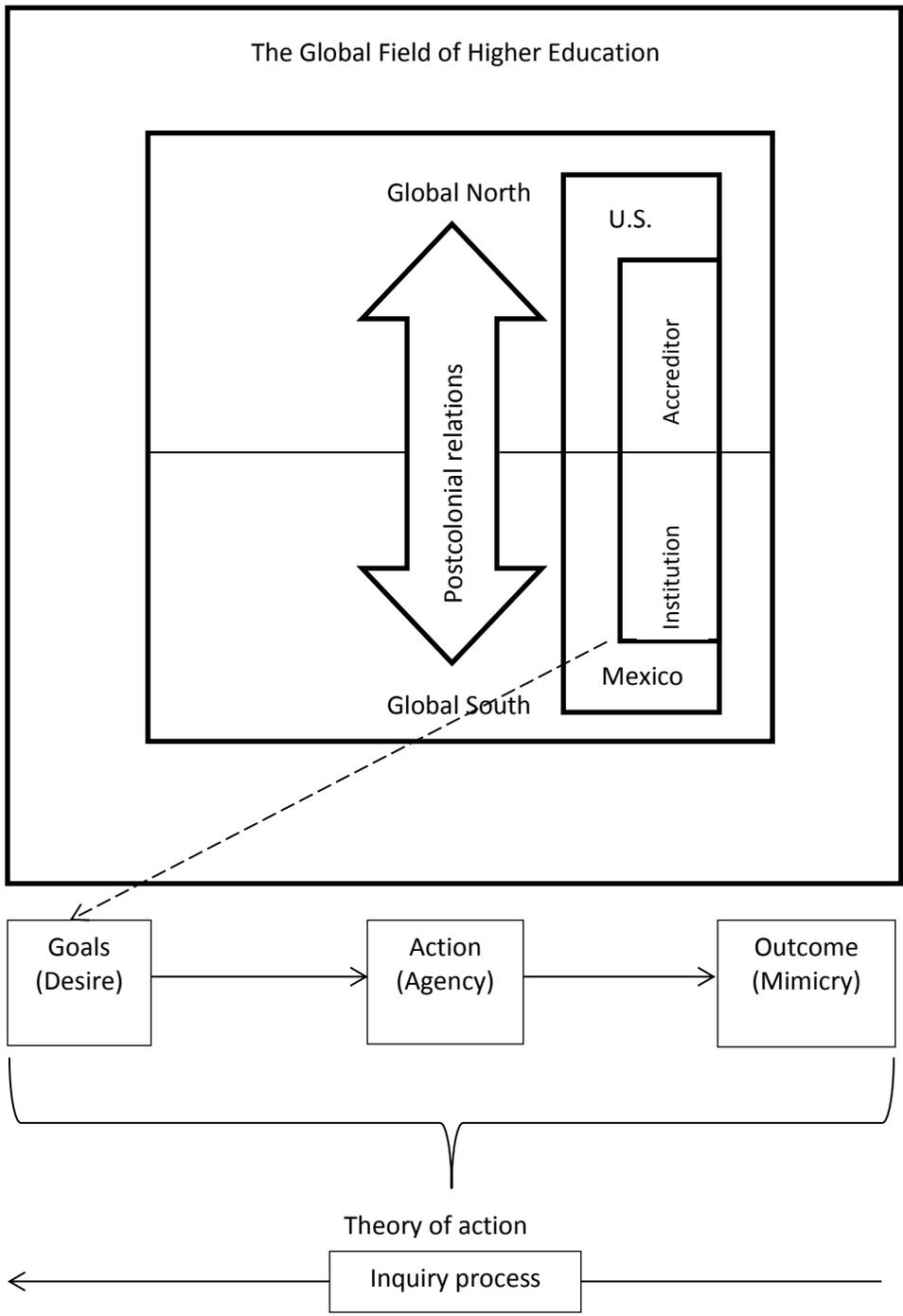


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

The United States and Mexico subsume the core actors in this study, respectively, an accrediting agency and an institution of higher learning. Inside the college or university in Mexico, complex dynamics are at play: Goals or motivations—that I label desire (Young, 1995)—lead to actions, that I label agency (Gandhi, 1998; Bignal, 2010), which have some effects. I establish a parallel between the effects of accreditation and mimicry (Bhabha, 1994) because campus leaders in the Global South that seek U.S. accreditation exercise their agency in order to transform the institution according to U.S. standards. This inquiry process explores—from outside in—outcomes first (accreditation), then actions (quality management), and finally goals and aspirations that I equate to value and quality in higher education. This study is therefore intended to unearth the theories of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974) in relation to accreditation between the Mexican institution and the U.S. accreditor.

### **Research Questions**

Given that accreditation is connected to quality and value, accreditation involves goals and actions because it constitutes an exercise of individual and group agency. Value has been defined as “the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger social totality” (Graeber, 2001, p. xxvii) and consequently, this study explores value in the context of higher education. As a result, the main research question of this study is:

How do university leaders in Mexico exercise institutional agency and construct value as they participate in U.S. institutional accreditation?

The following secondary questions further narrow the scope of inquiry:

1. What are the intended and unintended consequences of the accreditation process for the institution? What are the stated and unstated goals for entering the accreditation process? How do these goals affect action?
2. What institutional actions and actors are at play in the process?

3. How do campus leaders evaluate the accreditation process?
4. What is the role, if any, of Mexico's colonial past in selecting this particular form of quality assurance and accrediting agency?
5. What are the assumptions about quality and value in higher education implicit in the U.S. accreditation process?

### **Research Design and Genre**

Exploring value, decision, and meaning making in a particular organizational setting suggests that the research questions presented here are best explored through an in-depth case study design. This study makes explicit an interest in the meanings and interpretations that participants negotiate within a specific social context, which coincides with principles of qualitative research (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). This study fits into Yin's (2009) definition of case study research because "a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control" (p.13). While case studies present challenges, mainly the need to set some boundaries around the case which is not always easy, they present significant advantages because they allow for in-depth investigation and take place in a natural setting (Knight, 2002).

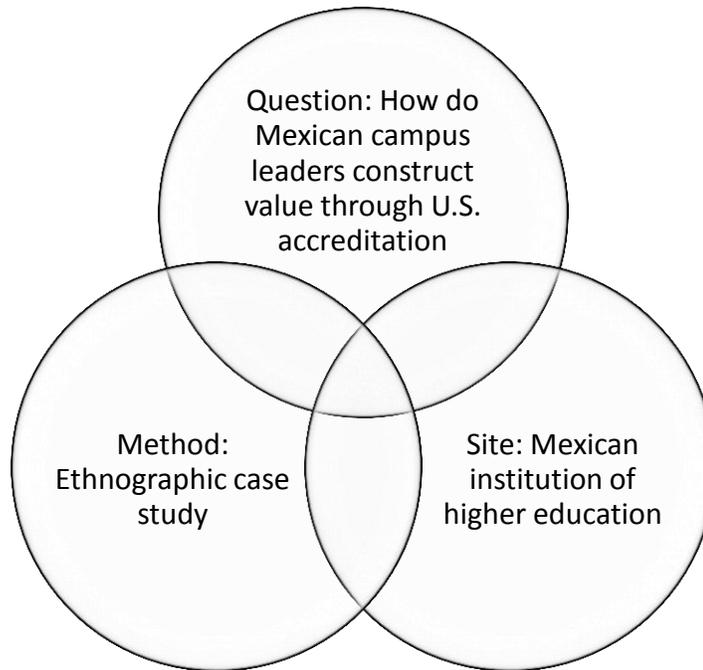


Figure 3: Relationship among Question, Method and Site

Stake (2010) suggests that, in designing a qualitative study, the researchers need to reflect upon three elements: question, method, and site. The figure above illustrates the connections between question, method, and site. There are different perspectives in the use of case studies, for example, some methodologists indicate that case studies constitute an inquiry strategy but not a research genre (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Stake, 2005; 2010). In addition, case studies are not considered inherently a qualitative research strategy (Yin, 2009).

I characterize this case study as ethnographic, because I focus on actions and interaction within a group, and a reference to ethnography makes clear the qualitative nature of the study, situating it within a particular research genre. As indicated in the introduction chapter, in this case study I pay attention to shared language and culture according to ethnographic principles (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, attention to the perspective of participants and the centrality of

description (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) characterize my approach. Given that the present study follows an ethnographic approach to the qualitative case study, ideas about *compressed ethnography* are relevant. Traditional ethnographies involve very long periods of data collection and during much of that time, the researcher—usually an outsider—becomes familiarized with the local setting and sometimes language. Ethnographies may be shortened or compressed, especially if (a) the researcher is familiar with the local language and culture, (b) conducts a focused inquiry, and (c) works with local experts (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). This chapter discusses how this case study met these three conditions.

The unit of analysis of the case study is Mexican higher education through the in-depth study of a single institution. Consistent with qualitative case study strategies (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009; 2011), various strategies for data collection are displayed in this project: document analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews.

In addition to characterizing this case study as qualitative and ethnographic, it is important to note that this is an *instrumental case study* (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2003, p. 137). Instrumental case studies refer to those case studies that are selected in order to analyze in-depth a particular phenomenon. Applied to this research project, the instrumental nature of the study means that, while the institution I explored is an interesting and valuable setting in its own right, my interest in the university derives mainly from my initial interest to understand a larger phenomenon, i.e. U.S. institutional accreditation of Mexican universities.

### **Site Selection**

Purposeful sampling is a common characteristic in qualitative studies (Patton, 1980). Case selection can be seen as an application of the same principles of purposeful sampling to case study research. Site or case selection involves setting selection criteria. For the purpose of this project, I set out to search for a data rich environment that illustrates how U.S.

accreditation of Mexican institutions of higher education works. The literature points to four institutions in Mexico that receive U.S. institutional accreditation (Didou Aupetit, 2002; Kells, 1992). One more institution received accreditation in 2012 (Western Association of Schools and Colleges [WASC], 2012b). The following table summarizes some organizational characteristics of the eligible institutions for the study<sup>7</sup>:

Pseudonym	Location	Control	Accreditor	Initial accreditation	Institution type	Enrolment
Mex-U	Single campus, Capital	Private Non-profit	SACS	1991	3 or fewer doctoral degrees	638 (U) 196 (G)
Central College	Single campus, Central region	Private Non-profit	SACS	1959	4 or more doctoral degrees	6,020 (U) 980 (G)
Northern Tech	Multi-campus, Northeast	Private Non-profit	SACS	1950	4 or more doctoral degrees	57,308 (U) 19,797 (G)
Metro University	Single campus, Northeast	Private Non-profit	SACS	2001	3 or fewer doctoral degrees	7,562 (U) 490 (G)
TECHS University	Multi-campus, Northwest	Private Non-profit	WASC	2012	Master's	2,476 (U) 1,362 (G)

Table 3: Summary of eligible institutions for inclusion on the study

All of the U.S. accredited institutions in Mexico are located in urban centers and are privately controlled. However, the institutions represent three different regions in the country. Almost all institutions are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and only one by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. The time of first accreditation status awarded ranges from 1950 to 2012. One of the eligible institutions, that henceforth I refer to using the pseudonym of Technology Education Center for Higher Studies (TECHS), presents two distinct advantages over the other institutions, making it a particularly *data rich*

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<sup>7</sup> While the table refers to real institutions and institutional data, I have utilized pseudonyms in order to protect institutional identity.

site for study. First, their accreditation process is recent and significant amounts of information about the accreditation process are available online and through their local media. Second, actors directly involved in the process are likely to still work at the institution—accreditation runs in 7 to 10 year cycles, data could be scarce in institutions where the accreditation cycle took place long ago. According to these criteria, TECHS was determined to be the best site for conducting this case study.

Henceforward, I refer to the United States Regional Accrediting Agency simply as USRAA in an effort to protect the identity of participants in the Mexican University and the U.S. regional accrediting agency. While this decision may be detrimental to the accuracy of some non-essential elements of the analysis, I believe it is in the best interest of all participants. Furthermore, while differences exist among different U.S. regional accrediting agencies, the similarities in approaches prevail, as they are part of the accreditation ‘field’. Even the literature sponsored by these agencies talks about American accreditation in general (Eaton, 2012; Jackson, et. al., 2010) which supports the idea that the use of a pseudonym is acceptable. Finally, utilizing pseudonyms prevents me from the risk of self-imposed censorship; accreditation is a high-stakes political activity and my awareness of the many sensitive issues are best dealt with, albeit not fully solved, by utilizing pseudonyms.

### **Participants**

Determining the participants of any study requires a balance between prefiguration and responsiveness. As a start point, I anticipated interviewing the academic leaders of the institution. This group included college deans, the director of the office in charge of accreditation, and other university administrators. Some institutions have an office specialized in accreditation; in other cases, this responsibility belongs to the academic planning unit. Given that accreditation involves multiple stakeholders, and given that stakeholders are different in

each setting, I remained open to incorporating the perspectives of other participants. These included faculty, staff, and students. Also, given that the accreditation process involves participants from the candidate institution and evaluators from the U.S. accrediting agency, I also interviewed staff from different U.S. regional accrediting agencies.

Participants in this study included 13 individuals: Four senior staff members (presidents or vice-president) from U.S. accrediting agencies; four deans of schools and colleges from TECHS; and three directors who participated directly in the U.S. accreditation process at TECHS. In addition, during my data collection visit, I had the opportunity to interview one more staff member from the Admissions office and one undergraduate student. These two last participants were not part of the original data collection plan. This combination of participants allowed me to interview three out of four administrators that chaired committees for the TECHS accreditation process.

It is important to note that the vast majority of participants in the study were men (10) while I only interviewed three women. This skewedness responds to the fact that the majority of administrators at TECHS are men. Staff interviewed from the U.S. regional agencies shows a 50/50 proportion. In addition, I wish to note that all the faculty members interviewed for the study also have roles as administrators. Administrators are more likely to contact and more willing to speak in an official capacity, like an interview. I address the implications of these issues when discussing the trustworthiness and limitations of the study.

The following table summarizes the participants in the study:

Staff from U.S. regional accrediting agencies	1 President	In person
	1 President	Phone interview
	1 Vice-president	Phone interview
	1 Vice president	Phone interview
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4</b>	
Administrators at TECHS in charge of accreditation processes	1 Director	In person
	1 Director	In person
	1 Director	In person
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3</b>	
Administrators with faculty status	1 Dean/professor	Skype™ interview <sup>8</sup>
	1 Dean/professor	In person
	1 Dean/professor	In person
	1 Dean/professor	In person
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4</b>	
	1 Admissions staff	In person
	1 Student	In person
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2</b>	
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>13</b>	

Table 4: Summary of participants

### Data Collection

There are six potential sources of data when conducting a case study. Those sources are: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2009). The data collection strategy, once the site had been selected, involved the following steps:

1. Extensive online search for contextual information on the selected institution and the accreditation process.
2. Identification and selection of documents pertaining to the accreditation process.
3. Selection of relevant policy documents and manuals regarding U.S. accreditation of non-U.S. institutions.
4. In person and phone interviews with staff from U.S. accrediting agencies.

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<sup>8</sup> Skype is a trade mark of Skype and I am not affiliated, sponsored, authorized or otherwise associated by/with the Skype group of companies.

5. Email, phone, and videoconference conversations communication with administrators from TECHS to identify participants and negotiate access.
6. Phone and videoconference interviews with administrators at TECHS.
7. On-site observation of TECHS campus and surrounding area.
8. On-site in person interviews with TECHS administrators, faculty, staff and students.

As the list above indicates, there were three major strategies for data collection:

document analysis, observation, and semi-structured interviews. The last two strategies correspond to ethnographic inquiry and all of the three coincide with case study research (Yin, 2009). Given the significance of each of those strategies for this project, I will discuss each of those strategies next.

Data collection began with document analysis. My decision of initiating the process with document and policy analysis was intended to conduct interviews with participants in Mexico only after I had gained a substantial understanding of the process. During my initial communication with participants at TECHS, one of the main gatekeepers in the process indicated that the academic staff is under a lot of pressure and very busy so, even if they may be willing to participate, their response time may be long. This and other interactions led me to believe that I had to be very mindful of how I would like participants to contribute to the study, given that I would have a small window for data collection as participants would be unlikely to spend lots of time in interviews and follow-up communication. Consequently, I collected numerous documents including websites, pamphlets, manuals, policy statements, among others. After an initial revision, I narrowed the analysis to thirty-three documents, with a total of 493 pages, which I analyzed line by line. Appendix A provides a summary of the documents reviewed in this project.

Interviews were a central strategy in collecting rich data for this study. Interviews brought to life the information I gathered while conducting the literature review and document analysis. Interviews also made this research project personal, as I became immersed in the experiences of participants and explored the meanings that they attributed to those experiences. Conducting interviews involves at least the following two assumptions: First, that personal experiences and perspectives can be expressed through language; and second, that—even if limited—the interviewer may gain insights into another individual’s lived experience (Seidman, 2006). Utilizing interviews as a strategy for data collection also assumes that “what people experienced is true for them and that by sharing those experiences the researcher can enter the interviewee’s world” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 7). These assumptions coincide with the constructivist-interpretive perspective of the study. As a result, I planned the interview protocol only after I was familiar with the accreditation process and the policies for accreditation of non-U.S. institutions. During the interviews, I kept basic questions to a minimum and focused on participants’ experiences and perspectives.

Appendix B provides sample interview protocols for staff in the U.S. regional agencies; appendix C contains a sample interview protocol for administrators at TECHS. The former set of interviews took place in English; the latter, in Spanish. The interviews with staff in the U.S. regional agencies focused on four main content areas: (a) the policy environment for accreditation of non-U.S. institutions, (b) work currently undertaken by their accrediting agency, (c) specific experiences in conducting accreditation activities abroad, and (d) their direct experience with the accreditation process at TECHS. For participants in Mexico, the interview focus was on four different content areas: (a) main actors in the accreditation process and their own involvement, (b) questions addressing the accreditation process from beginning to end, (c) personal experiences in the process, and (d) general ideas about quality in higher education. I

began each interview with a discussion of my project, its main objectives, and a discussion of informed consent. Additionally, I requested participants' permission to take notes or record the interview; all of the participants agreed to have the interview audio-recorded. When the interviews took place in person, I asked participants to sign the informed consent form; for phone or *skype*<sup>™</sup> interviews, I emailed the form and asked participants to signal their agreement via email or electronic signature. As a form of member-checking, I emailed participants the transcriptions of the interviews.

Participants in the study included university administrators who joined the university administration after years of successful academic careers. In addition, I interviewed top-level staff from accrediting agencies. Some of these accrediting agency staff members are former presidents and chancellors of both universities and university systems in the U.S. Consequently, when planning and conducting the interviews, I incorporated considerations about elite interviewing and interviewing technical experts (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These considerations were essential for a relatively brief and focused interview with limited opportunities for an independent member check. As a result, during these interviews, I shared my initial interpretations in order to seek confirmation or dispute, and I emailed participants the interview transcripts which gave them further opportunity to clarify their perspectives.

Being a graduate student interviewing administrators and faculty members with years of experience created a unique dynamic that Huckaby (2011) labels as "researching up" (p. 169). Researching up involves interviewing participants who are more senior in status and experience and who quite possibly are more versed than the researcher in data collection strategies. Aware of this situation, I paid particular attention to the flow of questions in the interview protocols. Some participants complimented me for being well prepared and organized. Whilst complimentary, those remarks were also evaluative, perhaps expressing a tacit

acknowledgement of the senior administrator-student status differential. One participant-administrator prompted me by asking if I was not going to record the interview when I started the conversation about informed consent. And yet another participant shared with me his surprise given that my questions did not address a discussion of budgets and endowments. These examples show the complex dynamics of researching up, which, as Huckaby predicted, involve “power and vulnerability, not as shifting or reversal, but simultaneously” (p. 174). As the researcher, I was aware of my own power; as a graduate student, knowing that my performance was under some level of scrutiny, I felt vulnerable. Power and vulnerability were good companions in my research process as they encouraged me to be reflexive (Etherington, 2004; 2007).

In addition to document analysis and interviews, observation was a major source of information. As I mentioned previously, participants in Mexico had limited time to devote to this study, given their high-volume teaching and overall workload. One participant pointed that the faculty teaching load is four courses each semester. In designing the study, I was mindful of this limitation as I did not intend to burden them with extensive observation sessions that might disrupt their work flow. However, while preparing for and conducting face to face interviews, I had valuable opportunities to observe the university and the work of TECHs administrators. We also discussed the accreditation process while touring the institution. During these tours, I employed strategies that stemmed from the concept of mobile interviewing (Brown & Durrheim, 2009).

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

Coding and analyzing are not synonymous. Data analysis is a more comprehensive process than coding a text. Coding is neither a necessary or sufficient step in analysis. Coding is a useful initial step for getting acquainted with and organizing the data. Analysis and

interpretation are related and iterative processes of making sense of the different streams of data that make up a research project.

### **Data Coding**

Data can take many forms (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Different strategies and stages of collection in this study produced different types of data. The initial process of document analysis produced extensive amounts of data. Those data could be divided into two categories: First, factual data; these data include dates, names, organizational charts, and so on. Those factual data provided context and were informative in nature. Texts are a second type of data produced from reviewing documents, archives, and artifacts. For example, websites, pamphlets, alumni magazines, and signs constituted texts. Textual data allow for an analysis that goes beyond fact-finding because texts provide insights into meanings. Likewise, interviews provided some factual information—always re-constructed through the experience of participants and subject to their interpretations.

There are different views about what data analysis entails. For some, the emphasis of data analysis is on managing data, i.e. “coding, indexing, sorting, retrieving” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 6). This project required managing large amounts of data which needed to be organized. Strauss (1987) suggests a coding paradigm that divides data into four categories: conditions, interactions, strategies/tactics, and consequences. This classification facilitated organizing large amounts of data and transforming them into usable units. In addition, coding helped focus the inquiry into topics or initial areas for analysis.

This study involved an iterative process of organizing, sorting, and indexing data. I conducted data analysis in multiple stages:

1. Line by line coding of documents regarding the accreditation process at TECHS, following the steps of initial or open coding (Charmaz, 2005, 2006)

2. Focused coding (Charmaz, 2005; 2006) of documents—policies and manuals regarding accreditation of non-U.S. universities, incorporating principles of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003)
3. Initial organization of interview data based on interview questions according to coding paradigm, i.e. conditions, interactions, strategies/tactics, and consequences (Strauss, 1987)
4. Initial content analysis (Patton, 1987) of interview transcripts
5. Initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) of interview transcripts
6. Refinement and elaboration of themes informed by narrative analysis (Wortham, 2001) and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
7. Reconciliation of themes vis-à-vis research questions

Even though I have presented a self-conscious list of the steps I took for coding data with references to relevant methodological literature in Education and Anthropology, I wish to clarify two points. First, coding and data analysis in general are intuitive processes that involve reflective decisions, not following recipes. Second, even though I employed techniques from a wide array of epistemological perspectives, my focus is interpretive-constructivist. In this regard, it is necessary to emphasize the tentative, perfectible, and therefore refutable nature of the process and the findings in this study (Charmaz, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

In addition to in-vivo (Charmaz, 2006) or indigenous typologies (Patton, 1987), I also utilized what Patton (1987) calls analyst-constructed typologies based on the conceptual framework presented in the beginning of this chapter. However, these a-priori categories were mainly used for the interpretation stages, later in the study. Appendix F presents a sample of the initial codes developed early in the data analysis process. The following table summarizes the main steps I followed for analyzing data:

<b>Analytical strategy</b>	Initial Coding (Line by line and in-vivo)	Focused Coding	Discourse Analysis (Critical and dynamic)	Revise research questions	Revise conceptual and analytical framework
<b>Grounding</b>	Charmaz (2005; 2006)	Strauss (1987); Strauss & Corbin (1998)	Allan (2010); Fairclough (2003); Wortham (2001)	Marshall & Rossman (2011)	Rallis & Rossman (2012); Rossman & Rallis (2012)
<b>Intended Outcome</b>	Description		Analysis	Analysis/Interpretation	Interpretation

Table 5: Stages of Data Analysis

The use of matrices facilitated the use of multiple analytical strategies for specific passages or interview segments. The following table displays on the left the elements of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) and, on the top, the components of Strauss' (1987) coding paradigm. I utilized variations of this table to analyze some central pieces of data.

	Conditions	Interactions	Strategies	Consequences
Inter-textuality	Text or passage:			
Assumptions				
Legitimation				
Equivalence/difference				
Discourses				
Representation				
	Analysis:			

Table 6: Integrating Multiple Strategies for Analysis

### From Analysis to Interpretation

In relation to analysis and interpretation, I find Wolcott's (1994) discussion about the different levels of emphasis given to description, analysis, and interpretation to be useful.

According to Wolcott, description, analysis, and interpretation are not mutually exclusive operations even though they vary in emphasis. In description, the researcher stays close to the data and hopes they will speak for themselves. In analysis, the researcher carefully and systematically explores relations and connections among data, moving beyond description. In interpretation, the researcher tries to make sense of the phenomena she explores even if she does so somewhat distanced from the data and beyond the limits of confidence and rigor that traditional analysis provides. There is room for different modes of data transformation in this study. Description, in particular thick description (Geertz, 1973), understood as “successfully answer the question ‘What is this person doing?’” (Packer, 2011, p. 221), has a central place in data analysis and interpretation. Description is also critical in increasing the usefulness of one’s findings for other situations (Kennedy, 1979; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Analysis beyond description is important if this study is to make a contribution to the field. Analysis implies identifying patterns in the data, comparing cases, and contextualizing within a broader analytical framework (Wolcott, 1994).

The final stage of data transformation according to Wolcott (1994) is interpretation. Wolcott lists a number of strategies available for interpretation; I find two of them most useful for my study: using theory and connecting with personal experience. Conceptual frameworks integrate personal experience, existing literature, and relevant theories (Rallis & Rossman, 2012; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Accordingly, a solid conceptual framework is critical to increase the chances of developing credible interpretations. For that reason, many pages in this dissertation are devoted to articulating my conceptual perspective (see chapters two and three).

A final element of the interpretation process undertaken in this study comes from Yin (2011) who asserts that case studies follow for a particular form of generalization: analytic generalization. Analytic generalization involves explaining how the study informs theoretical

concepts or hypotheses, and then applying those revised theories into new settings or cases. Kennedy (1979) presents a similar perspective in their discussion of analogic logic, which can be achieved through comparison and contrast. Yin (2009; 2011) describes the explanation building process as an iterative process in which researchers compare their initial theoretical statements with the findings of the study and then revise those initial premises. This study's findings constitute theories of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974) about how campus leaders establish goals and actions around U.S. accreditation within a global and contested field.

### **Analyzing Discourse and Text**

Document analysis is one of the data sources in this study, alongside interviews and observations. Initial and focused coding is a common strategy for analyzing interview transcripts and other documents. However, albeit useful, coding presents limitations. Intentional use of broader analytical strategies (beyond mere coding) may enrich the analytical value of this study. For instance, discourse analysis became a valuable analytical strategy for understanding practices in higher education and included exploring “talk and text and the relationship to the social context in which it is constructed” (Allan, 2003, p. 47). Allan (2010) points out three main elements regarding discourse:

(1) discourses are more than words on paper—they are constellations of words and images that produce meaning; (2) discourses are dynamic and not only reflect, but also produce culture; and (3) it is through discourse that we gain a sense of ourselves and come to interpret the physical and social aspects of the world in which we live (p. 14-15).

Discourse does not happen in isolation but as a result of interactions (Mills, 2004); similarly, texts are the remaining evidence of communication among individuals and groups. Texts are the forces that configure cultures (Silverstein & Urban, 1996). As such, text can be defined as “any configuration of signs that is coherently interpretable by some community of users” (Hanks, 2000, p. 165). According to Hanks (2000), textuality is the coherence that

connects different texts; analyzing text and textuality calls for attention to such issues as status, voicing, and power as these issues relate to the creation of texts. For analysis of texts, Fairclough (2003) suggest attending to intertextuality—other texts interwoven into the text one is analyzing—assumptions, explanations, comparisons, and representation. These elements hold clues to understanding interactions among individuals and groups.

Interviews also provide a valuable opportunity for analysis beyond traditional codes and coding. Arguably, interviews are particular forms of narrative. Wortham (2001) suggests that narratives are re-embodiments of lived experience and that one must attend to issues of voicing in text. Attending to issues of voicing requires paying attention to not only what participants say but also to their choices in the way they present or re-enact their experiences within the interview setting.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Trustworthiness and ethics in research are deeply intertwined (Rallis, Rossman & Gajda, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2010). Given that one of my assumptions is that participants give a great deal of importance to their work, then representation of participants and their institutions demands tact and responsibility on my part. Principles of beneficence and protection of participants were particularly relevant in conducting this study. Rather than speaking generalities, I provide some potential risks I was mindful of. For example, the number of eligible institutions for my study is so small that protecting the identity of the institutions and individual participants was important and difficult at once. If accreditation is used as a proxy for institutional effectiveness and reputation, *discrediting accreditation* and questioning the process may also bring into question the reputation of specific organizations. Furthermore, highlighting the shortcomings of accreditation at a given institution may affect the credibility of the person

or group in charge. These issues called for incorporating an ethic of care into my research (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

For the reasons discussed previously, I gave pseudonyms to the institutions I studied and to individual participants. In doing so, my intention was protecting participants' identities. In addition, in writing this dissertation and thereby representing others, I have made every effort possible to make clear when I am making claims or interpretations and when I am reflecting or summarizing participants' perspectives. For instance, I have separated *findings* in chapter four from *analysis and interpretation* in chapter five.

In discussing the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Wortham (2001) suggests that authoring consists of presenting the words of others in a particular deliberate order with the purpose of conveying a message. In that sense, the findings presented in chapter four are the result of my authoring and authorship.

### **Relationships in the Field**

Given that I have claimed the ethnographic tradition as one of the schools that inform my study, the idea that "all interactions involve moral choices" (Tedlock, 2003, p. 165) is very important. Authenticity is central in this process (Yin, 2011). My experience in Mexican higher education prepared me to anticipate and manage access and power issues at play. Additionally, I presented the purpose of my study with openness; appendices D and E contain samples of the informed consent forms I developed both in English and in Spanish. Tedlock (2003) suggests the notion of the researcher as an apprentice as a way of balancing power in the field. The idea of apprenticeship captures my status as a learner, as work in progress, as susceptible to making mistakes. The idea of entering the field as an apprentice felt comfortable and honest. It also intended to communicate that I was serious about the process of learning and that I am an agent of my own learning. Interviews are situations where issues of power are particularly

important (Huckaby, 2011; Seidman, 2006). In addition, selecting a research role and doing so reflectively is necessary because, as Rubin and Rubin (2012) point out, “if you do not choose a role for yourself that is meaningful to your interviewees, they are likely to choose one for you” (p. 74).

A particular juncture of field-work, conceptual framework, and ethics at play in my study had to do with colonial relationships. Packer (2011) discusses the historical and often ignored relationship between anthropology—where ethnography primarily stems from—and colonial discourse. Packer indicates that fieldwork is a cultural encounter and that representation involves power. He warns against the risks of naively thinking that, by becoming a member of the group, one can solve the power differential involved in research. These reflections are of crucial importance and demanded that I critically reflect on what – and whose - interests I might be serving in conducting this research. I believe that critical analysis constitutes one of the most radical ways of caring for others. I care about quality and I care for Mexican higher education. I believe conducting this study is important and, consequently, I have done so with humility and care. The use of multiple sources of data and member checks, along with the intentional process of building relationships with participants that recognize the power embedded in representation, were some of the strategies I used to cope with threats to the trustworthiness of this study.

### **Limitations**

Research findings are always tentative (Kennedy, 1979), and no research project is perfect. Researchers often want more time, more participants, and more research sites. And yet, “doing social research is about making pragmatic judgments about what look to be the best way of getting a grip on your research questions in specific settings (Knight, 2002, p. xii). This study was no exception. I would like to acknowledge and discuss some potential shortcomings in

this study. An important question I have about the trustworthiness of the findings has to do with the stakes of the phenomena I analyzed. I have described accreditation and quality assurance as high-stakes processes, and I assume that participants in my study take their work seriously and place certain values into their day-to-day activities. Could I expect, in such a high-stakes setting, that participants would be completely transparent and share their experiences and perspectives with me, almost a complete stranger? Could I move on despite this doubt and conduct the study and make claims about their accreditation process?

Given the nature of my data collection strategy and my status as an outsider, I had only access to public information—websites, policies, manuals—and what participants were willing to share with me—mainly through interviews. In other words, the information I gained access to was mainly public and artificial. I believe people conduct themselves in public in ways that may be different than in private. Rarely one gets to see people’s behavior in private but that does not mean that public behaviors are unimportant. I argue that higher education and work are public settings and, therefore, I was willing to accept what participants shared with me because I also accept responsibility—*author-ity*—in the decisions I made about how I have interpreted and represented those encounters.

Patton (1980) discussed multiple reasons that may distort a qualitative study: the situations selected for observation in the case study, the timing of the observations, and the selection of participants. As I mentioned earlier, ethical considerations in this study demanded significant consciousness about burden on participants, especially in relation to time commitment to the study. This situation demanded making some trade-offs because participants’ limited time availability also limited my ability to have an even more extensive involvement in the field and longer observations. From a perspective of justice, I am likely the greatest beneficiary of this study. Consequently, I tried to make every effort to prevent

participation burden, even if reducing burden involved making compromises and finding alternative, less intrusive, ways to gather information. For example, I interviewed many, but not all, of the administrators involved in the accreditation process. Some were not available; some were not willing. Furthermore, my interactions with faculty and students were limited. And I was not part of the accreditation decision making; I was not in the room when they made decisions or drafted statements. All I had access to was the products of those activities and participants' narratives of their experiences.

Even though I collected data over a long period of time, my claims are based on a snapshot of the institution shortly after their accreditation process was completed. I did not follow the process from beginning to end, and therefore, I do not have access to longitudinal data which might help in making generalizations from single case studies. While case studies are powerful strategies for gaining insights, they present information about a particular setting only. These challenges involve trade-offs of breadth versus depth. I decided to engage in-depth with those administrators who were more closely involved in the process rather than involving larger numbers of participants with less intensive participation in the process. These decisions have implications for the credibility of the findings, and it is up to the reader to decide if the findings I put forward are likely to inform their thinking (Kennedy, 1979).

### **Strategies to Increase the Trustworthiness of the Study**

I discuss the trustworthiness of this study from the point of view that qualitative research pursues different goals than quantitative research and therefore, has separate criteria for evaluation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, I present information that may assist readers to assess the credibility of this study, its potential transferability to other settings they may be similar to it, its dependability, and whether my findings may be confirmable.

There are several strategies to increase the trustworthiness of the study: collecting data an extended period of time, sharing emergent insights with participants, and triangulating (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Note that these are strategies rather than recipes. Clarifying this is critical because no single step or action can dissipate questions about trustworthiness. Therefore, the actions I took to increase the credibility of this study included:

*Extended Data Collection:* data collection took place during several months and my visit to the university I studied took extensive preparation.

*Reliance on Conceptual Framework:* before initiating any data collection, I conceptualized the study and developed a conceptual and analytical framework that I presented in chapters two and three which I shared with participants.

*Fidelity to the Standards of a Community of Practice:* by stating a research genre—ethnographic inquiry—and a research strategy—case study—I have subjected this study to the standards of these communities of practice.

*Transparent Analysis:* by articulating my conceptual perspective before collecting and analyzing data, and through the use of comparisons, I have expressed both my argument and my interpretation of the phenomena I encountered while conducting this study.

*Sharing Insights with Participants:* Given ethical considerations about burden, the possibility of member checks as a separate episode was unlikely in most cases; I followed a conversational approach to the interviews in which I shared with participants my insights and initial interpretations

*Triangulating:* information from different data sources, different participants, and different perspectives.

Presenting transferable conclusions based on a single case study poses significant risks. Making inferences based on a single case study requires a particular set of strategies. Kennedy

(1979), in her classic work on generalization based on case studies, mentions three approaches: longitudinal information, using different disciplines for interpretation, and full description.

These last two strategies are central in this research project: This study draws on literature and research strategies that are based on multiple academic traditions and disciplines. In addition, and given that the act of generalizing mainly rests with the audience, the researcher's role is to provide descriptions that enable the audience to make decisions as to whether the case is similar to their own—and therefore use the findings to inform their own research or practice.

### **Triangulation**

One of the main strengths of case studies as a research strategy is that case studies utilize multiple sources; utilizing multiple sources of information makes possible comparing different perspectives and seeking confirming and disconfirming information. Triangulation is the process of analytical comparison of perspectives intended to clarify tentative explanations (Stake, 2003). Triangulation was the main strategy I used and therefore requires particular discussion.

Triangulation has several meanings: repeated observation, comparing information from different sources, and gathering and analyzing information “from more than one vantage point” (Stake, 2010, p. 123). However, triangulation can be limiting, as seeking convergence may prevent identifying alternative explanations or disconfirming evidence. As a result, I found the idea of “triangulation as differentiation” to be particularly useful, given that qualitative research often engages with complex phenomena where multiple valid interpretations coexist (Stake, 2010, p. 123). The purpose of triangulation, then, is not arriving to a “single, totally consistent picture” (Patton, 1980, p.331) but rather identifying patterns among the different perspectives.

In my analysis of the data, I introduced different perspectives and recognized that the same participant may contradict herself in the process; rather than finding the one true

statement, I accept these contradictions because I recognize that “multiple perspectives, including those of the researcher-writer exist” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 42). Cox and Hassad (2005) emphasize that triangulation is an analogy open to interpretation. They propose moving away from notions of triangulation that involve distancing from the study and, rather, suggest an interpretation of triangulation as perspective-taking. Triangulation as perspective-taking was a valuable concept in grappling with my own perspectives and notions about U.S. accreditation; this notion of triangulation is also compatible with the constructivist orientation of this study. Here are the steps I followed for data triangulation: (a) I began with the perspective of documents; (b) I compared and contrasted the content from the documents against the conceptual/analytical framework; (c) I conducted interviews and exposed myself to participants’ perspectives; (d) I compared perspectives from different participants; (e) I went back to the conceptual/analytical framework; and (f) I arrived to conclusions—always tentative and open to modification and refinement.

### **Reflexivity and Positionality**

If qualitative research involves persuasion (Stake, 2010), then, trust between the researcher, I, and the audience, you, is necessary. Trustworthiness—literally speaking—begins with trust and does not exist in a vacuum. Trust and persuasion are more likely to happen among those who are acquainted. In addition, in qualitative research, the researcher is the means or medium through which the findings/learning come into existence (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). These premises make clear the need for a discussion of positionality. If you, the audience, are to judge the trustworthiness of this study, i.e., decide whether or not to trust my claims, I may need to disclose who I am and how I came to study this subject.

The first lines of chapter one indicate that the case study I report here is not my first or only involvement with the U.S. accreditation of a Mexican institution of higher education. In a

rather unanticipated turn of events, I was hired in 2005 to assist in the process of re-accreditation of a Mexican university. That experience opened my eyes to the many challenges that higher education managers face as they try to improve and demonstrate quality to external stakeholders. Working as assistant to the then provost, I worked long hours reconciling spreadsheets, revising draft reports, and collecting information from different departments around campus. I was also part of the meetings to discuss the feedback that the U.S. accrediting agency provided and observed the frustration that the university administrators experienced as they encountered what they thought to be misinterpretations on the part of evaluators. These experiences have shaped my perspective; Rallis and Rossman (2012) suggest that personal experiences contribute in developing an analytical framework and guiding research decisions. I did not cease to have these experiences while conducting this study. Quite to the contrary, (a) my prior experience with accreditation ignited my interest in the topic, (b) helped me identify a site and gain access—it was in a conversation with a former colleague that I learned about TECHS, and (c) guided some of my research questions.

My previous experience with U.S. accreditation is not the only element that influences my perspective. As a Mexican national, I learned from an early age that my country of origin was *tercermundista*, i.e., from the Third World. My ideas about global political economy have evolved in recent years, certainly since I began my doctoral studies. I used to believe that Third World was the lowest in a hierarchy of world development. I recall cringing while reading about Third World countries even as a master's degree student. Growing up in the Global South has shaped my perspective as a post-colonial individual. For me, the post in postcolonial involved where I was born and where I grew up: a formerly colonized territory. Today, I experience the post in postcolonial as an intellectual effort to re-construct an identity that is simultaneously aware of the global injustice that I believe shapes our world and appreciative of the individual

resiliency and ingenuity of those who continue coping with the aftermath of the colonial wreckage.

As evidenced in the literature review and the conceptual framework, my methodological decisions and the interpretations I put forward in the forthcoming chapters are influenced and mediated by my previous experiences and by my identity. Etherington (2004; 2007) points out very lucidly that reflexivity—which I strive to exercise in this study—goes beyond self-awareness because reflexivity recognizes that one’s perspectives and identities are always changing.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter one outlined the *what* of this dissertation by setting boundaries around the topic and scope of this study. Chapter 2 continued that discussion by situating the study within current academic dialogue on quality in higher education. Based on the literature on accreditation and quality assurance, chapter two explained *why* this holds potential for making a contribution in the field of higher education. This current chapter outlined *how* I intend to conduct the study and the reasoning behind the choices I have made. Marshall and Rossman (2011) emphasize the need to discuss the *what* and the *how* when making decisions about research design.

In summary, this study followed single case study design where multiple strategies for data collection were employed. Document analysis, interviews, and observation constituted the core strategies for data collection, according to the ethnographic orientation of this project. The following chapters present and discuss the findings of the study (chapter four), my interpretations of the findings (chapter 5), and their implications (chapter six).

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

This chapter is divided in three major sections. First, I discuss the site for the case study and introduce the main elements of the accreditation process. Second, I introduce each of the four themes that stemmed from the data analysis process. Third, the chapter concludes with an assemblage of the themes in order to provide provisional responses to the research questions of the study.

#### **Description of the Site**

This study explores in-depth a Mexican university located near the U.S.-Mexico border that recently completed the process of initial accreditation with a United States Regional Accrediting Agency (USRAA). The Technology Education center for Higher Studies (TECHS) obtained initial accreditation in February 2012, after engaging in an eight year long process. TECHS has an enrolment of approximately 4200 students at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and offers academic programs, primarily in Business and Engineering fields.

Based on the extensive document analysis process and interviews that I conducted, it is possible to assemble the following institutional snapshot: TECHS has three campuses; each of them is located in the three main cities of one state in the Northern region of Mexico that borders the United States. The main campus is located in the state capital, approximately 10 kilometers, or 6 miles, away from the nearest border crossing to the United States. This oldest campus has the largest student enrollment and serves as the administrative headquarters for the entire multi-campus system. TECHS was founded in the early 1960 by a group of Mexican business leaders interested in the development of the local and regional workforce. One of the initial goals for the institution was to slow down, or even reverse, brain drain in the region. The

assumption behind this goal was that, if students have high-quality local educational opportunities, they will stay and work in the region after graduating.

TECHS offers undergraduate and master's programs in Engineering, Accounting, Business Management, Law, Psychology and Computer Science. The institution receives its authority to grant degrees from Mexico's Federal Department of Education and is one of the founding members of the Mexican Federation of Private Institutions of Higher Education (FIMPES). Even though TECHS is a private institution, the number of graduate students enrolled is comparable to the number of graduate students at the local state university. In addition, TECHS promotes socioeconomic diversity, which is relevant in Mexico where class hierarchy and economic inequity are pervasive. The institution provides some form of financial aid to 70% of its students. Note that Mexico's government does not provide financial aid for students in private universities because public higher education is almost entirely subsidized.

Spanish is the main language of instruction and communication at TECHS but all students are required to take courses of English as a Foreign Language. The campus top leadership have made it a goal to graduate classes of students who are fully fluent in English every year. Internationalization is a pillar of the TECHS' strategic plan for 2020, and it has the region's highest number of MOUs and exchange programs with institutions outside of Mexico.

### **Initial Case Narrative**

The accreditation process was documented extensively by the candidate institution: self-studies and reports of capacity and educational effectiveness for each of the three main accreditation stages—eligibility, candidacy, and initial accreditation—are available to the public. Likewise, the accrediting agency produced reports and official decisions. These documents are available through online repositories. In addition, the final accreditation decisions received local media coverage in newspapers and television. Media coverage is also accessible online through

the institution's website and official social media channels, as well as through institutional publications. Based on these sources of information, I have put together the following narrative regarding the accreditation process.

TECHS began developing a relationship with USRAA, the U.S. accreditor, in the mid-1990s and applied for eligibility status in 2004. However, top administrators at TECHS fostered relationships with USRAA for many years prior; these relationships included participation in conferences and professional development opportunities organized by the U.S. agency. Quality and accreditation have personal significance among TECHS leaders; the university president earned his doctorate at a USRAA-accredited top research university; his dissertation studied USRAA's approach to accreditation.

After years of nurturing this relationship, USRAA granted TECHS eligibility in 2005, candidacy in 2008, and initial accreditation in 2012. Each of these stages involved vast amounts of work distributed throughout the organization. During the eight years in which the accreditation process unfolded, new faculty members have been hired, new buildings have been erected and new processes and technologies have been added to the life of the university. The director of academic planning and effectiveness shared with the following: "The entire candidacy stage was very difficult for us; it forced us to do things in a very different way; we had to enter a culture of evidence."<sup>9</sup>

Given that I initiated data collection for this study in 2012 and continued through January 2013, the process was still salient among multiple constituents involved in the process throughout campus. Furthermore, websites, email communications, and artifacts—including signs and posters—on campus all pointed toward the significance of the process for the

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<sup>9</sup> "Entonces toda la parte de candidatura fue muy difícil, nos obligó a hacer las cosas de diferente manera; tuvimos que entrar en una cultura de evidencia"

institution. This visibility and saliency provided initial conformation of the case as a data-rich environment for inquiry.

While the official path to accreditation was approximately eight years long, TECHS leaders lobbied for accreditation from USRAA for many years before applying for eligibility—which officially started the accreditation process. The former and current university presidents developed relationships with USRAA leadership over the years. These two university presidents are considered the champions who moved the accreditation process forward.

Participants describe USRAA accreditation as a challenging process that involved many struggles; one of the administrators describes the process in the following terms:

One of the visiting teams... they were not like totally convinced that a Mexican university could meet all the elements and they were reflecting on whether they would partake in the international side of things. Fortunately, they came and got a good impression but even then, we faced great challenges.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the challenges, when recounting the accreditation process, administrators discuss improvements that the university experienced as a result of accreditation. The director of institutional research shared with me that:

There is a great improvement, maybe the whole cycle hasn't taken place but we have been running with this ball for four years and it is going to produce results. The other great benefit that I see is about the kind of professors we now have. [USRAA] made recommendations about the number of faculty members that was insufficient and that they should have doctorates. That has made us invest more in faculty and making sure they have doctorates. It is also needed to make investments in the library and we are doing that. There are great impacts happening. We can say that TECHS will change in many aspects, some because of USRAA and some without USRAA but TECHS is changing.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Un grupo de visitadores, y como que no estaban totalmente convencidos que una universidad Mexicana pudiera reunir los elementos y ellos también estaban reflexionando si le entraban o no le entraban a la parte internacional. Afortunadamente, ellos vinieron se llevaron buena impresión, y aun así teníamos grandes retos”

<sup>11</sup> “Entonces ahí hay una gran mejora, que todavía no se gesta el ciclo total como quisiéramos, sí, pero tenemos cuatro años que estamos corriendo con ese balón y va a arrojar resultados. El otro gran beneficio que yo veo fue que está el tipo de profesor que tenemos. Nos

As it may be expected within a complex system, as colleges and universities are, a process of change causes different reactions ranging from acceptance to opposition, as one of the college deans explained:

One of the emotions that [USRAA] elicits is...some people fall passionately in love with USRAA. Some of the actors open their arms to USRAA and fall in love. In other words, we don't always see what we need to see. Some of my colleagues fell in love with USRAA and embrace it unconditionally. For others, the feeling that [USRAA] elicits is affection. Love is a passionate process; affection lets you take some distance but at the end you end up embracing USRAA, and there is a third group of colleagues that show constant resistance toward USRAA; they don't allow themselves that process of approaching or appreciating—therefore, there is no emotion. So, it depends on where you're situated you will have an idea and perspective of what USRAA is. If you are passionately in love, you feel wonderful; if you have affection for USRAA, you'll say it is very good but it still has some areas for improvement. And if you are in a state of resistance, you are going to say that most things about USRAA are useless.<sup>12</sup>

These narratives set the stage for presenting the main findings of this study. After this dean shared with me such an evocative and description of the process, he concluded by sharing his own perspective. I will take the following quote as an opportunity to close this section and to give place to the main themes of the study:

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hicieron recomendaciones que la cantidad de profesores es insuficiente y que todos deberían de tener más doctorado. Eso nos ha hecho invertir más en profesores y más con nivel doctorado. Entonces necesitas hacer grandes inversiones en la biblioteca y se están haciendo. Hay grandes impactos que se están dando. Y podemos decir que el TECHS va a cambiar en mucho aspectos, unas por USRAA y otras sin USRAA pero el TECHS va a cambiar en ese sentido.”

<sup>12</sup> “Una emoción que despierta es que hay gente que se enamora apasionadamente de USRAA. Algunos actores de la institución abren sus brazos a USRAA y se enamoran... Es decir, a veces no vemos todo lo que tenemos que ver. Entonces algunos de los colegas míos se enamoran de USRAA y lo abrazan incondicionalmente. Otros, el otro sentimiento que provoca es de cariño. El amor es un proceso de apasionamiento, el cariño te permite tomar cierta distancia pero a final de cuentas también terminas por abrazar a USRAA y hay un tercer grupo de colegas que muestra una resistencia constante hacia USRAA, que no se permiten este proceso de acercamiento ni de valoración ni tampoco de emoción. Entonces depende donde estés situado vas a tener una idea y una mirada y una valoración de los que es USRAA. Si tú estás enamorado apasionadamente, te sientes maravilloso; si quieres a USRAA vas a decir que es muy bueno pero que tiene algunos puntos de mejora; y si estás en una fase de resistencia, vas a decir que la mayor cantidad de cosas que USRAA te pide sirven para nada.”

Right now, I can say that USRAA has many valuable aspects but we need to be very careful, but very careful, because Mexican universities are culturally different than U.S. universities. There are many things to learn from those processes but there are many things they should let us do in order to respect the cultural manifestations of Mexican universities<sup>13</sup>

### **Overview of Main Themes**

This chapter is intended to report on the main findings from the study while remaining close to the data participants shared with me. I will present a synthesis of the most salient issues I identified through a process of rigorous data collection and analysis. While the next chapter is intended for discussion and interpretation, I wish to be forthright in acknowledging that the analytic choices—informed by my continuous involvement with multiple forms of evidence stemming from literature, documents, and participants—provided the structure for this chapter. Put another way, rather than claiming that themes emerged, I make explicit that I identified and articulated four themes in order to organize the most significant learning in this process of analysis.

Before elaborating on the four themes that I developed, the following statements summarize the main findings in this study. These statements forecast the upcoming sections of this chapter:

1. U.S. Institutional accreditation leads to multiple benefits for the candidate institution.

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<sup>13</sup> “En este momento puedo decir, USRAA tiene muchas cosas valiosas pero hay que tener mucho cuidado, pero mucho cuidado, porque culturalmente somos distintos las universidades mexicanas con las estadounidenses. Hay muchas cosas que aprenderles a esos procesos pero también hay muchas cosas que ellos tendrían que dejarnos hacer para respetar las manifestaciones culturales de las universidades mexicanas.”

2. The main benefit of obtaining institutional accreditation is the development of quality by association, or the ability to demonstrate an institution's quality by providing evidence of its connection to reputable institutions.
3. Anticipated benefits motivated top administrators at TECHS to pursue and invest in U.S. institutional accreditation.
4. There are burdens associated with the accreditation process.
5. Accreditation requires compliance with standards, as established by the U.S. accrediting agency.
6. Compliance with the demands of an accreditor-gatekeeper is necessary to gain entry into the accreditation process.
7. Institutional accreditation requires communication, translation and interaction among individuals from the candidate institution and the accrediting agency.
8. Relations among individuals from the accrediting agency and applicant institution take place in a specific cultural context in which power is constantly negotiated.

The seven statements above gave place to four main themes. I use these four themes to structure the findings for the study and the upcoming sections in this chapter. The four themes are as follows: (a) quality by association, (b) benefits and burdens of investment, (c) gaining entry and legitimacy, and (d) translation: tensions of language and location. The four themes I have identified are neither a disjointed set of topics nor a group of mutually excluding categories. The four themes are interconnected with a significant level of overlap among them.

*Quality by association* is the central benefit of accreditation. Quality by association brings about other *benefits* which, along with work and *burden*, are unevenly distributed throughout the institution because different members of the organization take on different roles. In order to reap the benefits of accreditation, institutional leaders promote compliance

with demands and standards that the accreditors set which, in turn, *legitimize* the accreditor and accreditation process. Compliance is a constant communicative exercise of *translation* and interpretation. Standards are determined and interpreted based on the institution's and accreditor's location across a continuum of power that is frequently re-negotiated.

The following table illustrates the connection between the initial seven statements and the four themes:

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Statements</i>
Quality by association	The main benefit of obtaining institutional accreditation is quality by association
Benefits and burdens of investment	U.S. Institutional accreditation leads to multiple benefits
	There are burdens associated with the accreditation process
	Anticipated benefits motivate seeking and investing in U.S. institutional accreditation
Gaining entry and legitimacy	Accreditation requires compliance with standards
	Compliance involves gaining entry through gatekeepers with a distribution of responsibilities
Translation: Tensions of language and location	Relations among agents from the accrediting agency and applicant institution take place in a specific cultural context in which power is constantly negotiated
	Institutional accreditation requires communication, translation and interaction among individuals from the candidate institution and the accrediting agency

Table 7: Findings as Themes and as Statements

Each of the following sections unpacks the four themes identified in this study and, in doing so, present the reader with an opportunity to understand the basis of my argument and judge the credibility of the claims I presented in the beginning of this chapter.

### **Quality by Association**

Quality by association consists of presenting evidence of one's external connections with prestigious institutions as a strategy to demonstrate internal quality. Chapter two discussed at length how quality in higher education is rarely defined and how there is not a single widely accepted definition or metric for quality. As a result, U.S. institutional accreditation presents non-U.S. universities, particularly those that are not very well known outside of their own

region, with an opportunity to demonstrate their quality to an international audience. Later in this chapter, I explain at length that demonstrating quality in this manner brings significant benefits from the perspective of institutional leaders; these benefits accrue through institutional investment. As an example of how quality by association works at TECHS, several signs and posters throughout the campus include the USRAA logo or mention the recently obtained accreditation. One of these signs suggests that, through the accreditation process, TECHS “consolidates its academic quality internationally, just like Stanford, UCLA, SDSU and more than 150 USRAA accredited institutions”<sup>14</sup>. Conceivably, these signs are intended for broad audiences: current and prospective students, students’ families, visitors, but also faculty and staff. During the interviews I conducted and on different publications, Stanford, UCLA and UC Berkeley are commonly mentioned in connection to the USRAA accreditation process; these institutions are offered as exemplars of what the accreditation process means. However, even when TECHS obtained accreditation from the same agency that accredits Stanford, UCLA or Berkeley, accreditation does not mean that TECHS has direct relations with all or any of those prestigious institutions. However, becoming accredited creates some possible common ground that may result in successful future partnerships.

Participants at TECHS mentioned their connection, via the accrediting agency, to reputable institutions: “we are accredited by the same agency that accredits Stanford, UC Berkeley and UCLA”<sup>15</sup>. One of the participants in Mexico drew a parallel between accreditation and known chains or brands: “when you see a restaurant from a known brand, you go in

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<sup>14</sup> Consolida su alta calidad académica a nivel internacional, como lo han hecho Stanford, UCLA, SDSU y más de 150 instituciones de USRAA”

<sup>15</sup> “Estamos acreditados por la misma agencia que reconoce a Stanford, UC Berkeley y UCLA”

because you think it's going to give you a service of the quality you expect."<sup>16</sup> I believed that, using the brand example, the participant I interviewed was drawing a parallel between accreditation and branding, which illustrates the symbolic value of accreditation.

The president of one of the U.S. regional agencies attests to the idea that institutions around the world base, at least partially, their decision to seek U.S. accreditation on the possibility of associating with reputable institutions: "I think the fact that this commission accredits what I call some *household name institutions* probably makes people who are not accredited look here more often." Arguably, Stanford and the UC system exemplify those *household names* or brands. These examples illustrate a larger pattern I identified; the pattern suggests that one of the most powerful reasons to pursue accreditation might be associating with institutions that are recognized internationally. The higher education literature also supports this idea by suggesting that U.S. accreditation is the "gold standard" of quality assurance (Jackson, Davies & Jackson, 2010, p. 9).

Figure 4 shows some of the main codes and ideas related to the first theme, quality by association. While quality by association is an important component for understanding the motivations and benefits for Mexican institutions of higher education to engage in U.S. institutional accreditation, this theme has multiple aspects that go beyond reputation-based connections and prestige; these benefits translate into material gains for the institution. These facets, including training, professional development opportunities, and networking, are explored next.

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<sup>16</sup> "así como ves un restaurant que es de marca conocida, te metes, dices, pues este me va a dar un servicio que yo espero de calidad"



Figure 4: Quality by Association Concept Cloud

### Professional Development

Participants at TECHS suggested that one of the keys to succeeding in obtaining USRAA institutional accreditation consisted of participating in programmatic and educational opportunities offered by the accreditor. This participation included various workshops and USRAA’s annual conference. How does this help? On the one hand, participants suggested that such professional development opportunities helped them understand USRAA’s approach to quality and accreditation but additionally “you begin to build relationships with certain institutions...and the expert in that area tells you what experiences they had”<sup>17</sup>. Then, those connections opened the possibility for the newly developed partners to go on campus and consult or give advice and feedback, for example, on how to improve student assessment or how to effectively store and report data for accreditation purposes. Different participant-

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<sup>17</sup> “empiezas a hacer relaciones con ciertas instituciones...y el experto en esa área te va a platicar qué experiencia tuvo”

administrators in charge of the accreditation process mentioned the development of these networks as key to their success: “Developing relationships with certain institutions is a very important factor for the success of these processes.”<sup>18</sup>

According to participants in Mexico, USRAA staff members often suggested the development of connections with already accredited institutions: “USRAA told us ‘look, that person knows a lot about assessment, she might help you’.”<sup>19</sup> In addition, the reports that USRAA staff produced commended TECHS for developing connections with already accredited institutions in the U.S. and for “sending senior administrators and faculty to USRAA annual meetings and to numerous workshops in areas such as learning outcomes assessment to strengthen their understanding of USRAA and US higher education standards of practice and expectations.” Similarly, these connections served as evidence of TECHS’s commitment to improvement and helped TECHS in moving forward in the accreditation process. Another area that gained praise for the Mexican institution was “providing financial support for library staff to enroll in MLS at Arizona State.” These examples suggest that USRAA encouraged and rewarded efforts that TECHS leaders made to participate in the professional development opportunities that USRAA and USRAA-accredited institutions offered.

### **Networks and Recognition**

Building connections with individuals at U.S institutions through the USRAA accreditation process had implications not only for sharing information and expertise; additionally, participants at the Mexican university discussed the importance of recognition and

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<sup>18</sup> “es un factor bien importante para el éxito de estos procesos, que empiezas a hacer relaciones con ciertas instituciones”

<sup>19</sup> “USRAA nos decía, mira, esa persona sabe mucho de assessment, te puede ayudar”

visibility. One way of thinking about such recognition is, like one of the college deans I interviewed suggested, “so that one can show off.”<sup>20</sup> The idea of *showing off*, as one of the deans explained, is relevant in meetings, like when different university presidents gather, because accreditation can be used as a symbol of quality and institutional—and personal—accomplishment.

Another way to understand recognition, like another college dean suggested, consists of gaining respect by other, perhaps more reputable, institutions from other countries: “we just got the accreditation and we are already seeing how universities in the United States, in Latin America, and in Spain see us more seriously because we are USRAA accredited.”<sup>21</sup> The same administrator described accreditation as “entering the big league.”<sup>22</sup> Two of the administrators who worked closest to the accreditation process during the eight years it took TECHS to become accredited also referred to the process and the resulting recognition as emotionally rewarding. One of them asserted: “at the personal level, I find it pleasurable to attend to the USRAA annual conference and to be recognized, to have people know who you are and where you’re from”<sup>23</sup>. The other administrator indicated: “They give me fabulous information and you get to see other universities present papers and it gives a great environment. I find it to be beautiful”<sup>24</sup>. These

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<sup>20</sup> “para que yo pueda presumir”

<sup>21</sup> “Recién tenemos la acreditación y ya estamos viendo cómo universidades en Estados Unidos, en América Latina y en España nos empiezan a ver con cierta seriedad porque estamos acreditados por USRAA”

<sup>22</sup> “nosotros podemos decir que estamos nosotros entrando a grandes ligas”

<sup>23</sup> “A mí me resulta placentero en el plano personal ir a la conferencia anual de USRAA y que te identifiquen que sepan quién eres y de dónde vienes”

<sup>24</sup> “Me da una gran información fabulosa y ves otras universidades presentando papers y todo pues te da otro ambiente. Eso se me hace hermoso ¿no?”

statements point out to satisfaction and achievement as possible motivations or justifications for seeking U.S. accreditation. These emotional outcomes are rarely addressed in contemporary higher education literature. Even if one may consider these motivations as capricious or arbitrary, as one of the participants interviewed in the study did, such motivations are part of the decision making process.

The ideas presented above were culled from interviews with university administrators and were supported by public statements and institutional publications describing the accreditation process. The university president, in a letter available at the university website, shared the news about receiving initial accreditation “with great pride”<sup>25</sup>. The signs and banners in buildings and at the mall or main plaza on campus that celebrate obtaining USRAA accreditation seem to reflect a similar sense of pride and achievement by members of the institution. Here are some examples of the messages in the signs I identified:

- “The only one in Mexico with USRAA international accreditation”<sup>26</sup>
- “Our passion for educating has been sanctioned internationally by USRAA”<sup>27</sup>
- “With USRAA, we continue working for educational excellence”<sup>28</sup>
- “With the USRAA international accreditation [TECHS] reiterates its educational quality”<sup>29</sup>
- “The USRAA international accreditation is a stamp of educational transparency”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “con gran orgullo”

<sup>26</sup> “Única en México con acreditación internacional USRAA”

<sup>27</sup> “Nuestra pasión por educar ha sido avalada a nivel internacional por USRAA”

<sup>28</sup> “Con USRAA continuamos trabajando por la excelencia educative”

<sup>29</sup> “Con la acreditación internacional USRAA, ...refrenda su calidad educativa.”  
The name of the institution was included in this quote and I replaced it for the pseudonym I have utilized in this study.

A different facet of the quality by association theme involves the decision by university administrators to seek other forms of international accreditation, mainly program accreditation. USRAA has paved the way to explore program evaluation in Engineering and Business which enroll the majority of students at TECHS: “in the case of Engineering, we are exploring accreditation with ABET”<sup>31</sup>. Another administrator indicated “AACSB is the prospect to accredit programs in administration and business and ABET is the prospect to accredit engineering programs”<sup>32</sup>.

Finally, some interviews suggested that not all partnerships were perceived to have the same positive effects. For instance, during a site visit, when asked about the rigor in the comprehensive exams for doctoral programs in Engineering at TECHS, one administrator pointed out that they developed their process in partnership with a specific institution in Southern California. The comment met an unexpected response by a member of the visiting team: “the university is under the gun to lose accreditation”, as the administrator at TECHS reflected back: “the answer turned out to be worse.”<sup>33</sup> This example may suggest that there is a reputational hierarchy of institutions, i.e., associating with some institutions may be beneficial, while other partnerships are not.

In sum, the accreditation process opens the possibility for partnerships with other institutions and to seek other forms of accreditation while also providing opportunities for

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<sup>30</sup> “La acreditación internacional USRAA, sello de transparencia educative”

<sup>31</sup> “en el caso de ingeniería, explorando el caso de las acreditaciones con ABET

<sup>32</sup> Entonces AACSB es como el candidato para acreditar los programas de administración y negocios y ABET es el candidato para los programas de ingeniería”

<sup>33</sup> “Esa universidad está en la mira para quitarle la acreditación...entonces, la respuesta salió peor”

professional development for the candidate institutions. These networks also promote a sense of pride and achievement among some members of TECHS and increase the possibility of success in the accreditation process. However, the effects of the partnership seem to be tied to the perceived quality of the partner: On the one hand, associating with Stanford and UC Berkeley brings positive results; associating with an institution at risk of losing accreditation might jeopardize one's own process. These ideas serve as segue way to discuss other positive and negative consequences of accreditation in the next section.

### **Benefits and Burdens of Investment**

"It's a lot of work and some money, and you really need to decide if it's worthy." These were the words of the president of one of the U.S. regional agencies in reference to institutions of higher education outside the United States pursuing U.S. institutional accreditation. TECHS administrators in Mexico pointed to something similar, perhaps in a more vivid tone: "I cannot detach the emotional dimension when I talk about a process as innovative, as complex, and as exhausting as USRAA's"<sup>34</sup>. Another administrator at TECHS said: "it was a lot of blood, sweat and tears"<sup>35</sup>. During the interviews, in part due to my interview protocol and in part to participants' choice, the discussion about the USRAA accreditation process became a discussion of costs and benefits and how those were distributed throughout the institution. In brief, I identified that different roles within the organization are assigned in relation to the accreditation process leading to a particular distribution of work and authority. I also identified a number of challenges resulting from the accreditation process at different levels of the organization.

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<sup>34</sup> "Esta dimensión emocional no puedo desprenderme de ella cuando hablo de un proceso tan innovador, tan complicado, y tan agotador como es el de USRAA"

<sup>35</sup> "fue mucho sangre, sudor, y lágrimas"

Finally, assessments about the worth of the accreditation process seemed to be linked to the hierarchy that emerged with the process, i.e., those involved in the decision making process tended to have a more positive opinion of the accreditation endeavor, while those distanced from the ability to make decisions—and yet implicated in the work—tended to be more critical. I will take these themes apart in the forthcoming sub-sections.

My decision to discuss *benefits and burdens of investment* together reflects the realization I had during interviews that these three concepts are deeply intertwined. First, campus leaders, including the board and the president, decided to make a substantial investment of financial and human resources in order to pursue U.S. accreditation. Investment cannot always be quantified, for example, in the case of emotional burdens that administrators in Mexico attributed to the process. Furthermore, determining who pays for and who benefits from the accreditation process is complex because institutions of higher education are complex networks of individuals and organizational subunits. Benefit and burden come with the accreditation process and major investments take place in this process; these phenomena constitute the second main theme in this study.

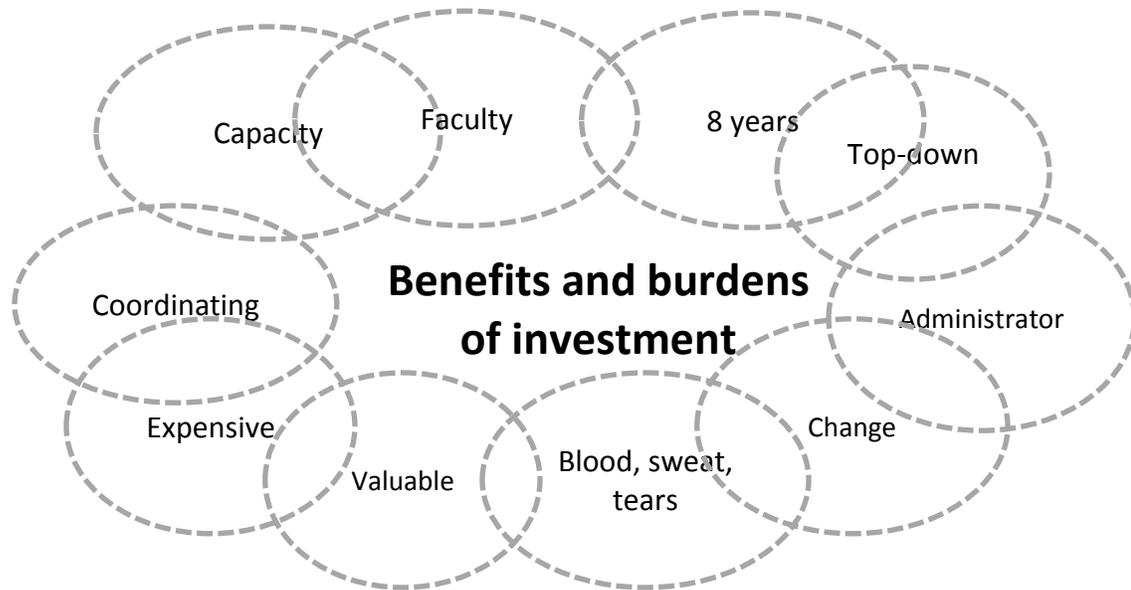


Figure 5: Benefits and burden of investment Concept Cloud

### Engaging Faculty

Faculty work is essential for ensuring a successful accreditation process with a U.S. regional agency. Such a central role is linked to the discourses of academic freedom and shared governance that are traditionally rooted in U.S. higher education. Paradoxically, this central role places significant pressure on faculty members at TECHS in relation to the accreditation process. First, the central role of faculty deserves attention; one of the deans I interviewed explained that:

If the accreditation process tells you that you need periodic program review, well, faculty will do it. If the accreditation process tells you that you need faculty with degrees, well, we are coming back to the faculty. If the accreditation process tells you that you need to design a process to measure learning, who will design it? Faculty<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Entonces, si el proceso de acreditación te dice que tienes que tener tus programas revisados periódicamente, pues la academia lo que lo va a hacer. Si el proceso de acreditación te dice que necesitas tener profesores con grados, pues estamos regresando a la academia. Si el proceso de acreditación te dice

Not only are faculty members indispensable for the institution to become accredited, but also USRAA standards require faculty members to have an active role in institutional decision making. USRAA has established as a criterion for review that “The institution’s faculty exercises effective academic leadership and acts consistently to ensure both academic quality and the appropriate maintenance of the institution’s educational purposes and character.” Several of the deans at TECHS that I interviewed indicated that they made efforts to involve faculty members in institutional decision making, in order to comply with USRAA’s requirements. Promoting this involvement was a challenge because, traditionally, faculty members are not part of the decision making in private universities in Mexico. Furthermore, some faculty members met this change with skepticism. One of the participants explained how significant the challenge is for faculty to switch to a culture in which faculty members can confidently state “my opinion matters and even if they didn’t listen to me before, now my opinion is extremely important.”<sup>37</sup>

Even though there was recognition among university administrators that faculty should participate in decision making and institutional governance, and even if administrators knew they had to convince faculty—as opposed to mandating participation—university administrators faced significant challenges in engaging faculty members in the accreditation process. One administrator explains:

The only problem I faced was that a professor’s time is very limited because, here, the academic load, unlike the United States, leaves little space for that kind of activity. For instance, the academic load right now is four courses a

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que tienes que diseñar un proceso de medición del aprendizaje, pues quien lo va a diseñar? La academia

<sup>37</sup> “mi opinión cuenta y aunque no me hayan tomado en cuenta anteriormente, ahora my opinión es sumamente importante”

semester...so it was very stressful and the faculty members told me “yes, I’ll do it but I don’t have time.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite the accreditor’s requirements for shared governance and the increased significance of faculty participation on campus, one dean described the role of the faculty as “the army that does all the work”<sup>39</sup> this administrator, a dean, thinks of faculty members as a bloc with a different perspective than the administration. The role assigned to the faculty poses questions about what the role is for the university administrators. The next section explores the role that university administrators had in the accreditation process.

### **Administrative Roles**

Participants described accreditation as a top to down process in which the roles at the top, from the board to the president and top administrators, involved investing resources to meet the requirements that USRAA established. In addition to the existing structure, the university administration appointed an ad-hoc staff person to coordinate the process and serve as liaison to the accrediting agency. One of the deans I interviewed commented: “it was like a trickle-down effect, like this, from top to bottom, with that central coordinator”<sup>40</sup>. Some of the deans interviewed described their role as gaining cooperation and support from faculty members. Another administrator further elaborated on his role:

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38 “el único problema que yo enfrenté es que el tiempo del profesor es muy limitado porque aquí la carga académica a diferencia de en Estados Unidos por decir algo te deja poca holgura a las actividades de este tipo, por ejemplo la carga académica de un profesor ahorita como está son 4 cursos...Entonces era así como mucho estrés y los profesores sí con la respuesta, sí lo voy a hacer pero no tengo tiempo”

<sup>39</sup> “el ejército que trabaja todo esto”

<sup>40</sup> “fue así como un trickle down effect, así de arriba hacia abajo con este coordinador central”

I felt like there was a whip above me from the person who was directing us. “I don’t know how you’ll do it, but you’ll do it; if not, here comes the lash.” In my case, I didn’t let that style go below me if I was getting lashed.<sup>41</sup>

This participant agreed with me when I paraphrased his words and asked if his role was buffering pressure from the top administration and protecting faculty members. Another dean reflects on the role that the president played in the accreditation process in the following terms “the presidency...has to manage the clearest arguments possible to convince the university community as a whole that this [accreditation] is a good decision”<sup>42</sup>. Even though the roles for both the faculty and the administration posed challenges, and even though faculty members conducted the bulk of the work, credit was not distributed evenly. One of the deans I interviewed, who was appointed after most of the accreditation-related work had been completed, reflected upon his experience:

Everybody told me “congratulations because the self-studies achieved in your college were crucial to obtain accreditation” And I told them, “well, thank you, but it was the faculty’s work” I wasn’t dean of the college and I just harvested the praise and their success.<sup>43</sup>

The educational effectiveness report that USRAA visitors elaborated after visiting TECHS was a crucial step to finalize the initial accreditation process; that report presents a picture of how credit for the institution’s success is attributed: “The board...and president...are

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<sup>41</sup> “Arriba de mí, quien nos estaba dirigiendo, yo sentía un tipo látigo ¿no? Yo no sé cómo le haces pero lo haces y si no, ahí te va el latigazo. En mi caso yo no dejaba pasar ese estilo hacia más abajo si yo recibía el latigazo”

<sup>42</sup> “la rectoría...tiene que manejar los argumentos lo más claro posible to para convencer al cuerpo, a la comunidad universitaria en general de que esa es una muy buena decisión”

<sup>43</sup> Todo el mundo me decía, muchas felicidades porque los autoestudios que se lograron en tu colegio fueron...cruciales para que lográramos la acreditación y todo eso. Yo yo les decía, pues gracias pero es trabajo de la academia...yo solamente coseché las alabanzas o el éxito de ellos.

commended for their vision, leadership, and unwavering commitment of financial and staff resources in support of the goal.” Faculty work is mentioned only marginally in this section of the report. One interpretation of this statement would suggest that faculty and staff were equated to resources that administrators invested in order to achieve accreditation—as opposed to actors or agents in and of themselves. These quotes and passages illustrate how the USRAA accreditation process involved an internal division of labor in which faculty members, despite being necessary to achieve accreditation, received little credit. Other effects of the accreditation process are discussed next.

### **Side Effects or Willing Sacrifices?**

While the accreditation process had an impact on the roles of faculty and administrators within the university, there were also some material consequences that resulted from the process. For instance, closing doctoral programs was one of the unanticipated effects from the accreditation process that Mexican participants discussed frequently with me. One of the participants I interviewed was outspoken about the negative effects of the accreditation process: “yes, there will be many benefits we can’t see yet; what we can see is the damage and wounds...for example, one of the damages or wounds was closing the doctorates”<sup>44</sup>. According to data collected from both interviews and documents, the initial USRAA visit team presented concerns regarding TECHS’ ability to provide the resources needed to award doctoral degrees. These concerns included library resources and a small proportion of faculty members with terminal degrees. Closing down the doctoral programs was not a mandate on the part of USRAA. However, as the educational effectiveness report by the USRAA team indicates: “On the

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<sup>44</sup> “Sí va a traer muchos beneficios que no se ven todavía y los que sí se ven son daños o heridas porque esas se nos hicieron. Por ejemplo, uno de esos daños o heridas es cierre de doctorados”

recommendation of the USRAA candidacy team [TECHS] agreed to suspend enrolment in its doctoral programs” (USRAA, 2009). Even though USRAA did not mandate closing down the doctoral programs, the candidacy team expressed enough concerns about the quality of those programs that the top university administrators, despite resistance from some faculty members, decided to preemptively close those programs in order to protect the success of the accreditation process.

Another fine line between burden and benefit involves the ability to create new academic programs. While administrators and some faculty members celebrated obtaining initial accreditation, they acknowledged that accreditation limited their ability, for instance, to create new academic programs. This new limitation represents an erosion of institutional agency. Because all substantive changes to the institution, like the creation of new academic programs, requires approval from USRAA, the institution’s response time has been prolonged and requires a formal request process and is subject to a fee.

Clearly, university administrators at TECHS made significant sacrifices in relation to resources allocated, time spent, and structural changes across the institution. It is also clear that the burden of sacrifice is not evenly distributed. Some faculty members and administrators had to give more of their time and resources and some lost substantial agency as hard internal choices took place in order to comply with the external mandates of accreditation.

### **Investment**

I opened this section quoting the president of a U.S. regional accrediting agency who suggested that accreditation involves “some money and a lot of work.” In this section I explore the role of financial resources and workload, in relation to the accreditation process. The cost of accreditation is not only a matter of fees but it also involves faculty and staff effort, in addition to investments required to bring the institution up to compliance with accreditation

requirements. These investments involve facilities, materials, and staff. Furthermore, affordability has been a concern among those who study U.S. institutional accreditation. A report by the American Council on Education [ACE] (2012) stated the following:

In its current form, getting and keeping accreditation can cost a great deal of money. Among the costs that all institutions face are those associated with gathering and preparing the materials needed for a review, underwriting the costs of review team visits, and donated time of their own faculty and administrators who serve as peer reviewers (p. 26).

How expensive was the USRAA accreditation process for TECHS? USRAA manuals and its official website provide a picture of the costs: First, it is necessary to explain that a separate cost scale exists for institutions outside the United States. For these institutions, there is an initial application fee of 5,000 USD solely to be considered for accreditation. In addition, the diagnostic visit involves a 20,000 USD fee; eligibility review requires 15,000 USD; candidacy requires an 18,000 USD fee. From that point on, the international institution pays 150% of the annual membership fee which is based on enrolment. In the case of the university I studied, the yearly membership would be 23,063 USD. According to one of the participants I interviewed, the university's yearly budget is roughly 200 million pesos or roughly 15 million USD. In other terms, the institution, which relies mostly on student tuition and fees as sources of revenue and does not have an endowment, has invested a substantial proportion of its resources in the accreditation process. The rationale for the dual cost system that USRAA requires is presented in USRAA's documents for international institutions: "the Commission established a fees and dues structure to ensure that the costs of international accreditation are borne by those [international] institutions."

Fees and dues are only part of the cost involved in the accreditation process, faculty and staff effort are harder to quantify. In addition, the university administration allocated more resources to upgrade facilities and build entirely new spaces in order to meet USRAA

recommendations. A common example that surfaced during interviews with administrators in Mexico and among USRAA staff members was the construction of a new library building at one of the TECHS campuses. The following figure illustrates different perspectives on the library issue:

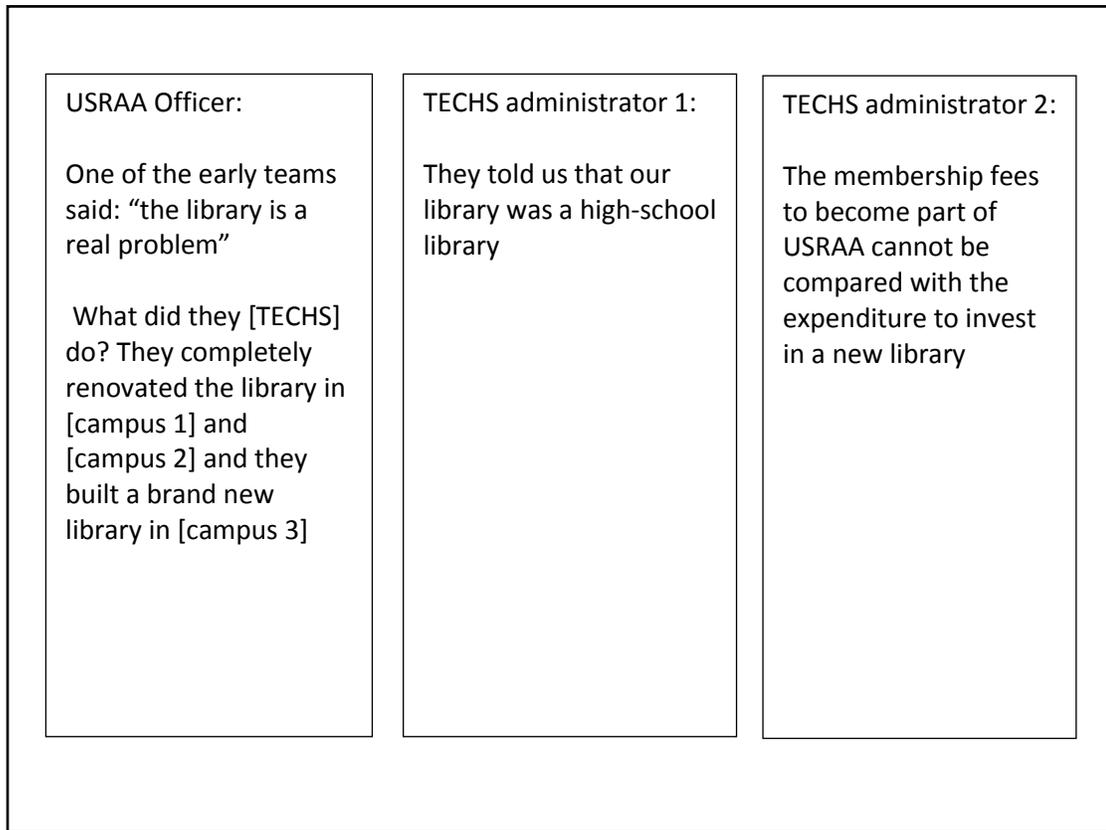


Figure 6: Analysis from Multiple Perspectives

Other costs have resulted from changing certain processes, including assessment of learning outcomes and program reviews. These changes to existing processes are costly given that they have required bringing outside experts and consultants, mainly from USRAA endorsed institutions. One of the participants I interviewed summarized these costs: “we had to make investments in libraries, faculty...efforts to measure learning outcomes, the famous learning

outcomes”<sup>45</sup>. Another participant arrived to a conclusion similar to the one by the president of one of the U.S. regional agencies: “the cost was the easy part because the board was always willing to support the institution with the costs...the fees are nothing compared to investing in a new library and new faculty”<sup>46</sup>. The comment about new faculty emerged from recommendations on the part of USRAA accrediting teams to improve the student to faculty ratio and to have more faculty members with terminal degrees. Both recommendations require substantial investments.

### **Benefits**

As the previous sections indicate, obtaining U.S. accreditation requires substantial investment on the part of institutions and imposes significant burdens; these requirements and burdens are particularly salient among those institutions situated outside of the United States. How can one make sense of such expenditures on the part of an institution with a relatively small budget? Putting the cost of accreditation in perspective makes the question of benefits evermore intriguing. There are different layers to the benefits that U.S. institutional accreditation brings about. The first layer, according to participants, involves improved processes and enhanced capacity. The second, and more complex, layer involves organizational change. Organizational change involves re-thinking, for example, the role of faculty. A third layer can be expressed as an imaginary of forthcoming benefits. I will explore each of these layers in the upcoming sub-sections.

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<sup>45</sup> “había que hacer inversiones en biblioteca, en profesorado...el esfuerzo de medir los resultados de aprendizaje, los famosos learning outcomes”

<sup>46</sup> Lo costoso fue la parte fácil, porque el consejo siempre estuvo dispuesto a apoyar a la institución con los gastos, las cuotas no son nada comparadas con la inversión en una biblioteca y nuevos profesores”

At the most basic level, the university community benefited from making new investments. Some of those investments are observable: new buildings and more books at the libraries, for instance. Other improvements involved electronic portfolios and learning management systems tailored to the institution's student body—which constituted new resources to support student learning. Other participants pointed out the new and more formalized process for hiring faculty, given that the previous process did not involve a search committee or a formal interview process. The institution now has a formal recruitment strategy and a commitment to hire new faculty with terminal degrees. Another process that surfaced in the interviews was the review of academic programs. These improvements are also reflected in the reports that USRAA developed.

A second layer of benefits had to do with organizational learning and change. One of the participants I interviewed explained:

Something we realized little by little is that accreditation in itself is not the prize; change is the prize. Changing how we understand the learning-teaching process. That change is the prize. We understood that when we were more into the process. We realized that the whole point is changing.<sup>47</sup>

Yet another participant suggested that accreditation requires that all units in the organization become aligned or synchronized. Other participants suggested that change is difficult to introduce and that accreditation processes provide the top administration with an opportunity to introduce changes. One participant suggested that a savvy university president might push for accreditation in order to promote changes she or he might want to see happen.

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<sup>47</sup> “Algo que nos fue cayendo poco a poco es que la acreditación no es en sí el premio; el premio es el cambio. El cambio de forma de ver el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje. El premio es ese cambio. Nosotros lo entendimos ya más avanzados. Nos dimos cuenta que el chiste es cambiar uno”.

While organizational alignment, new processes, and improved facilities might all seem persuasive arguments to engage in the significant investments that a process of institutional accreditation with a U.S regional agency demands, other—not yet achieved—powerful arguments were articulated by the participants I interviewed. Some participants indicated that many of the most important benefit from the USRAA process are yet to come in the next few years: “Accreditation with a U.S. agency brings many advantages: it opens up the market, it increases your enrolment, it opens up relationships and networks; it is very important to obtain U.S. accreditation.”<sup>48</sup> Another of those anticipated benefits involved an easier path to obtain program accreditation with international agencies. Some of those benefits were already felt during the university’s latest accreditation process with FIMPES, the Mexican accrediting agency in charge of private institutions, as one participant put it: “we found the FIMPES process very easy after what we suffered.”<sup>49</sup> Recall that USRAA accreditation exists alongside with the national accreditation system in Mexico. Whether obtaining other international accreditation constitutes a benefit per se or whether these forthcoming benefits become materialized remains to be seen.

### **Gaining Entry and Legitimacy**

TECHS administrators, in their pursuit for accreditation, seek entry into a relatively exclusive academic community for their institution; higher education accreditation plays a gatekeeping function (ACE, 2012) a notion that is frequently taken for granted. The U.S. regional accrediting agency staff members I interviewed in this study discussed some of their concerns

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<sup>48</sup> “trae muchas muchas ventajas acreditarte con una instancia acreditadora de los Estados Unidos. Te abre el mercado, te abre matrícula, te abre relaciones, te abre redes, es muy importante lograr la acreditación de Estados Unidos”

<sup>49</sup> “se nos hizo sencillísimo el proceso FIMPES después de lo que sufrimos”

about diploma mills and accreditation mills as well as preserving the integrity of the accreditation process. Arguably, these discussions relate to authority and legitimacy. The issue of jurisdiction in international accreditation and quality assurance has been discussed in chapter two. The connection between legitimacy, authority, and gatekeeping also became evident in my conversations with participants at TECHS. One of them posed the following rhetorical question, “Why do we have to adhere to their rules?” and also provided me with an answer, attributing that answer to USRAA: “And they, in their role, say: because you want accreditation from me.”<sup>50</sup> This quote condenses lot of meaning associated with perceptions that participants at TECHS have about USRAA that I will break down in the following sections. Before delving in detail into each of the elements of this theme, the following illustration represents the main components of the theme.

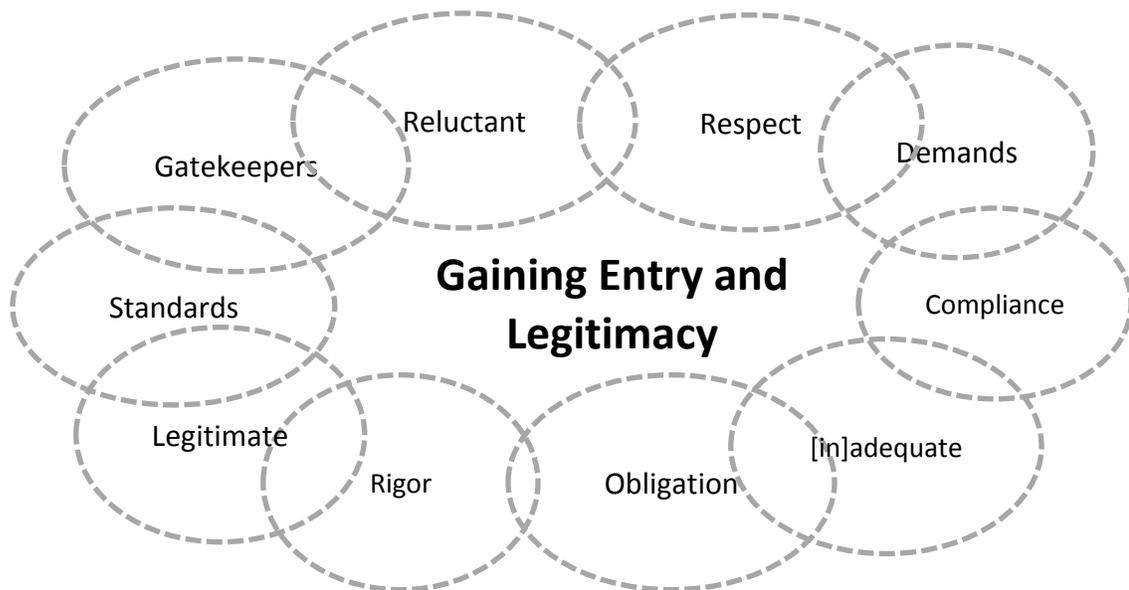


Figure 7: Gaining Entry and Legitimacy Concept Cloud

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<sup>50</sup> “¿Por qué tenemos que someternos a sus reglas? Y ellos, muy en su papel, dicen: pues porque tú quieres acreditarte conmigo.”

### Passing through a Reluctant Gatekeeper

“We’ve been very reluctant to this because we didn’t want to divert resources from our own institutional accreditation process.” “We don’t have an internationalization agenda; however, we are interested in being good partners.” “I don’t think it’s emerged from primarily a concern about what the accrediting organizations needed; I think all of this has emerged because international accreditation has become a more important issue.” These statements illustrate a theme I encountered in document analysis and interviews: Staff from accrediting agencies articulated their international work as something that came to be by necessity rather than something they intended. In addition, this selfless involvement legitimated the process: “People value U.S. accreditation; institutions and countries want it because it’s an important indicator of legitimacy.”

My interviews with university administrators at TECHS supported what I describe as an image of USRAA as reluctant gatekeepers:

We knocked on their door at the end of the 1990s. They saw us and said “Who are you?” But we knocked on the door for a year, and people here are persistent; until USRAA turned around and told us “OK, begin the process”<sup>51</sup>

In their eligibility self-report, university administrators presented a similar reality:

For over fifteen years, [the University] sought the opportunity to approach USRAA to explore the possibility of being considered the first university in Mexico to receive USRAA review and accreditation. Up to this point, we had been unsuccessful in obtaining a favorable response, even though a team from USRAA visited our main campus...three years ago.

These two narratives from the perspective of the Mexican university, which I confirmed in my interviews with staff at the accrediting agencies, suggest that not only were U.S.

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<sup>51</sup> “tocamos la puerta a finales de los 90. Nos ven y nos dice ¿y ustedes quiénes son? Pero tocamos la puerta un año y pues la gente de por acá es perseverante, hasta que USRAA voltea, viene nos ve y dice, OK, empiecen el proceso.

accreditors reluctant to participate in international activities; they are also sought-after partners. USRAA's website asks administrators from non-U.S. institutions to be patient as their requests may take a long time to be processed. USRAA's international guide for accreditation cautions potentially interested parties that: "many institutions will not find these criteria to be in accord with their own interests, missions, or the regulations of their respective countries. Accordingly, they will not wish to pursue accreditation through USRAA" (USRAA, 2012a). My interpretations of these narratives and discourses are presented in chapter five.

### **Working with a Benevolent Gatekeeper**

During the interviews I conducted, some TECHS administrators in Mexico referred to the accreditation process as an opportunity that the accreditors awarded them or a concession USRAA made: "let's give them the opportunity to enter the process"<sup>52</sup>; those were the words that a TECHS administrator attributed to USRAA evaluators. As indicated previously, USRAA offers a number of opportunities for training and networking that are intended to facilitate the path to accreditation. Administrators at the Mexican university referred to those opportunities as key in their success but they also emphasized that such help did not compromise the integrity of the review; they described the members of the visiting team as being "utterly interested in making sure the university would obtain accreditation, without undermining their role as USRAA representatives"<sup>53</sup>. This statement illustrates a pattern I identified regarding the legitimacy of the process: Both U.S. accreditors and Mexican administrators made it a point to indicate that TECHS was held to the same standards as any other institution accredited by USRAA. This idea is further explored in the forthcoming section.

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<sup>52</sup> "USRAA dijo vamos dándole la oportunidad de que entren al proceso"

<sup>53</sup> "sumamente interesados en que la universidad lograra esta acreditación, sin desmerecer su rol como representantes de USRAA"

The image of USRAA as a benevolent gatekeeper became most salient during my interview with one of the administrators, someone who was involved in the process from beginning to end. He reflected upon his experience of eight years in a way that I interpreted as being somewhat tongue-in-cheek: “That is why I think USRAA said ‘these poor ones...it’s good they’re still...they haven’t died along the way’. Ha ha ‘they’re still crawling along’ Right?”<sup>54</sup> This quote may suggest empathy or compassion attributed to the accreditors in light of the many struggles that TECHS administrators and faculty faced. However, this quote also illustrates an assumption that it is USRAA’s prerogative to grant or deny accreditation.

### **Satisfying a Demanding Gatekeeper**

The staff from U.S. accrediting agencies suggested during interviews that online programs and international activity raise questions about quality in higher education. Seemingly, some of these concerns triggered discussions about maintaining their gatekeeping function when accrediting institutions outside of the United States: “We would uphold our standards, as a matter of fact, we are not going to reduce our standards and CFR [criteria for review] just to meet the cultural context but we will try to interpret those”; these are the words of a USRAA vice-president. Interestingly, in this quote, adapting is equated to lowering standards. Being demanding, accepting some and rejecting some, seems to be a source of legitimacy in the process:

An accreditation review is a complex, rigorous process that involves a large number of actors from within and outside the institution who comprehensively examine all major aspects of its operation. Many colleges and universities that seek regional accreditation do not obtain it. Over the past decade, regional accreditors rejected or denied between 40 percent and 50 percent of the schools seeking initial approval (ACE, 2012, p.11).

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<sup>54</sup>“ Yo creo que por eso es que USRAA dijo “ estos pobres...qué bueno que...no se han muerto en el camino” jaja “siguen arrastrándose” ¿no?”

During the interviews, participants in Mexico commented on the demands and high standards that USRAA required: “we may need to confirm, but they say [USRAA] is the hardest of all the different regions; they say USRAA is the most critical in its processes, and standards and everything”<sup>55</sup> said TECHS’ director of academic effectiveness and planning. Seemingly, the idea of rigor added to the sense of accomplishment that resulted from successfully obtaining accreditation. One of the deans I interviewed described the process in the following terms: “I felt like a kid being evaluated”<sup>56</sup>. This feeling is perhaps the result of the questions that the accrediting team posed frequently:

Are you eligible to get into this? Ok, show me evidence... Let’s see, are students learning? Are students graduating? Are students finishing in the timeframe you establish? Do your doctorates have a culture of research? ...What evidence do you have that your students are learning? Becoming employed?<sup>57</sup>

In sum, administrators in Mexico, staff in the U.S. agencies, and multiple documents point out the rigor and demands that accreditation standards set. Furthermore, this rigor might serve as a legitimizing instrument for the process. Participants at TECHS described their engagement with the accreditors as having to respond to frequent questions in order to demonstrate quality.

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<sup>55</sup> “es cuestión de verificarlos pero dicen que es la más dura de las diferentes regiones; dicen que USRAA es la más crítica en cuanto a sus procesos, en cuanto a sus estándares, y todo”

<sup>56</sup> “me sentí como un chavo que me están evaluando”

<sup>57</sup> “, ¿Eres elegible para entrar a esto? Ok, dame evidencia. ¿Los estudiantes están aprendiendo? ¿Los estudiantes se están graduando? ¿Los estudiantes están terminando en los tiempos que te planteas? ¿Tus programas de doctorado tienen esa cultura de investigación? ¿Los estudiantes están aprendiendo, que están obteniendo empleo?”

### Trusting a Respectful Gatekeeper

Even though participants in Mexico referred to the accreditation process as rigorous and sometimes painful, when I asked about their interactions with members of the accrediting teams, participants described them as respectful and professional: “very kind, very good, very respectful”<sup>58</sup>. Others described them as professional and diplomatic. Furthermore, while Mexican and U.S. participants emphasized that standards were not compromised, participants in Mexico highlighted that USRAA staff and visitors did not force changes upon them. At times, Mexican participants seemed frustrated that USRAA representatives would not give them a concrete standard they had to meet: “the accrediting agency is not going to tell you what you have to do”<sup>59</sup>.

Some participants corrected themselves or took their words back when describing their interactions with USRAA accreditors: “they forced us...no, they didn’t force us”<sup>60</sup>. Participants at TECHS struggled frequently between the verbs *tener* and *obligar* that translate as *having to* and *forcing*. I was confused by this tension until one participant clarified it for me: “USRAA didn’t change our mission, they didn’t change our vision, they didn’t change our educational model, they didn’t change our academic program but they evaluate all of those...so we have to be careful”<sup>61</sup>. In other words, while USRAA does not impose measures or actions, the accreditation

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<sup>58</sup> “muy amable, muy bien, muy respetuosa”

<sup>59</sup> “la agencia acreditadora no te va a decir qué tienes que hacer”

<sup>60</sup> “Nos obligaron...no, no nos obligaron”

<sup>61</sup> “USRAA no nos cambi6n la misi6n, USRAA no nos cambi6 la visi6n, nos nos cambi6 el modelo educativo, no nos ha cambiado los programas acad6micos pero sobre todo nos est6 evaluando. Entonces ...nosotros tenemos que ser cuidadosos”

relationship created a certain level of self-consciousness among individuals in the candidate institution.

Through interviews and official documents, U.S. accreditors expressed an interest in being respectful partners of institutions outside the United States. They emphasized the importance of interpreting standards in ways that respect local cultures and local demands. One of the U.S. staff members in charge of the agency's international strategy explained during our conversation:

We are not interested in imposing our standards or views about quality on other nations, indeed, the intent is to engage on the basis of mutual understanding, mutual respect for other quality assurance bodies and to discover, trying to understand what it is that we share in common. So, that means collaboration and not trying to replicate, if you will, the American model abroad.

His position is consistent with the stated official policy:

By clarifying what it means to seek voluntary association through USRAA, the Commission intends to make clear that it will not impose its expectations on others. Instead, it has identified those standards, values and qualities that define its community, including institutions outside the US. Because seeking USRAA accreditation is elective, applicants will be expected to have met these criteria and to seek accredited status because they share these values. Further, they will agree to conduct their affairs in accord with USRAA standards, policies, and criteria. Thus, being approved to pursue USRAA accreditation is a milestone requiring extensive and substantive preparation.

These quotes show some coincidence between gatekeeping characteristics of respect and reluctance; they emphasize the voluntary discourse of accreditation.

### **Becoming a Nascent Gatekeeper**

U.S. accreditors reflected upon the legitimacy of their accreditation processes in the following terms: "given that we have a system for many years, certainly longer than any other country, and given that we have a large and diverse system, people are looking for ideas, effective practices, policy directions and they come to us." An additional aspect that makes U.S. accreditation attractive is, as suggested earlier, the aura of quality and legitimacy that comes

from associating with U.S. agencies. In addition, the U.S. agency can endorse some experts as accepted or trusted advisors. One of the Mexican administrators explained that USRAA staff would suggest experts to assist in the accreditation process:

I suggest that you consult with this guy, that guy, that guy, and that other guy. They do program review and they have a methodology already developed in a book and they do program review for USRAA accredited institutions in the United States.<sup>62</sup>

During the interviews I conducted in Mexico, I encountered some aspirations among TECHS participants to enter the group of experts that USRAA recommends for new candidate institutions. For example, when TECHS developed their electronic portfolio, they developed their own system—as opposed to purchasing an existing one—with the intention of selling it to other institutions. In addition, USRAA has suggested to some potential candidate institutions from South America to consult with the Mexican institution that is already accredited. Administrators at the university also perceive that other Mexican institutions might become interested in pursuing USRAA accreditation, and he sees that as an opportunity: “I even think, with some colleagues here, we might very well have a support unit for universities in Mexico on how to face the process”<sup>63</sup>. This possibility is increasingly conceivable as some USRAA staff members have been invited to FIMPES events, the Mexican accreditor for private universities:

In addition to giving the speech, I did a workshop for institutions that are interested in USRAA accreditation. So, there were about 15 representatives of private universities in attendance and that seemed to go very well. There was a lot of interest and a nice exchange of information. I came feeling that, one,

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<sup>62</sup> “te sugiero que consultes a fulano, zutano y mengano y perengano, ellos hacen revisión de programas y tienen una metodología ya en un libro desarrollada y hacen revisión de programas en universidades acreditadas por USRAA en Estados Unidos”

<sup>63</sup> “Entonces hasta me pongo a pensar a veces, con algunos colegas que aquí podría tener una unidad de apoyo a universidades en México en cómo afrontar el proceso”

there is good reasons for us to trying to develop a relationship with FIMPES at the association level and that there are indeed a few more Mexican universities that will be interested in USRAA accreditation because they appreciate the value of the association with USRAA.

In sum, based on different documents and interviews, it is reasonable to state that U.S. accreditors rely on perceived legitimacy to perform their gatekeeping function. This legitimacy rests on a foundation that encompasses a set of characteristics: some reluctance to be involved abroad, a discourse of respect, and a balance between high standards and benevolence. One of these characteristics, respect, involves interpreting standards according to the local context. The tension between local and U.S. contexts constitutes the core subject of the next section.

### **Translation: Tensions of Language and Location**

In the many documents I reviewed for this project and during the interviews I conducted, discussions of differences based on national origin, traditions or regions were salient. For example, participants from USRAA and from TECHS compared and contrasted higher education in both countries. They also discussed globalization and the need for universities to become more international in terms of both risks and opportunities. Accreditation and quality assurance seemed to be a central component of these discussions, as the president of a U.S. regional agency noted:

As higher education access has expanded in many countries, there's been an enormous interest in US accreditation; not to copy it but to, given that we have a system for many years certainly longer than any other country and given that we have a large and diverse system, people are looking for ideas, effective practices, policy direction and they come to us.

This quote illustrates some of the recurrent patterns I identified in participants' answers and forecasts the forthcoming subsections: First, it presupposes that the world is interconnected and emphasizes the role of the United States in this global landscape of higher education. This assumption raises the question—which the participant answered partially—of why the U.S. has such a central role. Secondly, the quote points out to the challenges of copying,

i.e., the risks of simply transferring practices from one national context into another. This discussion requires deeper analysis of standards and interpretation and the transferability of models and practices. The final subsections of this chapter discuss issues of languages, and the tension between the local and the global in the accreditation process. The following figure shows the main ideas contained in this theme.

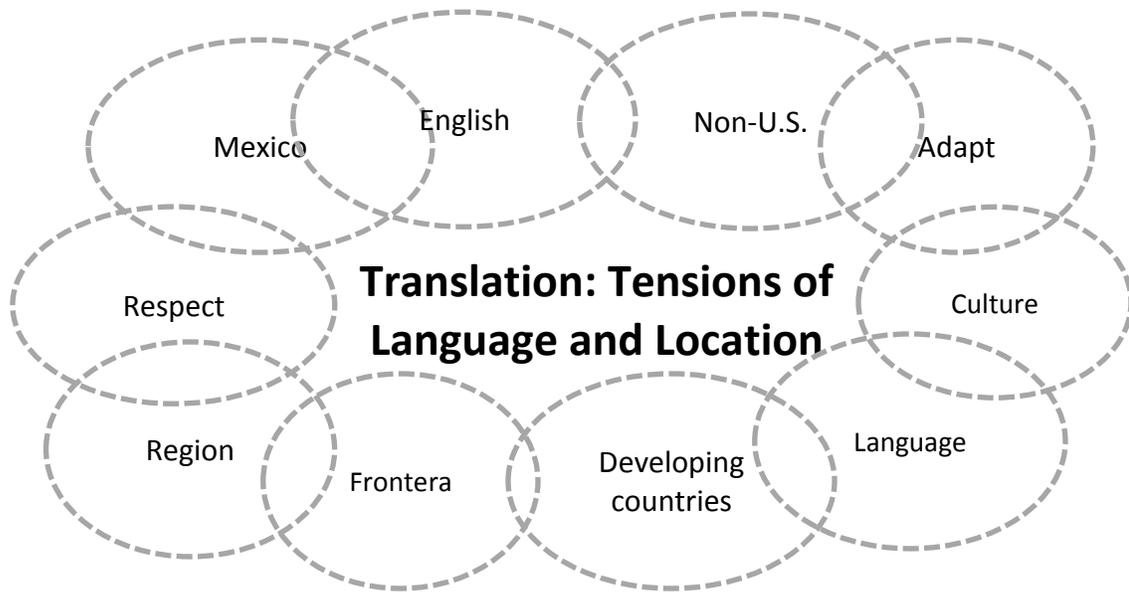


Figure 8: Translation: Tensions of Language and Location Concept Cloud

### Global Landscapes

Participants in this study, both from Mexico and the United States, in consonance with the main discourses that policy statements contain, emphasized the emergence of a global sphere of higher education: new educational modalities that require oversight, and control:

And we are talking about having the capacity to operate internationally and that means being able to understand the culture, being able to deal with a range of languages, it means effective communication with quality assurance agencies in another country so they know what they're doing and they know why they're there. It speaks to having the capacity within the US organization to make judgments about what quality means; are there different cultural settings?

This imaginary of an emergent new reality with contested jurisdiction seems to present a set of puzzles involving control and regulation. For instance, one of the initial challenges for U.S. accreditors had to do with how different U.S. regional agencies would participate in accreditation of non-U.S. institutions. During the interviews, U.S. participants referred to a set of discussions among accrediting agency leaders that took place back in the 1990s and was intended to develop a common approach or mechanism for institutions outside the United States to apply for accreditation. Those conversations did not successfully produce a common approach, and one of the participants from a U.S. agency described their current system as “kind of an open market approach.” This approach creates competition among agencies interested in conducting work abroad as non-U.S. institution can choose among different options. In fact, given the nebulous environment of international accreditation, multinational organizations, including the World Bank, UNESCO, OECD, and the World Trade Organization, encouraged and funded research intended to explore different policy frames for international quality assurance in higher education. Another staff member from a regional agency explained the reason: “at the time, because of the World Trade Organization's work on the General Agreements on Trades (GATS) included accreditation and had tentatively identified accreditation as a barrier to trade.”

One of the staff members in the U.S. regional agencies indicated that “in many ways, what happens in accreditation is a reflection of what happens in higher education institutions, in colleges and universities, and they are becoming increasingly international and thus accreditation is becoming increasingly international.” However, one might argue that what happens on a college or university depends largely on its context or where it is located. In this sense, differences between Mexico and the United States were evident—in the view of participants. These differences are explored next.

## U.S. Versus Them

As long as we seek to be colleagues and not try to impose what we do on anyone else; and we have to be careful because there's a tendency to perceive the US as taking a very strong role, and we shouldn't. So we need to be very mindful, sensitive and very focused on our colleagues.

Despite the best of intentions, discussions about differences in global higher education systems often become conversations about U.S. and non-U.S. institutions, practices, and ideas. Throughout this chapter, I have utilized the expression “non-U.S. institutions” reflecting the use of participants. In addition, participants I interviewed in Mexico equated U.S. accreditation to international quality assurance. One interesting occurrence that surfaced through the interviews had to do with the Mexican participants discussing their experience with accreditation not in terms of TECHS and USRAA but rather in terms of Mexico and the United States. In other words, USRAA was equated to the U.S. and TECHS was equated to Mexico. Here are some examples: “In Mexico, we don’t have the concept of general education like they do in the United States”<sup>64</sup>; “There are not many doctors in Mexico; it’s very hard”<sup>65</sup>. In these two cases, participants in Mexico were responding to two particular observations from the accrediting visit teams. First, the issue of general education; second, the number of faculty members with terminal degrees. While these observations were directed to the institution, participants responded by contrasting Mexico and the United States.

When it came to making sense of the differences between both systems in order to make decisions about accreditation, the Mexican institution leaders were mainly responsible for explaining themselves: Administrators at the Mexican institution provided evidence of how their

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<sup>64</sup> “En México no tenemos el concepto del general education como lo tienen en Estados Unidos”

<sup>65</sup> “En México no hay muchos doctores, es muy difícil”

credit policy exceeded USRAA requirements and how general education was frequently covered in high school. Other issues remained, like the lack of faculty members with terminal degrees. One expression Mexican participants used in relation to this process was “we demonstrated to them”<sup>66</sup>. This expression not only implies providing evidence, but presenting a convincing argument.

The U.S. accreditors also undertook actions in order to ensure mutual understanding in the process. Different staff members from the U.S. regional agencies discussed the importance of having enough capacity to engage in international work. This capacity was often articulated in terms of having enough people capable of understanding the culture of the institution they sought to evaluate. A USRAA representative explained:

We tried to appoint a team that was also culturally sensitive, we had the same chair so we had a person that served in all the visits and she had actually done some consulting in Mexico and she had a fairly good understanding of Spanish. Another member was a former Spanish professor...I am not sure if she had a Hispanic background or was married to a Latino but I think she did have a total understanding. For this last visit, the assistant chair, I actually asked a commissioner to be on the trip, former provost...born and raised in Argentina and came to the US as an adult so she had total understanding of the culture and the language.

This quote reflects the challenges of establishing adequate capacity for conducting quality assurance abroad. First, it is important to point out the goodwill that motivated the selection of the visiting teams. However, assuming that Argentine and Mexican cultures and higher education systems are the same might be misguided. Identity and culture are complex, and it is very difficult to determine whether somebody understands a setting fully. One might ask, what does it mean to “fully understand” a culture? On the other hand, appointing a team that has some familiarity—or affinity—to the setting might be good practice.

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<sup>66</sup> “Les demostramos”

## Frontera

The word *frontera* in Spanish means border; it may suggest a place for encounter and for separation. Frontera means both border and borderlands. La *frontera* is, in the Mexican context, a vast region in the Northern part of the country and stretches from the Pacific to the Gulf coasts of Mexico. Some participants referred to the impact of this region on the accreditation process:

I did not perceive anything negative in this process in terms of the relationship between both countries. Maybe the only thing was that, because of the perception of security issues in Mexico, in some of the visits from there to here, they encountered things like State Department instructions. You know, what precautions do we need to come to Mexico?<sup>67</sup>

The following is an excerpt from a Department of State warning issued in November, 2012 which illustrates what the Mexican participant meant:

Gun battles between rival TCOs [transnational criminal organizations] or with Mexican authorities have taken place in towns and cities in many parts of Mexico, especially in the border region. Gun battles have occurred in broad daylight on streets and in other public venues, such as restaurants and clubs. During some of these incidents, U.S. citizens have been trapped and temporarily prevented from leaving the area. TCOs use stolen cars and trucks to create roadblocks on major thoroughfares, preventing the military and police from responding to criminal activity. The location and timing of future armed engagements is unpredictable. We recommend that you defer travel to the areas indicated in this Travel Warning and to exercise extreme caution when traveling throughout the northern border region ([http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/tw/tw\\_5815.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5815.html)).

Participants in Mexico presented another implication of their geographical location. The university's proximity to the U.S. border might have influenced their choice of accrediting agency; during the early stages of the process, the administrators that championed the initiative

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<sup>67</sup> "Yo no percibí algo que fuera negativo en este proceso en cuanto a la relación entre los dos países. Tal vez lo único es que por la percepción que hay de las cuestiones de seguridad en México a veces algunas visitas de allá para acá se topaban con detalles como las indicaciones de la secretaria de Estado o sabes ¿qué tipo de precauciones necesitamos para venir a México?"

visited campuses and conferences in Los Angeles, San Diego, and other locations in California. A USRAA staff member confirms: “They’re on the bordering town... so they’re really close to our state...and so that was the basis upon the doors were open.” Nonetheless, proximity does not always mean affinity, as a USRAA officer explained to me: “of course in California there are some biases about Mexico as you can understand.”

Location is not enough to understand decisions related to accreditation and quality assurance. Mexico not only shares a border with the United States but also with Guatemala and Belize, in the South. Mexico has cultural and historical ties with other Latin American countries, and some of those nations have developed regional quality assurance networks. Is it just location and proximity? Mexican administrators provided alternative explanations: “Why don’t we turn toward Latin America? What you can see is that, unfortunately, in Latin America there is not a single international accrediting agency that can compete with SACS or WASC or any other”<sup>68</sup>. Another administrator shared his perspective on a different Mexican university pursuing accreditation from a Latin American agency: “and then, I just found out that they want to try an accreditation from Latin America. So I told them, mmmhmmh...the one in Central America. So I told them, that’s fine, but for us the North American accreditation carries a lot of weight”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> ¿pues por qué no volteamos hacia América Latina? Y lo que tú ves desafortunadamente es que en América Latina no hay ningún organismo acreditador de carácter internacional que pueda competir ni con USRAA ni con SACS ni con ninguna otra.

<sup>69</sup> “entonces ellos me acabo de enterar que quieren probar una de América Latina. Entonces les digo yo, mmmhmmhmmh...la de Centroamérica. Entonces yo les dije pues que está bien pero para nosotros una acreditación norteamericana tiene mucho peso.”

## Language and Translation

In the early stages of this project, translation was a metaphor and language a heuristic to analyze accreditation of a Mexican university by a U.S. regional agency. After a participant in Mexico shared with me that “USRAA became like a language,”<sup>70</sup> I realized that language and translation were more than mere metaphors. For instance, at TECHS, being able to communicate in English became an important skill at the Mexican institution in the context of USRAA accreditation:

Speaking English suddenly becomes a very valuable resource and, obviously, those professors that speak without an accent—correctly—or that like in my case, I speak with an accent but I read it very easily and I write with more ease than I speak<sup>71</sup>

Participants referred to English both as a challenge and as a need:

Another challenge we faced was that after the first report, they asked for everything in English. Then, the standard leaders had to work in English, understanding English—at least reading it. Then we faced that if a standard had 15 or 20 pieces of evidence...all of that had a huge cost in translation, a lot of money was invested in translation<sup>72</sup>

These linguistic challenges seemed invisible to some of the U.S. accreditors as they commented on students’ and faculty’s ability to communicate in English: “Their English is—they live on the border—so their English is just terrific as they’ve been listening to American

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<sup>70</sup> “ya USRAA se convirtió como un lenguaje”

<sup>71</sup> “El manejo del inglés se vuelve de repente un recurso muy valioso y obviamente aquellos profesores que hablan sin acento, correctamente, o como en mi caso que lo hablo con acento pero que lo leo con mucha facilidad, que lo escribo con más facilidad que la que lo hablo”

<sup>72</sup> “Otro reto que se presentó fue que después del primer reporte nos pidieron todo en inglés. Entonces los líderes de los estándares tenían que trabajar en inglés; entender en inglés, por lo menos leerlo. Entonces nos enfrentamos que si un estándar tenía 15 o 20 piezas de evidencia todo eso fue un costo enorme de traducción y se invirtió mucho dinero en traducción”

television. So, they know all the colloquialisms; they spend a lot of time in San Diego and the like.”

Besides presenting a challenge, language became a matter of compliance in the accreditation process. In its international guide for accreditation, USRAA makes explicit its language requirement as candidate institutions must “provide all documentation in English and host visits that must be conducted in English as the language of interaction.” TECHS explained, in its eligibility report, that the university “has made English not only a requirement but an important part of the undergraduate curriculum.” A few participants in Mexico discussed their interest in the possibility of developing their own language of quality, as they said: “respecting what USRAA says but in our own way.”<sup>73</sup> It is in this merging of practices and traditions that cross-national quality assurance may hold promise.

The following figure illustrates the main themes of the study; at the bottom, near the roots, there are examples of some of the initial codes that I later organized and analyzed in order to develop the four main themes which I have presented throughout this chapter.

### **Revisiting the Research Questions**

The previous sections laid the groundwork for explanation building (Yin, 2009; 2011) in this case study. The review of the literature and conceptual framework articulated what might be expected when analyzing the U.S. institutional accreditation process of a Mexican university:

- Decisions about accreditation and quality management within an educational organization involve not only technical-bureaucratic processes but also political, symbolic, and systemic ones

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<sup>73</sup> “respetando lo que dice USRAA pero a nuestra manera”

- Power and culture are particularly salient elements in decision making and therefore political and symbolic perspectives are two main forces in quality-related decisions in higher education
- Globalization and internationalization in higher education are on the rise and quality practices in higher education are increasingly international too
- Quality in higher education is characterized by a mainly North to South transfer of policies and practices
- Globalization is a continuation of previous world systems and therefore an unequal system characterized by postcolonial relations
- U.S.-Mexico relations involve North/South exchange and therefore postcolonial theory presents a valuable framework for analysis.

In addition to the main theoretical concepts above, the data presented throughout this chapter stemming from documents, observation, and interviews suggest that:

(a) Reputational value is a central motivation to pursue accreditation given that, through accreditation, the institution in Mexico becomes connected to internationally recognized universities;

(b) While desirable from many perspectives, the accreditation process triggers a set of intra-organizational dynamics and stressors, chief among them is a complex division of labor in which faculty members, while absolutely necessary, are distanced from decision making;

(c) Compliance with highly challenging—yet perceived as fair—standards makes the process legitimate and legitimizes the U.S. accreditors as reluctant players in a process mainly intended to assist emergent systems of higher education; and

(d) Language and translation are effective concepts to understand the accreditation process as they also establish power relations in which similarity with Global North institutions

and practices grants legitimacy and power to Global South institutions and further legitimizes the status quo.

The central points of the literature review and conceptual framework constitute theoretical propositions. In addition, the main themes of the study constitute initial findings. Having theoretical propositions and initial findings in hand, it is possible to establish an “explanation building process” (Yin, 2009, p. 141). Explanation building involves an iterative process of comparing the theoretical propositions with the preliminary findings (Yin, 2009). This explanation building process presents responses to the research questions of the study.

Table 8 reconciles the primary and secondary research questions with the different theoretical propositions and main findings from the case study. Re-organized in this fashion, the different sources of information provide responses to the research questions. Of course, these responses are not definitive and they remain tentative explanations to the complex phenomena involved in accreditation.

The upper-most row of table 8 displays the main research questions of this study; the rows below are divided in three columns: research questions, theoretical propositions, and preliminary findings. The different color bands group questions, propositions and findings thematically:

<b>How do university leaders in Mexico exercise institutional agency and construct value as they participate in U.S. institutional accreditation given their location in the global system of higher education?</b>		
<i>Research Questions</i>	<i>Theoretical propositions</i>	<i>Preliminary findings</i>
What are the intended and unintended consequences of the accreditation process for the institution?		While desirable from many perspectives, the accreditation process triggers a set of intra-organizational dynamics and stressors, chief among them is a complex division of labor in which faculty members are necessary yet distanced from decision making
What institutional actions and actors are at play in the accreditation process?	Quality assurance as faculty disenfranchisement (Harvey, 2004a; Morley, 2003)	
What are the stated and unstated goals entering the accreditation process? How do these goals affect action?	Decisions about accreditation and quality management within an educational organization involve not only technical-bureaucratic processes but also political, symbolic, and systemic ones	Reputational value is a central motivation to pursue accreditation given that, through accreditation, the institution in Mexico becomes connected to internationally recognized universities
How do campus leaders evaluate the U.S. accreditation process?		
What is the role, if any, of Mexico-U.S. relations in selecting the accrediting agency for this process and the accreditation process?	Globalization and internationalization in higher education are on the rise and quality practices in higher education are increasingly international	Language and translation are effective concepts to understand the accreditation process as they also establish power relations in which proximity and similarity to the U.S. grants power
What is the role, if any, of Mexico's colonial past in selecting this particular form of quality assurance and accrediting agency? How does the local and national history influence the choice of U.S. accreditation?	Quality in higher education is characterized by a mainly North to South transfer of policies and practices	
	Globalization is a continuation of previous world systems and therefore an unequal system characterized by postcolonial relations	
What are the assumptions about quality and value in higher education implicit in the U.S. accreditation process under study?	Power and culture are particularly salient elements in decision making and therefore political and symbolic perspectives are two main forces in quality-related decisions in higher education	Compliance with highly challenging—yet perceived as fair—standards makes the process legitimate and legitimizes the U.S. accreditors as reluctant players in a process mainly intended to assist emergent systems of higher education

Table 8: Informing the research questions

*What are the intended and unintended consequences of the accreditation process for the institution? What institutional actions and actors are at play in the accreditation process? As the*

*benefits and burdens of investment* theme indicates, while the accreditation process is desirable from many perspectives, U.S. accreditation triggers a set of intra-organizational dynamics and stressors, chief among them is a complex division of labor in which faculty members are necessary yet distanced from decision making. While faculty and administrators are involved in the process, their roles are determined by a hierarchy in which administrators mandate actions whereas faculty members are required to comply with USRAA's demands mediated by the TECHS administration. These findings coincide with the literature on the effects of quality assurance as faculty disenfranchisement (Kells, 1999; Harvey, 2004a).

*What are the stated and unstated goals entering the accreditation process? How do these goals affect action? How do campus leaders evaluate the U.S. accreditation process?* These questions are deeply intertwined as the process of U.S. accreditation brings about intended and unintended consequences alike. The literature and conceptual framework on accreditation suggest that decisions about accreditation and quality management within an educational organization involve not only technical-bureaucratic processes but also political (Harvey, 2004a; Morley, 2003), symbolic (Stensaker, 2010), and systemic decisions. The findings of this study provide evidence that reputational value is a central motivation to pursue accreditation given that, through accreditation, TECHS becomes connected to internationally recognized universities. The *quality by association* theme illustrates that by connecting with reputable U.S. institutions, via the USRAA accreditation process, leaders at TECHS attempted to build up the reputational profile of their institution.

The research questions about U.S.-Mexico relations and their influence on the accreditation process are complex. *What is the role, if any, of Mexico-U.S. relations in selecting the accrediting agency for this process and the accreditation process? What is the role, if any, of Mexico's colonial past in selecting this particular form of quality assurance and accrediting*

*agency? How does the local and national history influence the choice of U.S. accreditation?* My personal experience and the review of the literature indicate that globalization and internationalization in higher education are on the rise and that quality practices in higher education are increasingly international (Lemaitre 2002; Singh, 2010). In addition, quality in higher education is characterized mainly by North to South transfer of policies and practices (Altbach et al., 2010). Postcolonial theory suggests that globalization is a continuation of previous world systems and therefore an unequal system characterized by postcolonial relations. To my surprise, these themes are either not as salient for participants at TECHS or they decided not to discuss them in-depth with me. Very few of them recognized the significance of the historical and frequently tense relationship between Mexico and its Northern neighbor (Acuña, 1988; Anzaldúa, 1987; Zin, 2003). However, language and translation are important concepts that participants discussed in relation to the accreditation process. When it comes to language and translation, proximity and similarity to the U.S. provides influence and reputation.

*What are the assumptions about quality and value in higher education implicit in the U.S. accreditation process under study?* Power and culture are particularly salient elements in quality-related decision making and therefore political and symbolic perspectives are two main forces in quality-related decisions in higher education. According to the document analysis and interviews with participants, compliance with highly challenging—yet perceived as fair—standards made the process legitimate and legitimizes the U.S. accreditors. USRAA members were perceived as initially reluctant players in a process mainly intended to assist emergent systems of higher education, like Mexico.

The main research question for the study still remains: *How do university leaders in Mexico exercise institutional agency and construct value as they participate in U.S. institutional accreditation given their location in the global system of higher education?* It seems clear

through this case study that obtaining U.S. accreditation requires a very dynamic exercise of agency in order to mobilize the resources required to comply with USRAA standards.

Compliance is not a passive or reactive approach but a rather dynamic process of interpretation, negotiation, and action. This level of agency requires aligning institutional goals and actors with the accreditation process. The effort, and perhaps sacrifice, required to comply with U.S. standards which are sometimes at odds with national requirements—like in the case of general education—can only be explained by a strong commitment to and motivation for obtaining accreditation.

But why are TECHS administrators and faculty willing to champion or go along with the process? There is not a single answer: (a) some seek institutional change and improved quality through increased capacity, (b) others see the process as potentially advantageous to their agendas, (c) others appreciate the value of being recognized as a high-quality institution while they are skeptical of the process itself, and (d) yet others are likely believe that the risk of resisting a process that is supported by the administration and many other institutional players may be too high to bear. The message here is that understanding accreditation and quality practices in higher education requires paying attention to the unique and complex ways that individuals make sense of quality. These multiple and coexisting interpretations are the topic for the following chapter.

Before moving on to the discussion of different interpretations, my own included, of the URSAA accreditation process at TECHS, academic integrity calls for a discussion of those questions that this project came short of answering. Admittedly, the majority of participants I interviewed at TECHS were nowhere nearly as interested as I in the historical relations between Mexico and the U.S. One of the participants who shared my perspective was a dean and faculty member in the Social Sciences. His academic affiliation may help explain our compatible views;

the other administrators came from Engineering and Business fields. I would characterize their perspectives as pragmatic and technically oriented while the administrator who explored Mexico-U.S. history was more critical of the process. That is one possible explanation.

Another possible explanation for this unanswered question is that, as one of the USRAA staff members suggested, TECHS faculty and students “live on the border...know all the colloquialisms; they spend a lot of time in San Diego and the like.” This would mean that the boundary between Mexico and the U.S. is more fluid than I believe, maybe even hard to notice. I am reluctant to accept this answer but I am willing to entertain it. A third potential explanation for the lack of discussion of U.S.-Mexico relations among participants might come from the notions of ambivalence and mimicry (Bhabha, 1994) and colonial desire (Young, 1995). Citizens of the Global South are placed in a position of relative subordination to the North; members of the Global South may aspire to become North-like. If that is the case, denying one’s condition of subordination or sweeping it under the rug may be an appealing option. From this perspective, glossing over centuries of problematic relations with the most powerful country in the world may not be totally unexpected. Regardless, this question remains unanswered and calls for further research.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

#### Description, Analysis, and Interpretation

In order to introduce this section, I find Wolcott's (1994) discussion of the similarities and differences among description, analysis, and interpretation to be enlightening and useful. In this section, I present my conceptual sensemaking of the themes I presented in the previous chapter. Wolcott suggests that description, analysis, and interpretation are three different forms of making sense of data. Description remains close to the data; this is what I presented in chapter four. The current chapter is mainly analytical and interpretive. In regards to interpretation, Wolcott says that "interpretation...does not claim to be as convincingly or compulsively 'scientific'...the goal is to make sense of what goes on, to reach out for understanding or explanation" (p.10). As such, in this chapter I present my own learning about the process which is tentative and up for discussion, and yet informed by my interaction with the phenomenon I studied.

Given the complexity I faced when trying to make sense of the accreditation process that I studied, I have found it useful to present my analyses and interpretations in five sections: (a) I revisit the concepts of cost and benefit associated with the accreditation process in light of the literature review I presented in chapter two; (b) I analyze the accreditation process as organizational change and saga which coincides with the organizational framework for understanding quality; (c) I explore the implications of language and translation for understanding this and other quality processes; (d) I make sense of the accreditation process as cultural encounter; and (e) I explore brands and branding as heuristics to interpret quality practices in higher education. Before offering these interpretations, it may be relevant to

remember that interpretations are presented in qualitative research “not as proof but as persuasion” (Stake, 2010, p. 25).

### Was it Worth It?

In the previous chapter, I discussed *benefits and burdens of investment* in relation to the USRAA accreditation process. Here, I further problematize that discussion. An objectivist perspective to research may seek to establish whether the benefits resulting from the process outnumbered its drawbacks. I believe the question of whether the process was worthwhile is best served from a *value construction* point of view. From a value perspective, the accreditation process may be, at the same time, worthwhile and not worthwhile—depending on which type of value one is referring to. In chapter two, I established how quality practices can be analyzed from technical, political, symbolic, systemic, and collegial perspectives. From the perspective of Mexican participants, the USRAA accreditation process generated mixed reviews according to different perspectives as illustrated in the following table:

<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Technical	Positive	New processes for faculty recruitment, program review and student assessment; acquisition and development of new technologies; development of local capacity; new facilities
Political	Negative	Exacerbated faculty-administration divides; excessive use of top-down mandates; erosion of institutional autonomy and increased dependency on USRAA
Symbolic	Positive	Increased reputation locally and nationally; access to reputational big leagues; expected international recognition; organizational achievement
Collegial	Mixed	Increased participation of faculty in governance, at least in appearance

Table 9: Effects of Accreditation from Different Organizational Perspectives

As the table above illustrates, the effects of the accreditation process may be interpreted differently according to various perspectives. As discussed in the *quality by*

*association theme* in chapter 4, some of the greatest gains in the process were symbolic in nature. These symbolic gains should not be underestimated as so much involved in quality practices in higher education is symbolic in nature (Birnbaum & Deshotels, 1999; Stensaker, 2000; 2007). From the value construction perspective I propose here, value is not inherently attached to the accreditation process, but attributed by individuals to the process on different grounds—some of which are symbolic. Another set of reasons that participants at TECHS drew on to attribute value to the accreditation process involved the spillover of various technologies. Some of those technologies involved student assessment and more organized strategies for faculty recruitment and selection; some other technologies involved—for instance—the development of electronic portfolios. Yet another set of benefits involved new facilities, such as libraries and new buildings.

During my interviews with Mexican participants, the reviews about the impact of accreditation on collegiality and participation were mixed. Some members of the administration indicated that, in order to comply with USRAA requirements, a faculty senate structure was assembled and feedback was solicited from faculty members. Faculty members expressed, at best, difficulties to adapt to this change, and, at worst, cynicism about the administration's motives to establish the faculty senate. Collegiality cannot be mandated because mandates inherently contradict the necessary conditions for a collegial environment. Correspondingly, administrators might have employed mandates and direct authority—rather than seeking collaboration—which may have depleted some of their political capital. Furthermore, while the accreditation process may have surfaced or exacerbated some conflicts within the university, a significant effect of the process impacts institutional autonomy. As a result of the accreditation process, many decisions that could take place within the university now require approval from USRAA because they may involve a *substantive change* and, therefore, are subject to review.

This situation alters the power distribution of the organization and constitutes an erosion of institutional autonomy, which is an effect that Harvey (2004a) predicts.

Yet a different reason for inconsistent assessments of the accreditation process is the presence of different individuals' position within the organization and her or his formal role.

Consider the following figure:

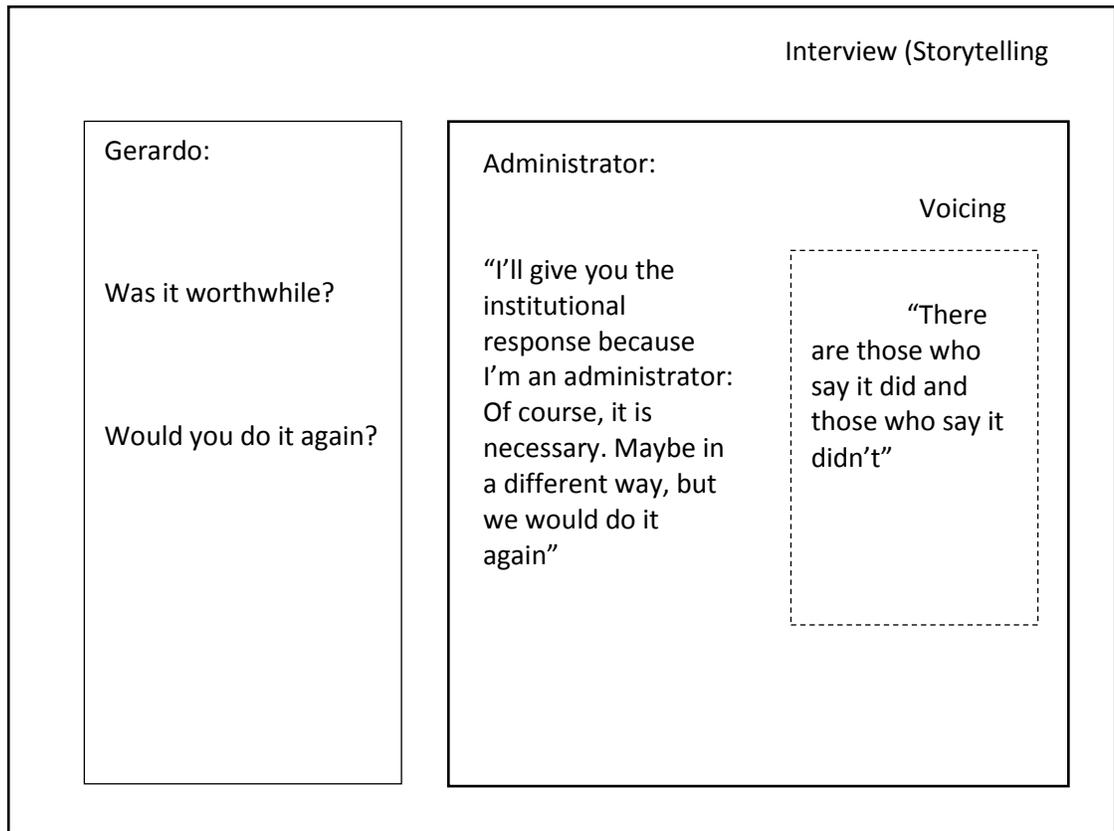


Figure 9: Application of Wortham's (2001) Narrative Analysis

Following Wortham's (2001) ideas on narrative analysis, I illustrate in this figure a small section of one of the interviews. Wortham suggests that in every narrative we can identify the storytelling event, in this case, the interview I conducted, and multiple narrated events, in this case, participants' experiences with the accreditation process. In the figure above, the larger

and outermost rectangle represents the storytelling event, i.e., the interview. I ask two questions that are, in my perspective, deeply intertwined. The participant responded, as an administrator, and affirmed the value of the accreditation process and characterized it not only as beneficial but as necessary. However, the participant also voiced other perspectives which can be interpreted as questioning his initial statement. Without reading too much into this exchange, it seems plausible that questioning the value of the accreditation process seems more acceptable when administrators attribute the questioning to others; yet, he makes a deliberate choice to present those perspectives.

Value in higher education is constructed; there are different sources of value in higher education (Blanco Ramírez & Berger, 2012). Consequently, I refuse to engage in absolute assessments of whether the accreditation process was worthwhile. Doing so would contradict the interpretive perspective that informs this study and that I articulated in chapter three. My perspective moves beyond positivistic views of quality, as I take a critical-dialectic perspective which involves “deconstructing prevailing knowledge, preconceptions and ideology and reconstructing an alternative understanding” (Harvey, 2007, p. 15). As I have argued thus far, participants (a) expressed making gains in relation to technical and symbolic aspects of the accreditation process; (b) negative effects in political terms; and (c) mixed impacts in relation to collegiality. These realities are complementary and coexist simultaneously. Furthermore, participant perspectives, like my own, are not objective as they are informed and influenced by one’s relation to the issue under analysis.

A final note of value that may serve as segue way to the upcoming sections involves Graeber’s (2001) discussion about value. According to Graeber, value has at least three possible and deeply interconnected meanings. First, there is economic value that Greber defines as “how much others are willing to give up” (p. 1) for something. Second, we have social value—or

rather—values. Values involve what is desirable in a particular social context. Finally, in the linguistic sense, value is “meaningful difference” (p.2). I will explore these three facets of value in the rest of this chapter in relation to the accreditation process I am exploring: Why is USRAA accreditation desirable at TECHS? What did the process mean? Why were participants willing to give things up in order to obtain it?

### **Organizational Learning and Organizational Saga**

The saliency of the USRAA accreditation process was evident on campus during, and before, my visit. TECHS’ official website and some participants’ electronic signatures include USRAA’s logo and refer to the university’s status as the only Mexican university to hold USRAA accreditation. On campus, signs and banners are placed in visible areas and indicate that the university, along with Stanford and UCLA, is accredited by USRAA. The participants I interviewed, even after discussing the many challenges involved in the process, seemed proud for obtaining USRAA’s initial accreditation.

Consider the exchange illustrated in figure 10. The dialogue took place during an interview I conducted with one of the participants in Mexico, an administrator at TECHS. One of the first questions I asked was very open ended; I asked about his impressions about the accreditation process as a whole. This administrator emphasized the efforts required to obtain accreditation. Later in our conversation, he pointed out that the USRAA standards for accreditation are among the most demanding:

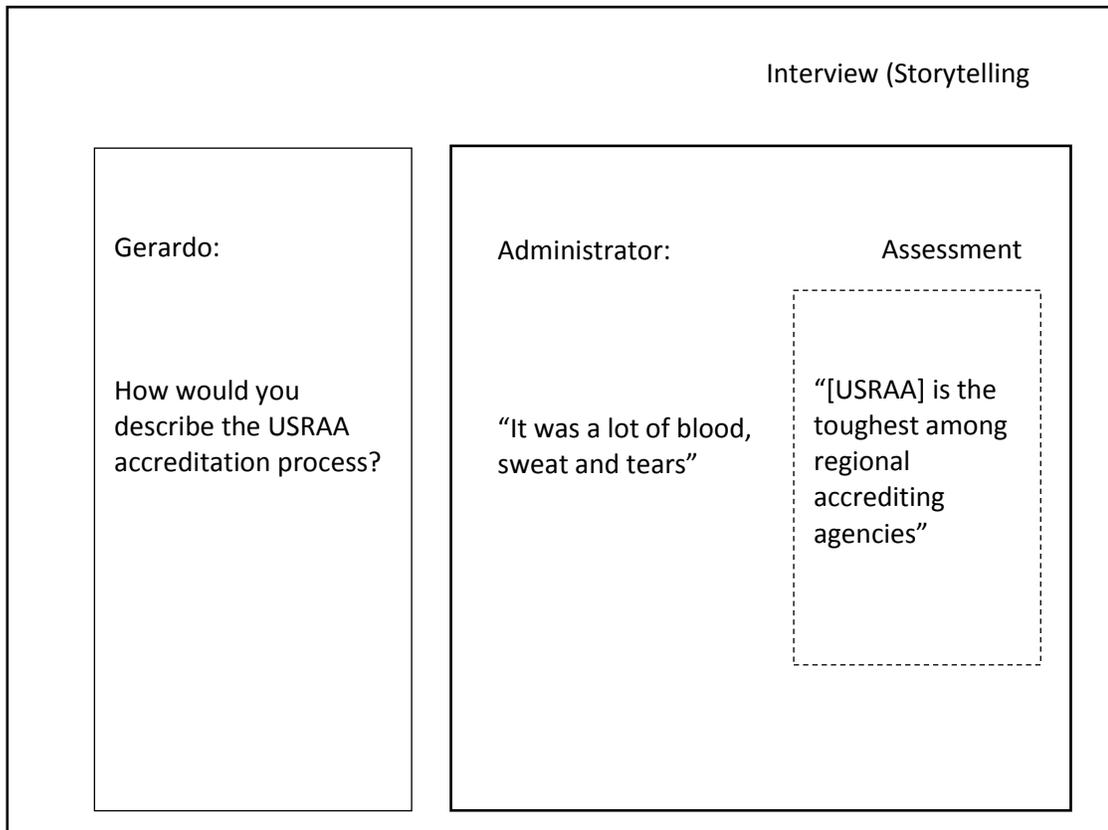


Figure 10: Narrative Analysis of Interview

One of the themes I presented in chapter four involved *cost, benefit, and burden* and the administrator’s quote above suggesting that the process involved “blood, sweat and tears” illustrates some of those challenges. Also in chapter four, I discussed how Mexican participants referred to USRAA evaluators as *demanding gatekeepers*. In that process, I discussed how these demanding gatekeepers were perceived as legitimate and also legitimized the accreditation process itself. The interaction of these two themes makes me think of accomplishments. It seems that an achievement facing difficult odds is deemed more valuable than an easy accomplishment. In addition, one of the participants in Mexico explained to me that such an attitude is engrained in their organizational culture: “What I’m trying to say is that we don’t do the least necessary effort; we seek to do the best we can and that entails a tremendous wear

down.<sup>74</sup>” Pride, sense of achievement, challenging odds; these concepts allude to Clark’s (1972) concept of organizational saga. According to Clark, an organizational saga “(a) is rooted in history, (b) claims unique accomplishment, and (c) is held with sentiment by the group” (p. 179). My conversations with faculty and administrators in Mexico involved discussions about a process of accreditation that took place over a period of eight years and was extensively documented. As a result of the process, TECHS became the first university in Mexico to obtain USRAA accreditation and that status is widely advertised in print and electronic media. Finally, based on interviews and materials, it is easy to argue that many members of the university community hold feelings about the process.

Even though the notion of organizational saga (Clark, 1972) holds significant heuristic value, Clark assumes that sagas are cultural phenomena embedded in higher education and mostly serve to provide cohesion. Findings in chapter four shows that points of view about accreditation are fragmented and in conflict: Even the same individual may hold both positive and negative ideas and emotions about the same process. Furthermore, detailed examinations of organizational culture (Berger, Blanco Ramírez & Hudson, in press) indicate that cultural divides within higher education organizations may exist between faculty/administrators, academic/corporate cultures, and among disciplinary traditions. In other words, while the idea of saga is interesting, it also needs to be taken with some reservations. An additional caveat for the use of saga is that sagas take a long time to develop and are long-lasting; it is simply too soon to know whether this initial accreditation process will become an organizational saga at TECHS.

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74 Lo que quiero decirte es no hacemos lo mínimo necesario; pretendemos hacer lo máximo que podamos hacer y eso te trae un desgaste tremendo

Consider the following figure that illustrates the way in which different elements converge to develop a potential organizational saga at TECHS:

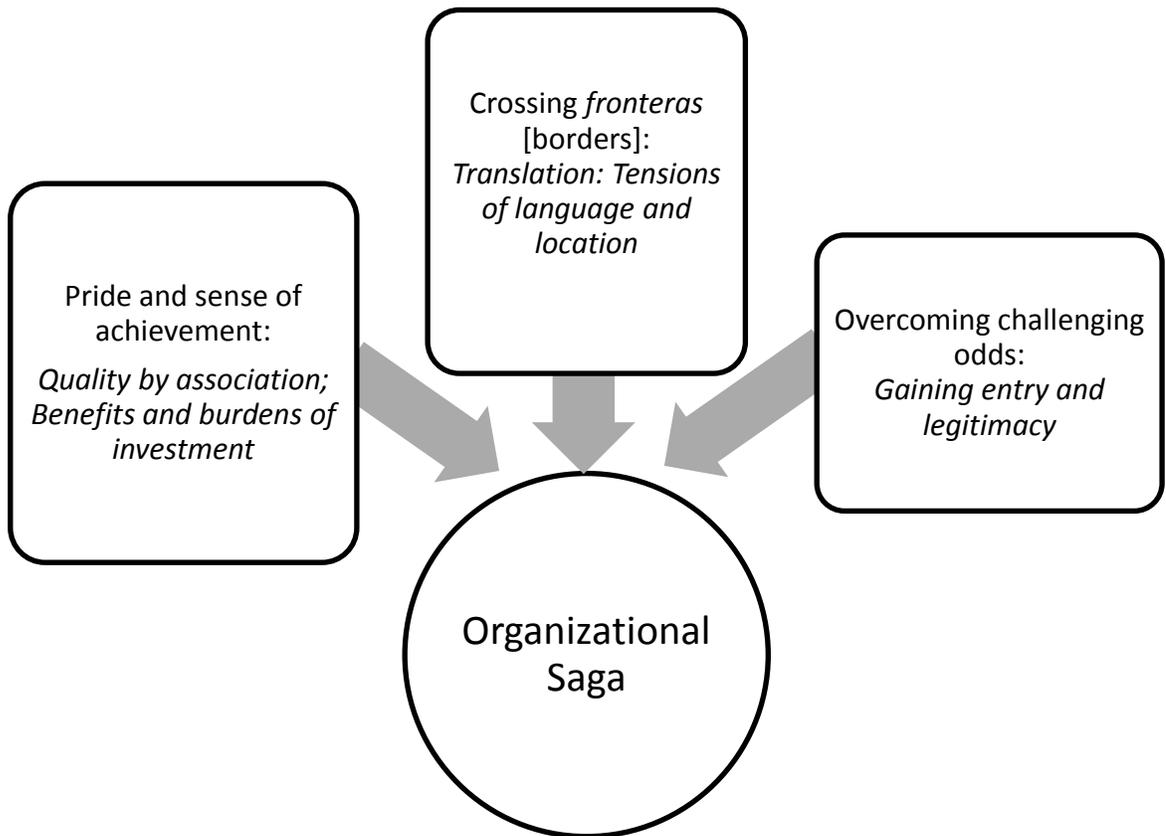


Figure 11: Accreditation as Organizational Saga

While discussing how participants at TECHS articulated the *benefits* of the accreditation process, I indicated that some of these participants suggested that “change is the prize.” In addition, *training and professional development* were significant elements resulting from the process, according to participants. On the one hand, participants at TECHS perceived that engaging in USRAA-provided training opportunities ensured their success in obtaining accreditation, and, on the other, their partnership with USRAA opened up the possibility for professional development that would not be accessible to them otherwise. This discussion of

organizational change in an increasingly interconnected world has been the object of recent discussion. Given its complexity and interconnected nature, cognitive models have served as useful analogies to understand organizational change (Kezar, 2012).

Given that organizational learning is one of the forms that organizational change can take, and given that participants suggested that organizational change was the most important benefit from accreditation, one might examine what kind of organizational learning the accreditation process entailed. Discussing organizational learning involves elucidating whether single loop or double loop learning processes are in place and untangling the complex relations between theories of practice and theories in use (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schön, 1983). Theories in use are often enacted with the purpose of maintaining the status quo (Argyris & Schön, 1974) and are different than theories of action. In other words, people may articulate a particular position but their actions are more revealing. For instance, a theory of action may suggest that improving institutional quality is the goal for pursuing U.S. institutional accreditation. In chapter two, I argued that quality in higher education is rarely defined; therefore, *improving institutional quality* as the theory of action for pursuing accreditation says little. By analyzing what administrators and faculty *did* in order to obtain accreditation, one can reconstruct and interpret the theory in use.

Participants at TECHS indicated that, in order to become accredited, they engaged in learning and professional development opportunities. They learned about USRAA's criteria for accreditation; they learned from institutions already accredited; they *learned to comply*. These actions were intended to replicate compliance with criteria on their campus and, therefore, I would characterize their efforts as *single loop learning* (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schön, 1983). However, there were times in which compliance was virtually impossible given the disparities between the U.S. and the Mexican systems of higher education. For example, in the case of

general education, complying with USRAA and with the Mexican department of Education was not achievable. In that case, USRAA criteria had to become questioned and subject to interpretation. Frequently, double loop learning takes place only when single-loop learning cannot be achieved.

However, one must be cautious when claiming that accreditation constitutes double-loop learning at TECHS. For instance, in the case of faculty participation in university governance and the establishment of a faculty senate, one may assume that those significant changes alter the organization to its core. Nonetheless, a closer look reveals that administrators agreed to promote increased faculty participation in governance only in order to comply with USRAA's requirements. In other words, change was introduced in order to keep things the same, i.e., on track to obtain accreditation.

Yet another example of single-loop learning involves aspirations among faculty and administrators at TECHS to become associated gatekeepers or designated experts by USRAA to assist other institutions in Mexico and Latin America to seek U.S. accreditation. One possible interpretation would be that leaders at TECHS intended to substantially transform their roles. I would argue that, given that their interest consists of changing their role within the existing and taken for granted structure, this example constitutes another instance of single-loop learning. In sum, the accreditation process has the potential of becoming an organizational saga if the accreditation remains salient in the years to come; this accreditation process mainly constitutes an instance of single-loop learning and preservation of the status quo.

### **The Language of Quality in Higher Education**

In chapter four, I discussed a perception among participants which equated their preparation for USRAA accreditation to language acquisition. A corollary of this comparison is the idea that quality in higher education constitutes a language and that international quality

practices in higher education include various levels of translation. While I have suggested in the previous chapter that language and translation are more than metaphors, I contend that language and translation have great potential to serve as heuristics in order to analyze international quality assurance in higher education. In particular, language serves as an ideal entry point to analyze the power struggles inserted in quality practices in higher education. In this respect, the study of language ideology—stemmed from linguistic anthropology—is of particular value given that the study of language ideology suggests that linguistic differentiation is not random but responds to specific social conditions (Milani & Johnson, 2010). The work of Lippi-Green (1997) is of particular value in understanding the mechanisms by which language ideology reproduces and perpetuates social oppression. Given the already discussed parallel between quality in higher education and language, and given the fact that much of the power of accreditation and other quality practices is symbolic in nature (Stensaker 2000; 2007), comparing the USRAA accreditation process vis-à-vis Lippi-Green’s model of language oppression may be productive:

<b>Language Subordination Model</b>	<b>Quality in Higher Education</b>
Language is mystified	Quality as symbolic and ill defined (Harvey & Newton, 2004; 2007; Stensaker, 2000; 2007)
Authority is claimed	Authority, gatekeeping and legitimacy theme (Chapter 4)
Misinformation is generated	
Non-mainstream language is trivialized	
Conformers are held as positive examples	Quality by association (Chapter 4)
Explicit promises are made	Benefit theme (Chapter 4)
Threats are made	
Non-conformers are vilified or marginalized	

Table 10: Lippi-Green’s (1997; 2012) Language Subordination and Quality Concepts

I introduced Lippi-Green’s (1997; 2012) model of language subordination for its heuristic value for analyzing the adoption of U.S. accreditation. Certainly, the model and the data gathered in this project do not correspond perfectly; no model fits perfectly. However, Lippi-

Green's model advances the interpretation of the themes I presented in chapter 4. Quality in higher education is complex: definitions are unclear and rarely clarified; assumptions are rarely examined. This leads to high levels of uncertainty which clash with demands for accountability. In this environment, leaders need to demonstrate their ability to control the system to external constituents (Birnbaum, 1988). Authority is necessary to reduce the existing ambiguity which creates incentives for accreditors and other quality providers; as illustrated in chapter four, discourses of gatekeeping legitimize accreditors and quality practices. Leaders at the institutional level must decide whether or not to comply. Moreover, compliance presents many benefits; chief among them is demonstrating quality by associating one's institution with other institutions that are considered legitimate. Non-compliance may lead to exclusion from the big league, in other words, marginalization. Compliance requires not only following practices established by accreditors but also embracing ideas and principles that support the status quo; that way the mystification-authority-compliance cycle is reinforced. Consider the following figure:

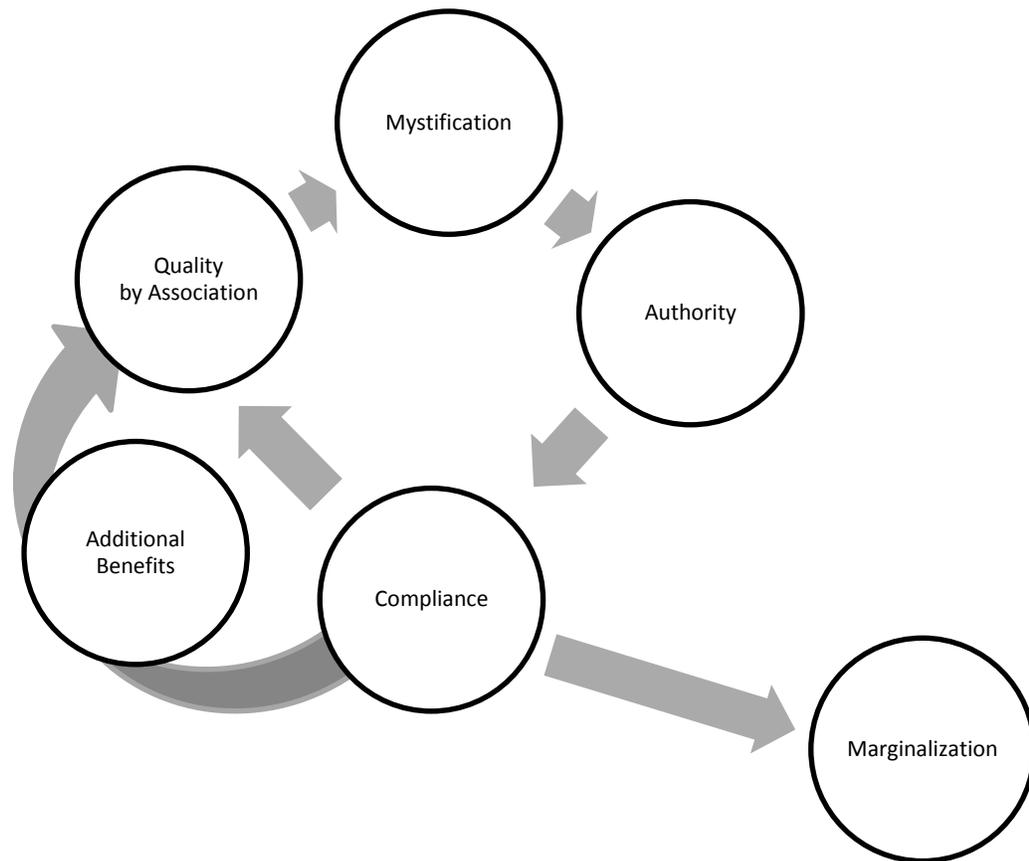


Figure 12: Quality by Association Cycle

Figure 12 illustrates how the cycle begins with the mystification of quality. Recall the discussion in chapter two of how quality is defined in overly broad terms: “A multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional missions and objectives, as well as to the specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline” (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg & Pârlea, 2007, p. 46). This ambiguity motivates the emergence of legitimate authorities and gatekeepers. Authority results from many sources but often emerges from power struggles, particularly at the international dimension (Harvey, 2007b). Authority demands compliance from those seeking

accreditation: “Why do we have to adhere to their rules? And they, in their role, say: because you want accreditation from me.” Compliance brings many benefits: “Obtaining U.S. accreditation brings many advantages: It opens up the market, it increases enrolment, it opens up relationships and networks. It is very important to become accredited in the United States.” Those who do not comply remain as outsiders in relative disadvantage: “Why don’t we look toward Latin America? Unfortunately, no Latin American international accreditor can compete with USRAA or SACS or any other [U.S.] agency.”

The cycle of compliance presented above illustrates how discourses of quality in higher education are at play at TECHS. Urcioli (2003) has discussed how discourses of excellence and rigor in higher education are deeply intertwined and how the language of outcomes assessment is considered by many as the highest expression of the excellence-rigor amalgam. However, an important additional element in the compliance cycle is the implied objective-positivist view of quality. Discourses of rigor and excellence in higher education can only become solid if they rest of a positivistic epistemological foundation. Interpretive-phenomenological or critical-dialectic (Harvey, 2007) perspectives of quality would wash off the mystical attributes of quality that lead to compliance. If, as so many have claimed, quality in higher education is constructed and interpreted, then anybody could develop his/her own standards and definitions of quality and associating with prestigious institutions would be ineffective as a strategy to demonstrate quality. Analyzing how this system could be disrupted may provide insights about the motivations that leaders, both in the accreditation agencies and the candidate institutions, have for going along with and perpetuating the cycle.

After discussing power differences in relation to the language of quality in higher education, it is now possible to determine where translation fits within the internationalization of quality practices in higher education:

Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 59).

Gloria Anzaldúa's quote above contains many of the dilemmas I have been grappling with in this research project: Quality as language demands choices, i.e., higher education leaders need to decide what language they will learn: Will they communicate quality in the language of WASC, SACS or FIMPES? Which tongue-twisting acronyms will they have to learn next? Furthermore, demonstrating quality in their own terms, as participants at TECHS discovered, poses the risk of being judged as illegitimate. As Anzaldúa suggests, having to translate—as opposed to speaking in a blended language—is evidence of the existing hierarchy of languages.

These themes are familiar in postcolonial settings. Translation, official languages, multilingualism, and many other phenomena are part of the daily lives of postcolonial peoples. The origin of the term translation implies re-location or “carrying across” (Tymoczko, 1999, p. 19). The case study I present in this project, and international quality assurance in general, involves carrying ideas and practices about quality in higher education across borders and from one location to another. In discussing translation, Tymoczko reminds us that not everything can be carried across—translated—and in those situations, new choices are necessary: The translator must choose between “bringing the text to the audience and bringing the audience to the text” (p. 29). As Anzaldúa suggests, how the dilemma is solved will provide insights about legitimacy and hierarchy.

Some elements of chapter four may suggest a certain level of reciprocity and mutual efforts for understanding. I believe, based on participants' perspectives, that faculty and administrators at TECHS did the heavy lifting in ensuring communication: for example, they translated documents generated in Spanish in order to accommodate the English speaking

evaluators. They changed their strategies for collecting data about students in order to accommodate USRAA requirements; they also explained, time and time again, their policy for general education and credit hours. USRAA also contributed to gaining mutual understanding; but not at the same level:

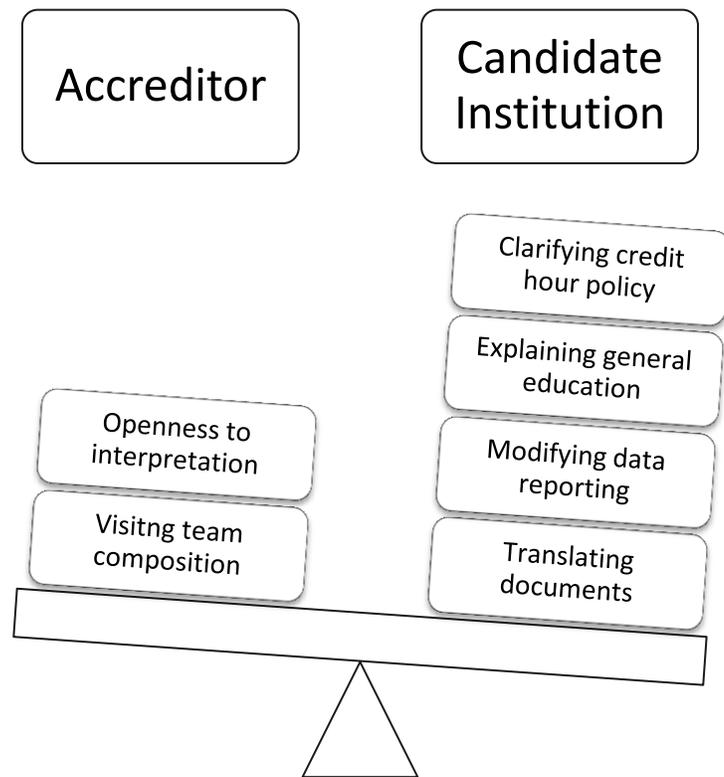


Figure 13: Asymmetrical Relations of Quality

Translation, like quality in higher education, involves a set of taken-for-granted assumptions. For example, in regards to translation, Basnett and Trivedi (1999) remind us of the assumption that a translation is relatively inferior to the original: “the original was perceived as being *de facto* superior to the translation, which was relegated to the position of being merely a copy, albeit in another language” (p. 2). Basnett and Trivedi further elaborate on the idea of colonies as copies of the original metropolis and therefore the assumption about the inherent inferiority of colonies. Language and translation are valuable heuristics to understand the

internationalization of quality practices in higher education because they illustrate unequal distribution of efforts to gain mutual understanding.

**Cultural Encounter**

In chapter four, I presented findings that indicate that perceptions about difference between Mexico and the United States are salient among participants during the accreditation process. Frequently, participants at TECHS attributed their struggles to meet USRAA accreditation criteria to differences between Mexico and the United States. Often, participants articulated those differences in terms of insufficiencies. Here are a few examples:

<i>Quote</i>	<i>Main Differences</i>
“In Mexico, we don’t have the concept of general education like they do in the United States”	General education and the work-preparation role of the undergraduate degree; program review
“The bachelor’s in Mexico is more work oriented”	
“Here in Mexico, we do program review but not with the approach or paradigm that an accreditor like USRAA expects”	
“In Mexico there are not many doctors”	Faculty credentials and research culture by institutional type
“In Mexico, 90% or 94% of graduate students are part time”	
“Mexican education doesn’t have those classifications [teaching/research institutions] like in the United States”	
“There is not a vice president; we don’t have those terms”	Governance structures
“[the academic senate] didn’t have an active role so now it’s called academic council; we did away with the concept of senate because it caused conflict with the Mexican structure”	

Table 11: Comparison of U.S. and Mexican Higher Education

At first glance, the examples that participants provided point out significant differences between Mexican and U.S higher education systems in relation to not only governance structures and resources, but also, and perhaps most importantly, differences regarding the

institutional mission and the purposes of undergraduate education. These differences between U.S. and Mexican higher education exist against the background of larger societal differences between these two countries. One participant, a staff member in the U.S. regional agency, suggested that, given TECH's proximity to the United States, students and faculty from the Mexican institution had familiarity with U.S. culture as illustrated by the use of slang and knowledge of U.S. television and pop culture. A participant in Mexico emphasized that the evaluators' accreditation visits took place in the context of warnings and concerns about security and violence in the region. One might ask: Which one is it? Does close proximity facilitate mutual understanding? Or, as one of the U.S. accreditors told me "of course in California there are some biases about Mexico as you can understand"? The answer to this question is anything but straightforward.

The notion of *frontera* or borderland has an evocative and heuristic power to understand the interactions between Mexican university administrators and faculty and U.S. accreditors. However, I do not want to underestimate the material realities implicit in the concept of border. For example, the barriers separating both countries are physical: concrete walls, barbed wire, armed military personnel. The border patrol white SUV following me on the highway as I headed toward the Mexico border to collect data was also a material experience. These material realities have interpretive and symbolic implications. Perhaps these complex realities are best illustrated as follows:

The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3).

Anzaldúa (1987) captures the paradox of contact and separation that characterizes life in the borderlands. Borderlands are places of encounter and cultural fusion; they are also places for separation, ID checks, and fingerprinting. Heyman (2012) has described border enforcement as a system of filters intended to control different flows across the region. TECHS' location in the borderland implies that these contradictions trickled into the accreditation process. Furthermore, the analogies of borderlands as an open wound (Anzaldúa, 1987) and filtering system (Heyman, 2012) may also be suitable for understanding accreditation: Just like border enforcement, characterized by surveillance and control, is frequently legitimized by "moral panic" (Lusk, Staudt & Moya, 2012, p. 14) and leads to the establishment of policies and practices intended to filter flows, accreditation's practices intend to norm and control access to the United States. Accreditation serves like an institutional visa to gain entry to the United States.

### **Brands, Branding, and Fashion**

Chapter two engaged with the notion of quality assurance in higher education as fashion (Stensaker, 2000; 2007) and fad (Birnbaum, 2000; Birnbaum & Deshotels, 1999). Furthermore, one of the participants at TECHS compared the USRAA accreditation with a brand: "when you see a restaurant from a known brand, you go in because you think it's going to give you a service of the quality you expect." Much like fashion, quality management involves making substantial investments in order to acquire symbolic markers. This process has been called *symbolic consumption* (Oswald, 2012). Branding in higher education involves a series of steps to "find out what the institution does well, and present it in an appealing way by taking into account what people outside think" (Temple, 2011, p. 114).

Discussing brands and branding in relation to U.S. accreditation is not intended to undermine the importance of quality practices or indulging in superfluous deliberations. Quite

to the contrary, brands are important, given that they influence how a particular institution is perceived. Temple (2006; 2011) draws an important distinction between reputation and brand. Reputation is a rather fixed recognition that comes after—often—centuries of good performance. Branding, on the other hand, is much more malleable. TECHS enjoys a good reputation in the region, as national rankings in Mexico and solid enrolment and fundraising numbers indicate. Arguably, obtaining USRAA accreditation will have little impact on TECHS' reputation but it may constitute a major branding effort. The signs and banners around campus, the numerous online and printed publications referring to the accreditation process, along with visibility in international forums, support this notion.

Branding as *quality by association* involves certain compromises. An experienced TECHS administrator who was part of the accreditation effort since its earliest stage said: “Some people say that we are now at the same level as the American universities, and I say no way! That is not true, not true...it doesn't mean you are equals.”<sup>75</sup> Quality by association requires reputable institutions to associate with; those institutions do not need USRAA accreditation as much as TECHS does, as they can stand alone. In their branding effort, TECHS administrators accept a role as a junior partner. In other words, TECHS has accepted to be the Old Navy™ of USRAA i.e. the lower tier brand that is part of a larger conglomerate (J. D. Rosa, personal communication 2013). It is not uncommon for brands to be part of a tiered system: Banana Republic™, Gap™, and Old Navy™ are part of the same consortium but they are tailored to different segments of the market; Old Navy is the lower-tier brand. Old Navy™ is not Banana Republic™ and it does not have to be. Likewise, TECHS is not, and will never be, Stanford but that does not prevent TECHS

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<sup>75</sup> “Porque hay gente que ha dicho ahora estamos iguales que las universidades americanas...mangos digo yo. No es cierto eso, no es cierto. Lo único que tú estás diciendo es que tú te estás evaluando con criterios que también ellos usan pero no quiere decir que estás en igualdad.

from benefiting from Stanford's reputation, via sharing a common accreditor and the same set of standards. These examples illustrate the inter-connectedness of brands, a characteristic that Nakassis (2012) refers to as citationality. Brands establish semiotic relationships (Oswald, 2012). The citational and semiotic relations of brands simply mean that brands invoke relations of similarity and difference among different objects.

A different important concept regarding brands is that the ways individuals interpret or use brands are unpredictable and constitute an exercise of agency. Once TECHS obtained USRAA accreditation, a brand, individuals at TECHS decide how to interpret the meaning of accreditation. For example, TECHS website suggests that, through the USRAA accreditation process, the university "received the world class quality stamp."<sup>76</sup> However, USRAA's documents do not claim to grant world class quality. An example of creative use of USRAA as a brand was the display of signs and banners around TECHS announcing the institution's status as accredited.

The implications of USRAA accreditation for branding illustrate the notions of systemic perspectives in higher education quality. Neo-institutional theory predicts that organizations make themselves similar to other organizations within their field that are perceived as legitimate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Accreditation provides the means for that isomorphic transformation.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed conceptual implications of the study's findings and revisited the main concepts of the literature review. If quality is a multidimensional concept, the effects of USRAA accreditation are also multifaceted and complex. At the same time, accreditation does not take place in a vacuum; it requires adaptation to the local context. Translation, borders, and

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<sup>76</sup> "Recibe sello de calidad mundial"

encounters provide valuable analogies for understanding the implications of internationalizing quality practices. Granted that quality assurance in higher education is a highly symbolic and normative activity, the notion of brands and branding also advance alternative ways to understand and represent the USRAA accreditation process undertaken at TECHS.

Before discussing the implications of the alternative interpretative models I have discussed, the organizational concepts, the ideas about language and encounter, and brands and branding need to be integrated. These alternative models do not constitute discrete analogies but all of them are interconnected.

Figure 14 illustrates how the USRAA accreditation process constitutes an interpretative exercise of agency. Based on semiotic analysis, which is grounded in structural linguistics (Oswald, 2012), the x axis represents oppositional relations between Global North and Global South (Grovogui, 2011), which has been a main element of the argument I have presented. The y axis represents oppositional relationships between household name universities—a concept present both in the literature (Marginson, 2006) and in the data for this study—and invisible colleges (Astin & Lee, 1971), namely institutions with limited reputational value and limited financial resources that are usually not selective in admissions. The y axis illustrates positional competition in higher education (Marginson, 2006; 2007a). It is important to note that the vast majority of institutions of higher education in both Global North and Global South are, by definition, not elite. As presented through the case study, TECHS is an institution in the Global South and invisible in terms of reputation, which makes it fit into Astin and Lee's model.

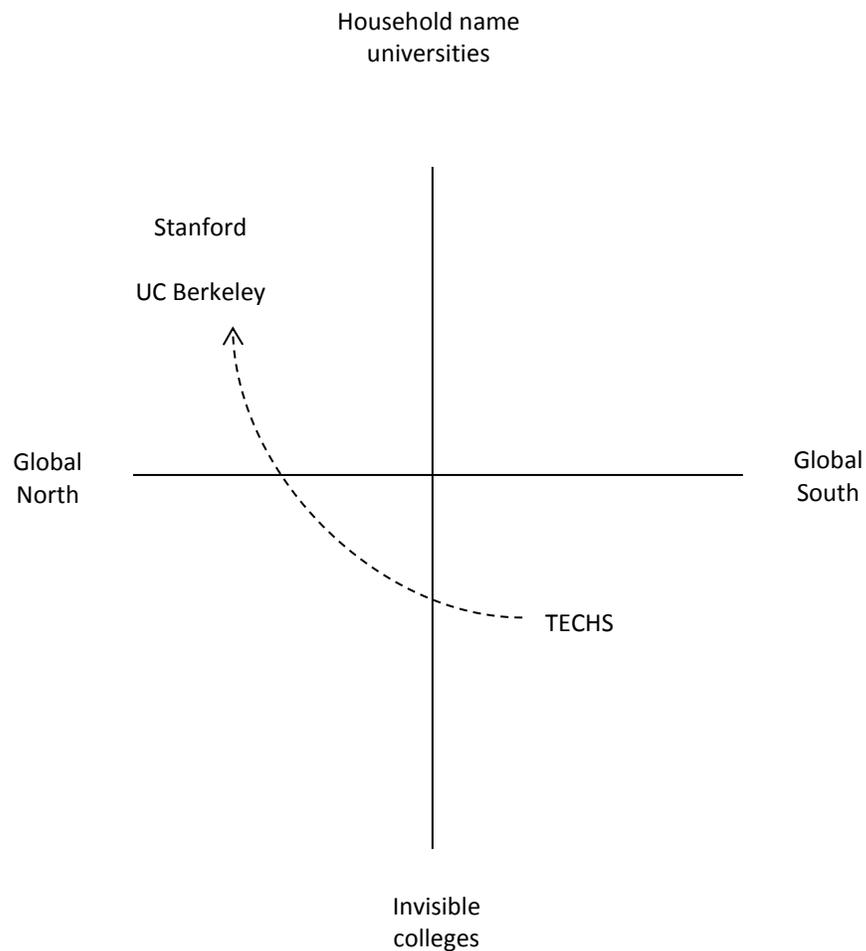


Figure 14: Accreditation as organizational change.

TECHS aspires to become like UC Berkeley and Stanford which are diametrically opposed in this plane. In order to become Stanford-like, i.e. household name and Global North, TECHS has at least two possible routes. The first one requires claiming a position of prominence in the Global South. Competition is fierce, and since studies as early as Riesman's (1956) it has been observed that reputation in higher education is very stable. U.S. regional accreditation becomes a viable alternative because, through accreditation, TECHS claims a secondary role, as an invisible college, but TECHS does so among Global North institutions. Accreditation is an example of position taking, a concept that illustrates institutional agency in the midst of global

competition (Marginson, 2007a). The second route, accreditation, involves compliance with Global North gatekeepers that are construed as reluctant and demanding. This model suggests that accreditation is desirable because it provides a path to become like Stanford and UC Berkeley by claiming a lower tier role among institutions from the Global North.

The concepts discussed in this chapter have implications for policy, practice and further research; those implications are discussed in the following and final chapter.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The previous chapters progressed from identifying a problem, situating it within a conceptual context, establishing questions for inquiry, making specific choices about how to explore the topic, presenting findings, and analyzing their significance. Consequently, I have discussed how quality practices in higher education are becoming increasingly international in nature and how U.S. institutional accreditation is one of those quality practices diffusing quickly, particularly in the Global South. In order to understand U.S. accreditation's expansion in the Global South, this inquiry focused in Mexico, undoubtedly a postcolonial setting and a country with multiple universities that have the seal of approval from one of the six U.S. regional accrediting agencies. Furthermore, I focused my inquiry in one of those institutions which I refer to under the pseudonym of TECHS. Understanding U.S. institutional accreditation in Mexico, and specifically at TECHS, required a discussion of quality, accountability, and the interplay of different stakeholders. Such a discussion shed light on the different dimensions of quality, as quality practices reflect not only formal structures and technical-rational decision making but also present political, symbolic, systemic, and collegial challenges. Given the long and complex history between the Mexico and the United States and the contested nature of the U.S.-Mexico border, where TECHS is located, postcolonial theory provided a valuable analytical framework for interpreting complex and often contradicting realities.

Through analysis of documents, interviews, and direct observation, I engaged with participants from U.S. regional accrediting agencies and administrators at TECHS with the purpose of exploring their experiences and perspectives on the accreditation process. Through such an engagement, I learned that there were many motivations among TECHS administrators

to pursue U.S. institutional accreditation for their institution. While the concept of quality is unclear, the pursuit of quality was a dominant discourse to explain the initial impetus for pursuing accreditation. One salient aspect of this pursuit was associating TECHS to other U.S. accredited institutions that are recognized worldwide for their quality. As a result of the accreditation process, faculty and administrators at TECHS were exposed to multiple opportunities of professional development and networking that they consider valuable. Additionally, I learned that the U.S. accreditation process set in motion a number of complex organizational dynamics that demanded significant efforts from faculty and, at times, introduced stressors or exacerbated complex organizational dynamics.

While U.S. institutional accreditation did bring about a set of changes that participants at TECHS categorized as beneficial, some unanticipated effects also took place. Many of the investments necessary for obtaining accreditation were larger than anticipated, as TECHS had to increase resources—from learning management systems to new buildings—in order to satisfy expectations and also new faculty members will be needed to maintain the commitments related to accreditation in the future. In addition, now that TECHS has obtained initial accreditation, USRAA has become a stakeholder, and some decisions will require consultation or approval through the process of substantial change review. This case study illustrates that the relationship between accreditor and candidate institution is complex and multi-layered, especially when such a relationship takes place across national boundaries. This relationship involves negotiating meanings and decisions in order for both parties to achieve their goals and maintain legitimacy in the process.

Given the complexity of the issues I have discussed, multiple and conflicting perspectives—rather than unisonous or harmonized ones—characterize the evaluation of the process among different participants. However, participants from the U.S. accrediting agencies

and the top administration at TECHS tended to see the process favorably, while fewer administrators and faculty members were critical or skeptical. Nonetheless, there was agreement that the process brought many benefits, and some participants pointed to organizational alignment and change as the main outcomes of the accreditation process. Of significant importance for other international practices for quality in higher education is the use of concepts like language and translation as heuristics for analysis. Furthermore, the accreditation process can be understood by utilizing several metaphors such as cultural encounter and crossing borders. These analogies have been discussed at length and need not to be repeated here. Instead, it is more fruitful to emphasize that accreditation and quality practices in higher education involve dynamic interpretation and are situated in cultural contexts.

Now that I have at least recollected the key points of this study, I discuss some implications of the findings and analysis. Some may refer to this discussion as a move from the *so what* to the *now what*? One caveat is needed, though. At the conclusion of a research project one might be tempted to present grandiose statements of truth in an attempt to compensate for potential shortcomings in the project. Aware of that risk, and given that there are certainly limitations in this study, I offer these suggestions with humility. Consistent with the qualitative, interpretive, and postcolonial assumptions that underpin this study, I relinquish the project of establishing a grand theory of quality in higher education and, instead, offer a few considerations based on the project. These ideas are subservient to local expertise that readers may have about their own contexts. The following sections present implications and considerations in three different areas: practice, policy, and further research. This division is, of course, artificial as these three realms are deeply interconnected.

### **Implications for Practice**

The implications of this study for practice constitute the most important set of implications and yet the ones I am most reluctant to put forward. Conducting this study helped me realize the daunting complexity that quality managers and other university administrators face in their everyday work. While I am in no position to offer advice, I believe at least three implications for practice surface from this study. First, the role of quality managers, often a single individual, is crucial in the successful pursuit of accreditation—particularly at institutions from the Global South. The role of quality managers from the Global South deserves further discussion. Second, the pursuit of U.S institutional accreditation may lead to the attainment of goals and anticipated results but it will almost certainly come with unanticipated consequences. While these consequences are unanticipated, some awareness about unintended effects early in the planning process may facilitate smoother processes. Third, as other institutions of higher education prepare for or aspire to apply for U.S institutional accreditation, some lessons from this case may inform their decisions.

### **Quality Managers in the Global South**

This study brought to center stage the need for institutions of higher education in the Global South to develop a strategy for quality management that is capable of balancing global demands and local needs. Higher education institutions that desire to pursue U.S. accreditation, for example, will need to achieve a difficult balance between U.S. standards and local expectations.

Managing quality requires making choices that involve symbolic and reputational value. Quality managers in the Global South need to make choices about the quality mechanisms they will employ, ranging from national accreditation to international rankings. These choices require maintaining a balance between the mechanisms that will represent an institution in the best

possible way (Barrow, 1999) and employing the mechanisms that will provide the highest reputational value (Stensaker, 2007). Higher education leaders also need to take actions and make decisions on their campuses that will allow their institutions to climb the steep reputational ladder of global higher education. These symbolic and reputational aspects of quality management are particularly challenging for institutions of higher education in the Global South which face the greatest disadvantages. These disadvantages are threefold. First, all of the top tier research institutions that hold the highest reputational value are situated in the Global North (Marginson, 2007). Second, institutions in the Global South have fewer material resources to implement the changes that would be needed to climb up the ladder. And third, virtually every institution in both the Global North and South is competing to reach the highest levels. Clearly, there is not enough room at the top for everyone. In short, quality managers in the Global South must be careful with what they wish for.

A key implication of this study for practice is an increased awareness about the agency that quality managers in the Global South have access to. For example, as illustrated in chapter two, Mexico has a complex higher education quality assurance system. Any given college or university, as the TECHS case study illustrates, can apply for degree recognition by the education department at either the state or national level. The same institution can obtain accreditation through membership in the national accreditation scheme, the scheme for private institutions, or both. In addition, once leaders at TECHS established their interest in obtaining U.S., they determined that USRAA was the best fit for their goals and needs. This example illustrates that effective managers make decisions and choices from among an array of options. On the other hand, this case also illustrates that university leaders are not always aware of the alternatives at their disposal. Therefore, a potential consideration would be to approach quality management as a constant exercise of agency and choice.

Discussing choice and agency in quality management, however, also invokes discussing the possibility of opting out of a system that disadvantages one's institution. Even though this case illustrates that the motivations to pursue U.S. accreditation are powerful, all the potential consequences from the process need to be appraised. As chapter five revealed, while U.S. accreditation represented gains in certain aspects, there is a high price to pay for obtaining accreditation, a price that cannot always be quantified.

### **Proceed with Caution**

This case does not constitute and is not intended as a cautionary tale to discourage quality managers in the Global South to pursue U.S. institutional accreditation; that decision can only happen after careful consideration of the local context and the resources available to commit to the process. After discussing the advantages and disadvantages of U.S. accreditation of non-U.S. institutions, Brittingham (2003) advised U.S. accrediting agencies to proceed with caution as they engage in international activities. The same piece of advice may be beneficial for quality managers and campus leaders in the Global South as they ponder the possibility of pursuing U.S. institutional accreditation.

Quality managers and other campus leaders may want to familiarize themselves with what U.S. institutional accreditation is and is not. Given that U.S. institutional accreditation is complex (ACE, 2012), there are a number of common misconceptions about what accreditation means. To mention just one example, some people believe that having an undergraduate degree from a U.S. accredited institution outside the United States facilitates access to graduate education in the U.S. The reality is that multiple aspects influence admission to graduate school in the U.S. and that many students from around the world, from non-U.S. accredited institutions, successfully pursue graduate degrees in the United States. In addition, institutional accreditation is not program accreditation nor does it constitute a blanket accreditation for all

the programs in an institution. The USRAA accreditation manual has guidelines for communicating accreditation status: “The accredited status of a program should not be misrepresented...Since institutional accreditation does not imply specific accreditation of any particular program in the institution, statements such as ‘this program is accredited’ or ‘this degree is accredited’ are incorrect and misleading.” Nevertheless, as the discussion about brands and branding in chapter 5 indicates, given the citational nature of brands (Nakassis, 2012), users re-interpret and transform brands in ways that the brand creators could not always anticipate—let alone control.

Before initiating an application for U.S. institutional accreditation, an international institution should consider whether they need it, and they should have a clear picture of what they intend to gain. In addition, campus leaders may want to involve the campus community, especially faculty members, in the process if the endeavor is to be perceived as legitimate and not as an imposition. Campus leaders should also take stock of the resources they have available for this ambitious enterprise. These resources are not only financial but, for example, leaders should consider whether it is possible to provide teaching reductions or give service credit—where these concepts exist—for faculty members who contribute in the accreditation efforts. As this case illustrates, mandates for participation not accompanied by time release or credit may lead to a cold reception among faculty members.

A potentially useful baseline before engaging in U.S. accreditation would be asking: Does the institution already meet or exceed all of the local standards for accreditation? As one of the TECHS administrator shared with me: “FIMPES came for a capacity visit and they didn’t make a single recommendation. In other words, it was very easy after what we had suffered [with

USRAA].”<sup>77</sup> In addition, quality managers should ask: Are local accreditation standards compatible with U.S. standards? What U.S. agency provides most flexibility? Quality managers in the Global South should pay close attention to expectations regarding general education versus specialization of the undergraduate degree and how credits are calculated.

Additionally, as the case of TECHS and USRAA illustrate, the level of coordination among the different regional accrediting agencies is such that their expectations and approaches vary. While some regional agencies do not accredit extraterritorial institutions, multiple agencies do but the boundaries are not clear. Therefore, quality managers interested in pursuing U.S. accreditation should be informed of differences and not expect uniformity across agencies, despite their isomorphic tendencies. A clear example is the use of English. While NEASC considers only non-U.S. institutions that employ English, for instance, as their main language of instruction, SACS and WASC do not have such an expectation. Many other differences exist, and quality managers aspiring to obtain U.S. accreditation should gather as much information as possible before moving forward.

### **Critical Quality Management**

While paying attention to the significance of the role of the quality managers in the Global South and careful consideration of quality management alternatives are important ideas in themselves, they capture only partially the implications of this study for practice. Rather than specific recommendations, I would like to present a framework for quality management in higher education from and for the Global South that can be adapted to different settings. This critical framework for quality management in the Global South accounts for two main elements

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<sup>77</sup> FIMPES vinieron e hicieron una primera visita de capacidad, no tuvimos una sola recomendación. O sea, se nos hizo sen cillísimo FIMPES después de haber sufrido

in this study: the multidimensional nature of quality in higher education, and the need for awareness of North/South relations pertaining to quality practices in higher education.

The framework for critical quality management in the Global South rests on three principles or pillars: (a) multifaceted quality; (b) agency; (c) commensuration. From a multidimensional perspective to quality in higher education, it is possible to recognize that while many of the responsibilities of a quality manager involve following procedural guidelines and establishing compliance systems (Kells, 1995a), managing quality involves handling internal conflict and competition and—to a significant extent—defending institutional autonomy and the core mission. In the prevailing context of international quality assurance, complying with external quality standards while remaining relevant in the local context can be a difficult balance to maintain. For example, general education is a central feature of U.S. higher education. Based on that principle, undergraduate students are expected to receive a broad education in a variety of disciplines in addition to specialization in a particular major. In many higher education systems outside of the United States, general education is not a priority because higher education follows a more vocational perspective in order to meet the needs of a growing workforce. Thus, national requirements demand high levels of specialization. Higher education institutions in such contexts that desire to pursue U.S. accreditation will need to achieve a difficult balance between both sets of needs.

**Agency** involves an intellectual element, or imagination (Bignal, 2010). Imagination sets boundaries around what is possible (Rizvi, 2000). Agency, for the purposes of the internationalization of quality assurance, involves resisting the prevailing neoliberal imagination (Rizvi 2006), questioning assumptions, and searching for alternatives. Analyses of global patterns in quality assurance are often reifying, and I am to some extent guilty of the same reification, especially in the previous chapter. The use of analogies is a powerful instrument for

analysis, but Rhoades and Sporn (2002) remind us that conceptual explorations must come back to the practical dimension and recognize that people, real people, are the ones who make decisions:

We reiterate that professionals are implicated in the quality assurance and strategic management practices that we studied. They are implicated in the implementation of these practices, and in the profusion and diffusion of these policies. The work of higher education policy scholars is part of those processes, as are the mechanisms by which we meet and disseminate our scholarship... (Rhoades & Sporn 2002, p. 385).

Rhoades and Sporn (2002) emphasize that the actions professionals undertake shape the changes that take place in quality assurance. They postulate that research and scholarship on quality assurance are also part of those influences shaping in turn the direction of quality assurance. Lemaitre (2002) describes agency in relation to quality assurance, from a Global South perspective, as adapting models while maintaining legitimizing practices:

We translate the standards regional agencies use to accredit institutions in the US, and the benchmarks of the QAA in the UK. We know that we must adjust those standards to our national requirements but we also know that, in the world we live in, it is essential that our standards are not very different from those applied elsewhere (Lemaitre 2002, p. 36).

It is my contention that new ways of thinking about accreditation and quality assurance are necessary. These new approaches should also account for cultural and historical differences and for national and regional contexts.

**Commensuration.** Urciuolli (2005) discussed the “language of higher education assessment” (p. 183), and I believe the use of language as a metaphor for understanding quality-related processes is insightful. I find the analysis by Lippi-Green (1997) to be of outstanding merit for helping understand quality and accountability in higher education. Lippi-Green argued that language subordination operates through a series of processes that involve the mystification of language, claims of authority, and the trivialization of non-mainstream language. I believe the central elements of this model are transferable to quality assurance:

When speakers are confronted with an accent which is foreign to them, the first decision they make is whether or not they are going to accept their responsibility in the act of communication...members of the dominant language group feel perfectly empowered to reject their role, and to demand that a person with an accent carry the majority of responsibility in the communicative act (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 70).

In the quality assurance terrain, when a university applies for accreditation from a different national system or an international agency, the burden of translating—not only in the linguistic sense of language A to language B—falls on the applicant organization. I argue that such a process takes place not just because of the university's status as an applicant but because a domination system is in place. For example, years ago, when I was assisting in preparing a self-study for an American accreditation process by a Mexican university, I observed how the senior academic officer spent long hours adapting the faculty roster. The purpose was reporting the academic degrees of the faculty in such way that they would fit into the accreditor's framework. Whether the faculty members received their degrees in Latin American or Europe, the provost translated their credentials utilizing American conventions (M.S., M.A or PhD) which in many cases were irrelevant or nonexistent in the original national contexts where those degrees were conferred. As the quality assurance effort goes on, the applicant university, the subject with “an accent”, to use Lippi-Green's (1997) term, will carry the majority of the burden in the exercise. The accrediting agency thus retains privilege, claims authority, and can decide to take limited responsibility about whether they achieve mutual understanding.

Commensuration provides a different but related analogy for understanding quality assurance. Commensuration has received attention from sociologists and anthropologists and has sparked theorization as a social phenomenon. Commensuration involves “the comparison of different entities according to a common metric” (Espeland & Stevens, 1998, p. 313) and “the transformation of different qualities into a common metric” (p. 314). D'Agostino (2003)

differentiates between upper case Commensuration, which deals with establishing the procedures and technologies for comparing different phenomena utilizing a similar metric, and lower case commensuration, which deals with the everyday process of making such comparisons. Given the current state of affairs I have presented, I argue that the internationalization of quality assurance in higher education faces a problem of (upper case) Commensuration. In other words, even with the best of intentions, appropriate technologies of commensuration are not yet in place. Even more alarming is the fact that many individuals involved in international quality assurance fail to appreciate the upper case nature of the issue and focus on the technical aspects alone.

The conceptual exploration of commensuration suggests that upper case and lower case commensuration are not merely technical processes; they involve power differences (Espeland & Stevens, 1998). In relation to this idea, quality assurance and accreditation are also political processes (Harvey, 2004a; Morley, 2003; Skolnik, 2010). Commensuration implies a set of assumptions, chief among them is the idea that different realities and values can be compared under the same metric. Moreover, Espeland and Stevens (1998) suggest that central to commensuration is the recognition of incommensurability, i.e., some concepts are not commensurate. Harvey and Newton (2004) suggested that quality can be defined only when the qualities of educations are taken apart and analyzed and when one discerns the essential from the superfluous. This exercise is necessary before one can establish international metrics of quality.

Framing the internationalization of quality assurance in higher education as an issue of commensuration could perhaps promote the analysis of taken-for-granted assumptions and encourage the exploration of important questions such as: What is quality? How do we assign value in higher education? What is the relation between quality and context?

Arguably, an approach to quality management that is based on recognition of the multiple dimensions of quality, that acknowledges the centrality of agency, and that understands quality practices as exercises of translation and commensuration may prove fruitful in addressing quality decisions. Such an approach may be of particular utility in Global South educational contexts where resources are often less abundant. A critical approach to quality practices in higher education would then bring into question the all too common North to South flow of quality approaches and practices in higher education.

### **Implications for Policy**

This study applied an organizational lens to analyze quality which is frequently conceptualized as a policy issue. Quality in higher education is often seen as a set of policies that trickle from a central government or, more recently, from multinational organizations down into specific colleges and universities. Rather than presenting new sets of policy recommendations, the contribution of this work resides in presenting considerations for policy implementation from an on-the-ground perspective. Situated and contextualized perspectives are rarely incorporated into policy development, which complicates the process of quality assurance in higher education. Top down approaches are particularly challenging in quality of higher education given that, as this study shows, accreditation and other quality practices require interpretation. As a result, I present this section of implications for policy as a response to existing international quality assurance policy. In this discussion, I focus on three policy documents produced by organizations that promote cross-border quality assurance in higher education, namely UNESCO-OECD, the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), and the Council for Higher Education (CHEA). While these three documents were part of the pool of documents I analyzed earlier, I now return to those not from an analytical perspective but with the intention to engage in productive dialogue.

The policy document entitled *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education*, sponsored by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and development (OECD), has been pivotal in the development and implementation of quality policies. UNESCO-OECD (2005) establishes recommendations for different stakeholders in relation to international quality assurance in higher education. This document has been discussed and analyzed elsewhere (Blackmur, 2007; Stella, 2006) which seems to confirm its significance.

UNESCO-OECD (2005) encourages collaboration and coordination, sharing of information, and mutual recognition among institutions and accreditation agencies across borders. Indeed, these principles set a strong foundation for promoting bona fide collaboration to promote quality in higher education. This foundation is weakened, however, by the fact that the document does not define quality in higher education and falls back to common sense definitions of quality. While it acknowledges the diversity that characterizes “the terminologies used, the definition of ‘quality’, the purpose and function of the system including its link to the funding of students, institutions or programmes, the methodologies used in quality assurance and accreditation” (p. 18), the document falls short of acknowledging that definitions of quality are constructed in context. Given that quality in higher education is so difficult to define, a suggestion would be to acknowledge the need for local and contextualized definitions of quality—as opposed to vague general definitions. This study illustrated how problematic the lack of definitions of quality can become; sooner or later policy makers will need to recognize that a single model for quality is not only unattainable but also undesirable.

A shortfall present in the UNESCO-OECD (2005) document is that, while the policies and recommendations in the document acknowledge the risks that disreputable organizations, also known as diploma and accreditation mills, it fails to recognize that these organizations are often

motivated by the promise of profits that international trade language implies. Discussions of internationalization of quality practices are linked to trade and market expansion, which may attract disreputable organizations in the pursuit of profits. While the use of business and trade language in higher education may pose an attractive alternative, different definitions may be more beneficial even though they may require more reflective effort.

A final consideration, given that the work of UNESCO on other fronts promotes the preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity, would be to articulate policies in higher education that honor and preserve the different notions of quality that are rooted in local tradition and culture. One of the effects, whether intended or unintended, of internationalization of quality practices is uniformity and standardization. UNESCO-OECD (2005) could define the multiplicity of notions about quality as a benefit, and not as an obstacle, for sharing quality in higher education internationally.

The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) works with accrediting agencies around the world, and as a result, INQAAHE (2007) has accrediting agencies as its primary audience. Titled *Guidelines of good practice in quality assurance*, the INQAAHE policy document devotes only one page to making recommendations to accrediting agencies that conduct international work. The principles that the document promotes call for evidence of meetings and exchanges among different agencies. INQAAHE incorporates trade language in its recommendations as the document makes reference to “importing” and “exporting” (p.12) countries. As discussed earlier, the use of trade language can be partial and problematic.

INQAAHE is in a privileged position because, as a voluntary international network of accrediting agencies, the organization has access to expertise from all corners of the world. INQAAHE also enjoys credibility in the creation and dissemination of knowledge through

biennial conferences and its own independent journal. The conference and journal often feature critical perspectives on internationalization of quality assurance; therefore, this organization may consider expanding its recommendations for practice to include internationalization of quality practices.

The Council of Higher Education Administration (CHEA) in the United States is the organization that coordinates and oversees U.S. accrediting agencies. CHEA's scope goes beyond the six regional institutional accrediting agencies as it also includes program accreditation and single-missions institutions. Moreover, CHEA (2001) provides a policy framework for U.S. accrediting agencies operating in other countries. CHEA recommends introspection before U.S. accreditors decide to undertake evaluation of non-U.S. institutions, especially on grounds of capacity. CHEA emphasizes the need of appropriate capacity in order for U.S. agencies to accredit non-U.S. institutions. Nonetheless, I would warn against the risks implicit in assuming that all non-U.S. settings are similar and those risks should not be underestimated. Further, as the study illustrates, some misconceptions about similarities between contexts may be misleading. In chapter three, I discussed how within a U.S. regional agency there was an assumption that by including staff of Latino ethnic backgrounds or from Latin American nationality of origin, the visiting team was fully equipped to undertake accreditation activities in Mexico.

In addition, familiarity and proximity, like this study illustrates, are not synonymous with mutual understanding. As a result, the discussion about capacity in the CHEA policy statements would benefit from expansion and deepening. Adequately so, CHEA encourages U.S. accreditors to collaborate and coordinate with local the national accreditation systems when operating outside of the U.S. An implementation consideration would involve raising awareness among accreditors about the rich and complex history and tradition of different higher education

systems around the world, and the complex history that characterizes the relation of the U.S. with many other countries in the world.

### **Implications for Further Research**

While the findings of this study have implications for practice and policy, perhaps its greatest contribution is raising a new set of questions that future studies may address. This case study may inform new research projects intended to (a) replicate the study, (b) advance its main concepts and findings, or (c) explore different but related phenomena.

### **Replication Studies**

There is much one can learn from a single case study (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yin, 2009), however, case studies present a partial picture that can be advanced or complemented by conducting other case studies. Therefore, replication studies constitute a great opportunity to further the findings of this study. Rather than seeking for confirmation or hypothesis testing, other case studies may illustrate different interactions in distinct settings and identify new nuances about the issues analyzed here. New case studies exploring the context and impact of U.S. institutional accreditation would be beneficial, especially if situated in other nations of the Global South and those settings that experience rapid expansions of their higher education systems. Given that private higher education institutions are likely to pursue U.S. accreditation in order to become more competitive, those systems with data rich private education systems may be ideal for further studies.

Replication studies informed by this case may also explore different research approaches. For example, a more extensive multi-site case study might be very interesting and generative. Similarly, single ethnographic case studies are not the only strategy to study accreditation in higher education; mixed methods or survey studies may also prove to be effective strategies of inquiry.

A different aspect of replication would involve new studies that incorporate and examine the utility of all or some of the main conceptual foundations of this study, namely (a) quality of higher education as a multidimensional construct, (b) the use of postcolonial theory to understand dynamics of international inequity in higher education, and (c) the ideas of value in higher education as a balance of quality, relevance, access and investment articulated here.

### **Studies that Advance the Findings of this Study**

Future research projects might utilize the findings of this study to develop hypotheses, either in the traditional sense for quantitative studies, or hypotheses as informed hunches about specific issues. For instance, new studies might want to compare and contrast perspectives on accreditation from faculty members and administrators in order to identify and elaborate patterns. Other studies might explore more closely the organizational dynamics of quality practices.

Given the significance of *burden and benefit* as a theme in this study, new research may want to expand the exploration of investment and benefit, perhaps following the impact of accreditation on a single or multiple institutions over time. Longitudinal studies may provide fascinating analysis. Other studies may explore comparatively the effects of accreditation according to different institutional type or national context.

Given the saliency of language and translation, a very stimulating set of studies might emerge from the use of language as heuristic for understanding cross-national quality practices in higher education. These studies might include analyzing discourses of quality embedded in different policy statements and documents—an exploration that has already been conducted to some extent here. A study of the impact and use of accreditation and other quality practices comparing English and non-English speaking national settings may be fruitful.

Given the articulation presented in this study of North/South divides as a category of analysis in the internationalization of quality practices in higher education, new studies focused on quality management strategies from the Global South may be of special interest. The challenges of managing quality in and from the Global South are unique in ways that warrant more detailed studies.

### **Exploring Different but Related Phenomena**

This project utilized U.S. institutional accreditation in Mexico as an entry point for exploring the internationalization of quality practices in higher education. U.S institutional accreditation is not the only form of international quality activity in higher education. This study illustrates the interest among university administrators for pursuing program accreditation after obtaining institutional accreditation. The study of institutions pursuing program accreditation would be productive.

The literature on higher education rankings has exploded in recent years. While some voices have been critical of or concerned about rankings (Marginson, 2007; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007), the study of rankings has not thus far incorporated North/South divides as a category for analysis and has been disconnected from discussions about quality. This study sets a solid conceptual framework for engaging with the study of international rankings.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the implications of the study for policy, practice, and further research. Given that the present case study provides in-depth insights into the process of U.S. institutional accreditation of a Mexican university and the context of such process, the findings could illuminate early decisions of higher education managers from institutions contemplating whether to engage in U.S. accreditation. Rather than specific recommendations, some considerations result from this research project: (a) quality management in the Global South

presents particular characteristics that need to be incorporated into accreditation decisions, (b) while every context is different, caution and introspection is advised before engaging in accreditation processes, (c) regardless of the context, a critical perspective to quality management that accounts for the local context may be the best approach. This case illustrates that institutional accreditation is a complex activity that may yield unexpected results; quality decisions are multi-layered and range from the technical to the political. Careful consideration of motivations and a forecasting of potential consequences are necessary. Ideally, this process would engage a broad range of constituents and not only the top university echelons. Certainly, faculty members ought to be part of the decisions process.

While this entire study has been structured from an organizational perspective given its unit of analysis, some policy implications can be derived. Multinational organizations, like UNESCO and OECD, along with global professional networks, like INQAAHE, as well as national organizations like ACE and CHEA in the U.S. all encourage collaboration in developing international quality assurance frameworks. However, true collaborative approaches can hardly be achieved without acknowledgment of existing disparities. Furthermore, the trade language that prevails in international policy documents that refers to importing and exporting countries does little to advance collaboration and trust.

This research project is most certainly not the final word in understanding U.S. institutional accreditation of institutions of higher education in Mexico as too many fascinating questions remain unanswered. In Mexico alone, there are numerous institutions en route to become U.S.-accredited, and it is impossible to know how many more are considering pursuing this credential. All across the Global South, the effects of higher education internationalization can be observed; internationalization of quality and accountability are on the rise. While generative, this study goes only so far to explore one case in one setting in depth and offer

some considerations for other settings. More studies are necessary to understand the contextual nuances of the effects that U.S. accreditation produces. Other international quality practices that are gaining traction internationally deserve attention: program accreditation and rankings, for instance.

Finally, more studies that engage in creative and critical ways with quality practices in higher education are necessary. At the core of this need for new research is the need to question taken for granted notions about quality and the use of trade language, on the one hand, and that, nonetheless, advance our understandings of quality recognizing its complex, contextualized, and interpretive nature. Rather than being regulated, measured or discovered, quality in higher education—from this perspective—must be created and agreed upon.

## APPENDIX A

### SUMMARY OF DOCUMENTS ANALYZED IN THE STUDY

Document Title	Sponsorship	Total pages
Assuring Academic Quality in the 21st Century: Self-Regulation in a New Era	2012 American Council on Education	52
TECHS: A Pivotal Factor in State development*	2009 TECHS	1
TECHS Eligibility report summary*	2011 TECHS	3
International Quality Review and Accreditation: The Role of U.S. Recognized Accrediting Organizations	2002 Council for Higher Education Accreditation	4
CHEA International Quality Group	2012 Council for Higher Education Accreditation	1
Principles for United States Accreditors Working Internationally: Accreditation of Non-United States Institutions and Programs	2001 Council for Higher Education Accreditation	1
Sharing Quality Higher Education Across Borders: A Checklist for Good Practice	2007 International Association of Universities; Council for Higher Education Accreditation; American Council on education	2
Sharing Quality Higher Education Across Borders: A Statement on Behalf of Higher Education Institutions Worldwide	2005 International Association of Universities; Council for Higher Education Accreditation; American Council on education	6
Guidelines of Good Practice in Quality Assurance	2007 International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education	12
Becoming Accredited: A Guide to Eligibility, Candidacy, and Initial Accreditation for Free-Standing Institutions Abroad	2011 New England Association of Schools and Colleges	34
Guidelines	2005 United Nations	24

\* The names of these documents and sponsoring organizations have been modified according to the pseudonyms assigned for this study with the intent of protecting participants' confidentiality.

for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education	Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization	
USRAA Visit Schedule*	2009 USRAA	9
Report of the USRAA Visiting Team: Capacity and Preparatory Review to TECHS*	2009 USRAA	39
Report of the USRAA Visiting Team: Educational Effectiveness Review to TECHS*	2011 USRAA	59
USRAA as a Cultural leader	2009 USRAA	9
Handbook of Accreditation	2012 USRAA	120
How to Become Accredited: Procedures Manual for Eligibility, Candidacy, and Initial Accreditation	2011 USRAA	32
A Guide Toward USRAA Accreditation for Institutions Incorporated or Operating Primarily Outside of the United States*	2012 USRAA	67
Protocol for Implementation	2012 USRAA	1
International Accreditation	2012 USRAA	1
Toward A Transnational Framework: Aligning Internal and External Quality Assurance Processes	2012 USRAA	16
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>493</b>

## APPENDIX B

### SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR USRAA PARTICIPANTS

#### *Opening*

---

- Thank you for your time, I really appreciate it
- My dissertation looks at accreditation of non-U.S. colleges and universities; the case of TECHS is really quite intriguing
- Review informed consent guidelines; ask for permission to record the interview

#### *Concrete Case Study*

---

1. As you know, my dissertation focuses on the accreditation process of TECHS, what are some lessons learned about that case from USRAA's perspective?
2. What have you heard about the institution? What were your impressions meeting TECHS folks?
3. In your perspective, why did TECHS chose USRAA to pursue accreditation?
4. Why do you think USRAA move forward to accredit TECHS Universidad?

#### *U.S. Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education Abroad*

---

5. It seems that USRAA is undergoing a deep revision of its international strategy. In general terms, how is this international strategy developing? What factors or changes are being considered?
6. Could you tell me about your role in developing USRAA's internationalization strategy?
7. In my perspective, there seem to be many changes taking place at USRAA, would you tell me about some of these changes in relation to USRAA's international role?

#### *Experiences*

---

8. What are some noteworthy experiences involving accreditation of non-U.S. institutions?
9. If you have traveled abroad for accreditation purposes, what do you find significant in those settings?
10. In your perspective how are the U.S. accreditors perceived abroad?
11. What aspects are considered when determining whether a particular colleges or university is eligible for U.S. accreditation?

#### *Principles and ideas*

---

12. What do you think is the role, if any, of U.S. accrediting agencies in promoting quality in higher education around the world?
13. What should be considered when developing the internationalization strategy for U.S. accrediting agencies?
14. What is the future of international accreditation of higher education? What are some of the emergent issues?

#### *Follow up*

---

- 

#### *Closing*

---

Thank participant for her/his time and clarify timeline. Offer to send transcripts from the interview. Ask if she or he has any questions.

## APPENDIX C

### SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR TECHS PARTICIPANTS

#### *Inicio*

---

- Le agradezco mucho por su tiempo
- El propósito de mi proyecto es documentar el proceso de acreditación institucional de CETYS Universidad con la WASC
- Directrices de consentimiento informado

#### *Actores principales*

---

1. ¿Cómo describiría el proceso de acreditación para alguien que, como yo, no estuvo involucrado?
2. ¿En qué consistió su participación en el proceso de acreditación WASC?
3. ¿Quién más participó en el proceso?
4. ¿Cómo se determinó que usted sería parte del proceso de acreditación?

#### *Proceso*

---

5. En su experiencia ¿cómo fue que CETYS Universidad decidió participar en este proceso de acreditación?
6. ¿Cuáles fueron algunos de los retos que el proceso presentó?
7. En términos generales ¿cuáles son los incentivos para participar en el proceso de acreditación?
8. ¿Es el proceso de acreditación con WASC diferente o similar a otros procesos de acreditación de los que usted tenga conocimiento?

#### *Experiencias*

---

9. ¿Hay alguna experiencia en particular dentro del proceso que usted me pueda compartir y que le haya llamado la atención?
10. ¿Cuál fue su experiencia al trabajar con los acreditadores de WASC?
11. ¿Qué dinámicas de grupo pudo usted observar durante el proceso?
12. ¿Cómo influyen las relaciones entre México y Estados Unidos en este proceso?

#### *Conceptos*

---

13. En su opinión personal, ¿en qué consiste la calidad de la educación superior?
14. ¿Qué aspectos determinan la calidad de una institución de educación superior?

#### *Cierre*

---

15. ¿Hay algo más que usted desee agregar?
- Gracias por su tiempo y participación.

## APPENDIX D

### SAMPLE INFORMED CONSENT LETTER IN ENGLISH

Dear participant:

My name is Gerardo Blanco Ramírez, and I am a doctoral student of Higher Education Administration at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in the United States. Thank you for considering participating in this study and taking the time to read this form. I am conducting data collection for my doctoral dissertation titled “United States Accreditation of Mexican Institutions of Higher Learning.” Being from Mexico, I am interested in how Mexican universities approach quality assurance and accreditation, particularly by foreign providers, e.g. American regional accreditation agencies.

Given the focus and scope of my doctoral dissertation, I intend to interview faculty and staff who are involved in the institutional accreditation process and are willing to participate in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately one and a half hours. The purpose of the interview is learning about the accreditation process and about the perspectives of staff and administrators regarding this topic. The interview will focus on aspects of your work regarding institutional accreditation. It is unlikely but not impossible that the interview may elicit experiences or memories that are upsetting or uncomfortable. Please keep this in mind when deciding your participation in this study.

In order to protect the wellbeing and confidentiality of participants in the study, I will do the following:

- i. Carefully and securely manage and store the information collected during the interviews.
- ii. Make sure not to keep records of the names of participants that can be associated with interview responses. I will utilize pseudonyms to protect the name of individual and institutional participants.
- iii. Audio-record and take notes during the interview process. However, I will refrain from recording the interview or taking notes upon your request. I will keep the audio files only until I transcribe the interview.
- iv. Provide a copy of the transcript of the interview upon participant’s request

- v. Conduct data collection and management according to Mexican legislation, as stated by the Ley Federal de Protección de Datos Personales en Posesión de Particulares (Federal Legislation for the Protection of Personal Data by Particulars) and FERPA in the United States.

Your signature on this form indicates the following:

- a) That you have read and been explained this form and that you are willing to participate in the interview.
- b) That you have granted permission for your information to be used according to the guidelines established above.
- c) That you understand that you can withdraw from the process at any time and for any reason, and that you can request the interview not to be recorded

If you have further questions, you are welcome to contact me:

Gerardo Blanco Ramírez, [email] [Phone number]

Thank you for your time and participation!

-----

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

I request a copy of the interview transcript

I would prefer not to have the interview recorded

## APPENDIX E

### SAMPLE INFORMED CONSENT FORM IN SPANISH

Estimado(a) participante:

Gracias por dedicarme un momento de su tiempo y por considerar participar en mi investigación. Soy Gerardo Blanco Ramírez, candidato al doctorado en Educación Superior por la Universidad de Massachusetts Amherst en los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica. Actualmente estoy realizando la recolección de datos para mi tesis doctoral titulada “La acreditación estadounidense de instituciones mexicanas de educación superior.” Me interesa investigar el papel que la acreditación estadounidense juega en las actividades educativas de las universidades en México. Por lo tanto, he seleccionado su institución ya que ésta cuenta con el tipo de acreditación que me interesa investigar.

Dado el propósito de mi tesis doctoral, pretendo entrevistar a académicos y personal administrativo en México que participan directa o indirectamente en el proceso de acreditación de sus instituciones. La entrevista abordaría temas relacionados con los procesos de acreditación y las perspectivas de los participantes y tendría una duración de una hora y media, aproximadamente. En la entrevista me limitaré a realizar preguntas relacionadas con su trabajo en relación al proceso de acreditación.

Si usted decide participar en mi investigación, yo me comprometo a tomar las siguientes precauciones para proteger su confidencialidad y la información que usted me proporcione:

1. Manejar y archivar la información con el mayor de los cuidados, asegurando la disociación de la información que usted proporcione de los elementos que puedan identificarle.
2. Destruir los registros de los nombres de los participantes y remplazarlos por códigos o pseudónimos que impidan revelar o difundir la identidad de los participantes.
3. Proporcionar una copia de la transcripción de la entrevista si usted lo desea.
4. Realizar este proyecto de investigación y manejar la información recabada de acuerdo con la Ley Federal de Protección de Datos Personales en Posesión de Particulares vigente.

Ya que su opinión es importante para mi investigación, solicito su permiso para audio-grabar nuestra conversación. Una vez realizada la transcripción de la entrevista, me comprometo a eliminar la grabación y a no reproducirla o difundirla en manera alguna.

Su firma en esta forma indica lo siguiente:

- a. Que usted ha leído y comprendido el contenido de esta forma y que decide libremente participar en la investigación.
- b. Que usted autoriza que la información proporcionada sea utilizada de acuerdo a los puntos anteriores.
- c. Que usted está enterado(a) de que se puede retirar del estudio y que su información no será utilizada si usted lo solicita de manera verbal o escrita a cualquier punto de la investigación.

Si tiene cualquier pregunta o solicitud, me la puede hacer llegar por correo electrónico a: [Email]  
[Phone number]

¡Muchas gracias por su tiempo y participación!

-----

Nombre: \_\_\_\_\_ Fecha: \_\_\_\_\_

Firma: \_\_\_\_\_

Autorizo que se grabe la entrevista: Sí No

Solicito una copia de la transcripción de la entrevista: Sí No

**APPENDIX F**

**SAMPLE INITIAL CODES**

Sample IN VIVO Codes					
outside	Non-US	enhance	accreditor	assure	capacity
promulgate	budget	Experience	information	transfer	equivalency
inform	adequately	cultural	costs	clearly	countries
insensitivity	exporter	variety	Language	expectations	supplemental
Special needs	Diploma mills	Acc. mills	exports	imports	protocol
sharing	across	recommend	market	safeguard	protect
mobility	capacity	accessibility	High-quality	checklist	assist
urged	commitment	diversity	sensitive	consulted	collaboration
opportunities	Critical think	citizenship	degrees	credentials	recognized
employment	access	host	ongoing	expertise	Same quality
services	resources	adequate	support	proper	authorization
Home	effective	information	award	good practice	clearly
criteria	appropriate	adequate	U.S.	operations	CHEA
accredit	separate	outside	interest	develop	examine
lengthy	experience	abroad	benefit	together	training
database	careful	thoughtful	issue	national	Supranationl
GATS	trade	debate	increased	expansion	Needed
exchanging	people	borders	goals	Intert'nalize	enhance
contribution	counterparts	market	public	delivery	developing
diversity	inadequate	wellbeing	flow	equity	contexts

accessible	Same high	opportunities	satakeholders	issues	exchange
wellbeing	communities	host	cooperate	appropriate	transparency
relevant	reliable	competent	authorities	vital	right
constructive	representative	dialogue	partnership	support	qualified
monitored	authorized	foreign	systematic	information	endorsed
abroad	eligibility	candidacy	becoming	formal	process
complete	must	meet	accountability	improvement	successful
Requirement	outside	authority	charter	English	sufficient
qualifications	collectively	oldest	appropriate	training	voluntary
resolution	timely	support	encourage	disreputable	vulnerable
Low-quality	recognition	qualifications	lack	mobility	capacity
limited	problems	respect	trust	due	regard

**Sample analyst-constructed codes:**

Agency; import/export; in/out; monolithic; value; deficit; sameness;  
home/host; nameless; deficit; sameness; opposition; second class;  
mimicry; U.S. vs. them; reification;

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