



**EXTERNAL REVIEW REPORT
ACCORDING TO THE GUIDELINES
OF GOOD PRACTICES OF INQAAHE**

**Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la
Educación Superior (SINAES) de Costa Rica**

September 2019

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A. Executive Summary

The Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior (SINAES) of Costa Rica has been reviewed for the second time following the Guidelines for Good Practice (GGP) of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). The evaluation has been carried out according to the 2016 version of the GGP and following the "*Procedures Manual 2018*", by an independent team of international experts (or review panel) appointed by INQAAHE and accepted by SINAES (see Annex 2).

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

Following the established procedure, the Panel visited the facilities of SINAES on 2, 3 and 4 July 2019 and met with representatives of the Agency and stakeholders. Annexes 1 contains information on the agenda of the site visit and the panel of experts, in accordance with "*Procedures Manual 2018*"

After the analysis of the self-evaluation report, the documents and evidences provided by SINAES and located in a "cloud" hosting service, as well as the information obtained in the interviews carried out during the site visit, the evaluation Panel submits the conclusions of this external report with the following detailed assessment of the guidelines.

The Panel considers that SINAES substantially complies with the six INQAAHE Guidelines for Good Practice. Two guidelines are fully complied and four are substantially complied. In each of the guidelines, the Panel has identified strengths and areas for improvement that have been included with the objective of recognising the efforts for continuous improvement made by SINAES, but also with the spirit of identifying issues that might be important to incorporate them into this on-going process of improvement that is part of the activity of the Costa Rican agency.

The SINAES is in a moment of functional and administrative renewal and the Panel mentions in the report that some of the elements identified among the areas of improvement are possibly being addressed by the Executive Direction and the Council.

With regard to **Guideline I *The Structure of the External Quality Assurance Agency (EQAA)***, the Panel considers that SINAES is **substantially compliant**.

SINAES complies with the Guideline I in terms of structural considerations, achieving a strong performance in areas such as legitimacy, capacity to carry out its tasks. The HE sector recognises the capacities of SINAES to fulfil the objectives established by the law. However, SINAES run its activities from 2012 to 2018 without approving a new Strategy Plan, extending a temporary situation for a longer period that would have been desirable for an organisation of this kind. This situation has been corrected with the reforms carried out since the beginning of 2019 that imply an organic and functional reorganisation.

Regarding **Guideline II *Accountability of the EQAA***, the Panel considers that SINAES is **substantially compliant**.

The Panel considers that SINAES only partially complies with the part of the Guideline II related to the IQAS, since the IQAS requires a very important reformulation in order to be able to develop this area to its full capacity. It is necessary that SINAES will take up again the initiative of being a reference agency in the development of an internal quality assurance policy.

With regard also to Guideline II, the links and the visibility of SINAES in the national and international QA community are in full compliance with the Guideline and its interest in cyclically undergoing review processes carried out by international organisations should be highlighted.

Concerning **Guideline III *The EQAA's framework for the external review of quality in higher education institutions***, the Panel considers that SINAES is **substantially compliant**.

The Guideline is substantially compliant with the part of the Guideline related to the relations with the HEIs subject to accreditation. However, the Panel considers that there are areas of improvement in the formalisation of mechanisms to collect feedback of the accreditation procedures from universities and incorporate them into the improvement cycle, as well as in the involvement of stakeholders in the evaluation processes.

The Panel considers that SINAES has made an important effort to improve the external evaluation process in the different phases in which it is designed, particularly reducing the time of the whole process. But the Panel finds an important area of improvement in the training of international peers and in a better definition of the roles of the national peer within the site visit panel.

With regard to **Guideline IV *The EQAA and its relationship to the public***, the Panel considers that SINAES is **fully compliant**.

SINAES is fully compliant with Guideline IV with regard to the relations established with the general public. SINAES has become a reference body for information on QA and accreditation of HE in Costa Rica. The Panel considers that the policy of SINAES towards publishing specialised documents should be more active also including the reports of the programme accreditation procedures carried out by the agency, although it is a practice that has not been universally developed.

The Panel also recognises the effort of SINAES in publishing cross-sectional reports associated with the evaluation processes led by the organisation. Nevertheless, the Panel encourages the Council of SINAES to publish these reports in a systematic and cyclical manner and make them known to a wide public through its communication tools. Finally, the Panel recommends to develop mechanisms and initiatives available to SINAES to promote among the HE sector in Costa Rica that the accreditation reports can be made public in the future in a version easily understood by a broad audience beyond the experts in HE and QA.

With regard to **Guideline V *Decision making***, the Panel considers that SINAES is **substantially compliant**.

The Panel recognises that the accreditation decisions of the SINAES Council provide information on weaknesses and strengths and underlines its character as an instrument for continuous programme improvement.

The Panel recommends that the criteria, on which the decisions of the SINAES Council are based, should be explicit and take the form of general guidelines to inform applicants and help strengthen the consistency of the judgements.

With regard to the procedure for complaints and appeals, the Panel recommends SINAES to formalise the procedure in a detailed manner, in order to provide the people responsible for the accrediting programme with sufficient information about the available mechanisms to apply and the rights thereof.

Finally, **Guideline VI *The QA of cross border higher education***, the Panel considers that SINAES is **fully compliant**.

The Panel considers that, although SINAES does not have among its responsibilities the attention to cross-border education, the agency has developed competencies for the internationalisation of its activities, which favour its full compliance with the contents of this Guideline.

B. Glossary

Accreditation

In Costa Rica, the law establishes programme accreditation offered by both public and private universities as a process for improvement on a voluntary basis and grants SINAES the development of the procedure, methodology, selection and training of peer evaluators. The Council of SINAES is responsible for the final accreditation decision.

Although in the SINAES Mission institutional accreditation is included, this practice has not yet been implemented.

AEAC

Acronym in Spanish for Agencia Externa de Aseguramiento de la Calidad

AOP

Annual Operating Plan

CEO

Chief Executive Officer

CINTAS

Acronym in Spanish for "Internal Quality Assurance of Evaluation Agencies". Procedure designed by ANECA in 2008 and developed within the framework of RIACES between 2008 and 2010

CONARE

National Council of Rectors of Costa Rica

CONESUP

National Council for Private University Higher Education

ECA

European Consortium for Accreditation

EQAA

External Quality Assurance Agency

GGP

Guidelines of Good Practices

HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IQAS	Internal Quality Assurance System
MULTRA	Multilateral Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Results regarding Joint Programmes
Para-university (institution)	Institutions of higher education that deliver short programmes of two or three years to students who have completed secondary education
QA	Quality Assurance
Re-accreditation	Evaluation procedure where a programme already accredited by the SINAES is subjected to a second or successive processes of accreditation
Researcher	Representative of the technical staff of SINAES in charge of the accreditation procedure and the relationship with both the programme and the evaluation panel
RIACES	Acronym in Spanish for Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
SIACES	Acronym in Spanish for Ibero-American System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

C. Introduction

Background of the review

The National System of Accreditation of Higher Education (SINAES) of Costa Rica requested the *International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education* (INQAAHE) to coordinate its external evaluation against the Guidelines for Good Practice (GGP). The INQAAHE Secretariat developed the updated procedure in 2018 to establish the Terms of Reference and prepare the contract with SINAES for its external review. INQAAHE selected a list of three international experts that SINAES approved at the beginning of June 2019 and the Panel of Experts began its work prior to the visit.

Due to unforeseen personal reasons, the expert appointed as President had to resign from participating in the Review scheduled in June and the INQAAHE Secretariat had to select a new President and submit his appointment to SINAES for approval. This circumstance meant that the Panel had to request a shift of the dates of the visit from June 11, 12 and 13, 2019 to July 2, 3 and 4, 2019, so that the new President could have time to read the self-evaluation report and the annexes related to the report.

The Panel wishes to highlight at this point the flexibility and collaboration provided at all times by SINAES in the face of this unforeseen circumstance and the speed with which it reorganised the agendas with the people who were going to attend the interviews. This diligence was evidenced by the fact that neither the list of interview attendees nor their level and position were finally reduced.

The members of the Review Panel have extensive international experience in quality assurance and evaluation, as evidenced by their Curriculum Vitae submitted by the INQAAHE Secretariat to SINAES. The Panel is made up of the following experts:

- Francisco Cadena, Chairperson of the Panel, is Full Professor of Chemical Engineering at the National Polytechnic School of Ecuador,

and has been President of the Council for Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education (CEAACES) of Ecuador between June 2013 and June 2017.

- Martín Strah, Academic Member of the Panel, is Director of Development and International Relations of the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU) of Argentina.
- Rafael Llavori, Secretary of the Panel, is Head of the Institutional, International Relations and Communication Unit of the National Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (ANECA) of Spain.

The Review Panel had the opportunity to interview the SINAES Council and a representative number of members of the agency's staff, as well as evaluators and representatives of the country's public and private universities, as well as representatives of student and professional associations, as well as the Minister of Public Education, Giselle Cruz, who took office on the same day that the Panel's visit began and yet did not suspend the scheduled interview with the Evaluation Panel.

The visit concluded with a meeting of the Panel with the Council of SINAES in which the President made a summary of the review on behalf of the team of experts. The interviews during the visit of the Panel were carried out in Spanish.

Once the visit finished, the Panel drafted the first version of the external review report incorporating the information gathered during the interviews, as well as the discussions and comments of the Panel members after the interview sessions during the visit.

The report explains in detail the level of compliance of SINAES with INQAAHE's Guidelines for Good Practice. This first version was commented on and agreed by the Panel, closing the final version that is submitted to the INQAAHE Secretariat following the procedure for its submission to the Board of Directors for final decision. As a previous step, described in the abovementioned procedure, the Panel forwarded to SINAES the final version

of the report for the correction of factual errors. In this version, the results of each Guideline were omitted since it is up to the INQAAHE's Board of Directors to agree on the final opinion of the report.

The self-evaluation report and the annexes with supporting information have allowed the Panel to obtain the necessary information before the site visit, as well as to conduct an objective and evidence-based external review of SINAES.

The self-evaluation report had a descriptive and analytical component in the development and changes developed in SINAES in the last months, end of 2018 and beginning of 2019, prior to the review.

It should be noted that SINAES requested INQAAHE to coordinate its external evaluation for the first time in 2010 and in 2018 the SINAES Council requested it again. Although it is true that the lapse of time between the two reviews is 8 years, the Panel wishes to emphasise the zeal of SINAES in maintaining its external evaluation on a cyclical basis. The external review was conducted with a recent change in the Presidency of SINAES in April 2019 and in the CEO position in June, showing the stability of the processes and the competence of the workforce.

The fact that SINAES has been undergoing a profound organisational, administrative, human resources, financing and evaluative transformation in recent months has led the report to focus extensively on the documentation of the changes that are being undertaken in all these areas.

However, although the Panel is committed to focusing on the development of the work of SINAES from its last evaluation in 2010 until the time it requests the review in 2018, it has echoed the modifications undertaken by SINAES or planned in the documentation provided.

Thus, in some of the GGP guidelines analysed by the Panel, it has been possible to identify some weaknesses that will likely be the object of attention or even correction with the measures that are being implemented in recent months. This situation is shown in the assessment of the guideline

in order to allow the Board of Directors of SINAES to know that the Panel is aware of the corrective measure is either in its design or implementation phase.

Finally, the Panel would like to express its gratitude for the excellent support provided by SINAES before and during the visit, which allowed it to develop its work in the best of possible scenarios. The visit was prepared in detail to obtain the maximum yield and efficiency of the time of displacement of the members of the Panel.

The Panel wishes to highlight the speed and collaborative spirit with which SINAES responded to requests for supplementary information during the visit.

The interviews were conducted at the SINAES headquarters on the first day of July 2, at the hotel where the Panel was staying on July 3, and again at the SINAES facilities on Thursday, July 4. Both venues allowed the Panel to obtain the best results from the interviews. The only exception to these two locations was obviously the visit to the Minister of Public Education that took place for agenda reasons in her offices in downtown San José.

The Panel would like to congratulate in a special way to the team in charge of the logistical organisation of the visit, thanks to which the interviews could be carried out in the planned time, according to the schedule, and attended by most of the people who were identified in the agenda.

The Context of Evaluation: SINAES and HE in Costa Rica

The HE system comprises those institutions that establish as a general requirement for admission to them the completion of secondary education. The system is made up of two subsystems: university higher education and para-university higher education; the second includes short programmes (awarding a diploma of upper technicians).

The Political Constitution of Costa Rica (1949) grants full autonomy to public universities to manage their activities and resources. There are currently five public universities in Costa Rica: the University of Costa Rica (1940),

the Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica (1971), the Universidad Nacional (1973), the Universidad Estatal a Distancia (1977) and the Universidad Técnica Nacional (2008).

In 1974, the existing public universities signed a coordination agreement and the National Council of Rectors (CONARE) was created. The Higher Education Planning Office was created as a technical body of CONARE. This body is responsible for the coordination and planning of university higher education in the country, as well as the approval, evaluation and closure of programmes in public universities.

The body responsible for private higher education is the National Council for Private University Higher Education (CONESUP), attached to the Ministry of Public Education. It was created by Act No. 6,693 in 1981 and is the body in charge of the inspection and oversight of the country's private universities.

The Council is chaired by the Minister of Public Education in turn, a representative appointed by CONARE, a representative of all private universities, a representative of the National Planning Office and a representative appointed by the Federation of University Professional Colleges.

The number of private universities in Costa Rica has increased significantly since the 1990s, currently CONESUP has in the registry of its website 54 authorised private universities.

The relationship of the SINAES with these two organisations linked to public and private HE in Costa Rica has also undergone an important transformation that has led to institutional strengthening and an increase in its competencies. With respect to CONARE, SINAES has increased in recent years its independence on a legal, organisational and administrative level that will conclude in the near future with its location in a different headquarters from the one it currently shares with the Council of Rectors.

On the other hand, with regard to CONESUP, the law has recently granted SINAES the capacity to approve proposals for changes in the curricula of

accredited private universities, making use of its methodological and technical experience, thus allowing for a notable shortening of the time taken for a modification in CONESUP.

Parallel to the university higher education system in Costa Rica, a considerable number of non-university higher education institutions (*parauniversitarias*, by its Spanish name in Costa Rica) were developed. These are institutions that offer short programmes of two or three years to students who have completed secondary education, this option can also be delivered by universities. In 1980, Act No. 6,541 was adopted, conferring the status of para-university HEIs to the institutions recognised by the Higher Council of Education, the body responsible for authorising the creation, supervision and suppression of programmes delivered by public and private para-university institutions.

The para-university education subsystem is composed of public and private institutions. There are two types of para-university entities: university colleges that are funded and managed directly by the State and private para-university educational institutions. The data on this type of institutions provided by the SINAES self-evaluation report, based on the information available on the website of the Consejo Superior de Educación (2019), show that, as of January 2019, there are 2 state para-university institutions, 24 private para-university institutions, apart from a number of inactive institutions of this nature.

The National System of Accreditation of Higher Education in Costa Rica (SINAES) was created in 1999 within the framework of public HEI with the signing of the "Agreement for the Creation of the National System of Accreditation of Higher Education", signed by the highest authorities of the four public universities existing at that time and four private universities.

The Republic Act No. 8,256 of 2 May 2002 granted legal independence to SINAES, recognising its "NATIONAL" nature, as well as its legal status as part of the Costa Rican state university higher education system that enjoys autonomy, through its legal affiliation to CONARE. This Act confers on

SINAES the category of public interest body, whose primary mission is to accredit, with official nature, university degrees and programmes that comply with the quality requirements established by SINAES.

The National System of Accreditation of Higher Education is made up of 30 Higher Education Institutions (IES), among which can be identified: universities and public and private para-universities, and international universities based in the country.

The paramount evaluation activity of SINAES is the accreditation of degrees and programmes of the HEIs of Costa Rica upon request on a voluntary basis and for improvement purposes. Only those universities affiliated to SINAES can apply for accreditation. Therefore, the incorporation of new institutions is an important element to achieve an inclusive system at a national level.

At December 2018, SINAES had a total of 178 accredited degrees and programmes. 55% of the degrees and programmes belong to public universities, and these are the institutions with the highest number of accreditations.

Of the 178 accredited degrees and programmes, 90% are undergraduate and graduate accreditations, 9% correspond to programmes and the rest to para-university graduates.

Another important activity of SINAES in the context of programme accreditation is the follow-up of the implementation of the improvements established in the accreditation reports and the renewal of the accreditation, once the term granted in the accreditation decision has expired. In this sense, there are programmes that have undergone a process of reaccreditation up to 3 times. Therefore, in the System, due to the voluntary nature of the accreditation, programmes involved in processes of continuous improvement through their reaccreditations coexist with others that have not yet applied for a first accreditation.

The voluntary nature of accreditation has been a recurring theme in the various interviews conducted by the Panel with different stakeholders of the Costa Rican HE education system, including the Panel's audience with the Minister of Public Education.

The governance of SINAES ensures functional, evaluative and financial independence in decision making, which is clearly perceived by the different sectors of higher education in Costa Rica.

The division of labour between the Council and the Technical Directorate led by the CEO is clear for the purposes of the accreditation process where the procedure is carried out autonomously by SINAES. But the final decision, based on the report of the panel of experts and the cross-cutting elements of the process, is the sole responsibility of the Council.

To carry out its tasks, SINAES has a technical body in charge of developing the activities defined in the law and transferred to its strategic plan and annual operational plans coordinated by the SINAES Council.

The leadership of the daily tasks corresponds to the CEO of SINAES who is supported in the areas defined in the organisation chart of the agency that has undergone an important transformation in the months prior to the INQAAHE review.

The burden of evaluation functions falls on the Evaluation and Accreditation Division which, in the last few years of interim management completed in May 2019, has been led by the CEO.

The responsibility for the organisation and management of SINAES lies with the Directorate of Management Support Services, which ensures the functioning of the agency and also coordinates the preparation and implementation of annual operational plans.

With the structural modification, SINAES is equipped with an innovation division that will assume greater responsibility for methodological documents and the definition of procedures. This change will undoubtedly contribute to situating SINAES as an evaluative reference in the sub-region,

which together with its long trajectory could place it as one of the main reference accreditation agencies in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The role played by SNAES and its impact in the context of HE in Costa Rica has been described in detail and clearly in the self-evaluation report and has been contrasted in detail in the interviews with the different stakeholders. Later on, the report will analyse and explain how the structure, activities and methodology of SINAES comply with the GGP established by INQAAHE.

At the end of the report, in section 'E. Conclusions' the elements identified as strengths and weaknesses from the point of view of the GGP will be detailed, so that the INQAAHE review contributes to the continuous improvement of SINAES and its international projection in the context of accreditation agencies for higher education.

D. GGP Compliance

I. The structure of the External Quality Assurance Agency (EQAA)

The EQAA is a recognised, credible organisation, trusted by the higher education institutions and the public. It has adequate mechanisms to prevent conflicts of interest in the decisions it makes; its staff has the needed skills to carry out the functions associated to external QA. The EQAA has the needed resources to carry out their mission.

		X	
Not compliant	Partially compliant	Substantially compliant	Fully compliant

1.1 Legitimacy and recognition

In 1988, the Office of Higher Education Planning (OPES) requested CONARE to propose the creation of an entity responsible for the quality of HE in Costa Rica. On this basis, public universities created the National System of Accreditation of Higher Education in Costa Rica (SINAES), which was constituted in 1999 with the signing of the "Agreement for the Creation of the National System of Accreditation of Higher Education", signed by the highest authorities of eight universities, four public and four private.

The Act of the Republic N° 8256, of May 2, 2002, granted SINAES the category of public interest body with legal independence, whose primary mission is to accredit recognising its condition of "SYSTEM" and its "NATIONAL" character as well as instrumental legal personality, which empowers it to acquire rights and contract obligations in an independent manner. Thus, the Act grants SINAES the maximum public authority in matters of accreditation and giving official character to its decisions.

Subsequently, Act No. 8798 of 2010 on "Strengthening of the National System of Accreditation of Higher Education" provides important support to

its independence and technical sufficiency by stipulating that the criteria and standards defined by SINAES shall have the character of a national academic quality standard. It also provides SINAES with permanent, solid and stable funding (article 3), the annual amount of which "shall be calculated as the equivalent of zero point fifty percent (0.50 %) of the Special Fund for the Financing of State Higher Education (FEES)".

SINAES actively participates in international networks of QA agencies such as RIACES or INQAAHE adopting criteria and guidelines from other international accrediting bodies such as the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

In anticipation of a conflict of interest, the SINAES Board approved in its 450th meeting on October 4, 2007 the current "Code of Ethics" that applies to the Board, the management body, the staff and the members of its accreditation commissions.

Furthermore, in order to avoid conflicts of interest during the external accreditation, SINAES has implemented two tools. On the one hand, by means of reviewing the attestations and experience of the external peer candidates selected. Subsequently, this information is verified with each candidate. Also, as part of the programme selection process, the institution can show if a conflict of interest within the appointed panel of peers occurs.

The Panel highlights that all the interviews with the different external stakeholders have significantly demonstrated the important role that SINAES represents in the HE system of Costa Rica and its independence as an academic public body acquired through its work in its 20 years of development.

In this regard, the different stakeholders interviewed agreed: both the rectors of public and private universities and the university staff and peer evaluators, as well as the Minister in the interview held by the Panel on the same day on which she was appointed by the President, agreed on that point. The Panel considers that this perception has a particular relevance in the Central American sub-regional context where SINAES works.

1.2 Mission and purposes

The mission of SINAES is "To officially accredit higher education institutions, degrees and programmes, in order to ensure their quality to Costa Rican society". Article 5 of Act 8256 also clearly states its aims.

The Vision of SINAES is "To be recognised as a consolidated, dynamic and efficient organisation at the national and international level, responsible for the accreditation of the quality of higher education."

The 2018 Strategic Plan establishes mechanisms for measuring the fulfillment of the objectives associated with the mission and vision.

In order to fully achieve its mission and vision, the Panel considers necessary to make greater efforts to incorporate, on the one hand, Costa Rican universities and HEIs that do not yet belong to the System and, on the other, to significantly increase the number of accreditations in each member institution.

The panel is aware that, from a voluntary basis of accreditation in the national legal framework, the investment of time, effort and expenses that requires programme accreditation, it might dissuade the potential benefits of accreditation among those programmes that have not yet applied, but can also discourage those who have opted for accreditation as a mechanism for improvement and internationalisation.

The Panel is also aware that this situation exceeds the competences of SINAES but has a big impact, and even constrains, the assessment of its performance and its external perception.

The Panel considers important that SINAES takes advantage of its prominent position as the body responsible for the national accreditation processes in Costa Rica, among the relevant players of the HE system, to generate instances of discussion on the voluntary nature of accreditation in the country.

The Panel is aware that this task it is not within the responsibilities of SINAES but it is undoubtedly a crucial element for its future development

and the possibility of involving a greater number of universities and programmes in Costa Rica.

It is an issue that has recurrently and transversally emerged to all the groups interviewed, including the Minister of Education, without being the subject of direct questions. It is undoubtedly linked to numerous significant elements of the national HE agenda and its continuous improvement.

1.3 Governance and organisational structure

The governance structure of SINAES over the years that the report for INQAAHE's external review analyses has served to contribute to the legal mandate and objectives set by the agency.

The system is governed by the SINAES Council made up of 8 members chaired by its president. The implementation of its mandate rests on a CEO that has been in a transitory regime for the last few years. The current CEO was appointed immediately prior to the Panel's visit in an open public process that was made public on the organisation's website and whose deadline for submission of applications ended in March 2019.

The Council of SINAES is composed of representatives of recognised prestige of the Costa Rican public and private university environment and is chaired since May 2019 by the Master in Education Josefa Guzmán León.

In 2005, the Council of SINAES approved a new structure that incorporates processes to support accreditation, communication and IQA management. This structure was established with a permanent character in the Strategic Plan 2007-2012 and it is the one that has maintained its validity until the recent organisational change carried out in 2017 where the new management structure was defined, but has only begun to be implemented in 2019 and is currently under development.

Therefore, while the Panel is aware of the new organisational structure that has only been in place for a few months, the Panel's report focuses primarily on the existing structure until the 2017 reform implemented in 2019.

Likewise, in recent years, measures have been developed for SINAES to have a greater organisational and managerial independence with CONARE to reinforce its autonomy with respect to the HEIs that make it up.

One of these measures has been very recently taken. In January 2019, SINAES was registered as “employer” with the Costa Rican Social Security Fund according to a resolution of the Attorney General of the Republic, which ratifies that SINAES enjoys a larger degree of independence from CONARE even though it is still attached to it.

In this process of strengthening independence, the SINAES Council has assumed a proactive attitude, which the Panel has also seen recognised among staff representatives, evaluators and representatives of the universities interviewed.

The President of the Council and its members, as well as the current CEO, stressed that this gradual separation from CONARE is being supported by different sectors in the field of HE in the country and this was confirmed by the Panel in the various interviews held with representatives of professional associations, evaluators, staff of SINAES and the Minister of Education Giselle Cruz Maduro, who precisely assumed the same day scheduled for the meeting with the Evaluation Panel on July 2, 2019.

The Panel has been able to verify that the SINAES accreditation decision-making process follows the procedures designed for this purpose in a context of impartiality with the participation of the panels of three evaluating pairs, two of which are international.

The fact that the decision making process finishes with the SINAES Council’s decision, represents an additional guarantee of consistency in the final decision. This decision takes place after the accreditation panel has the opportunity to present the evaluation report before the Council, once the revision to identify mistakes made by the programme occurs. Furthermore, the Council has the general overview of the process, as well as the diachronic one derived from the total accreditation decisions made in the country.

The organisational structure developed by SINAES up to the INQAAHE review made possible to carry out the external evaluation processes in an effective manner. But SINAES is having a significant increase in the number of applications for programme accreditation, while its staff is not experiencing a proportional increase to the aforementioned workload.

Therefore, **this imbalance necessarily impacts on the efficiency of the process as each SINAES researcher has to deal with a larger number of procedures. However, it should be noted in a positive manner that the measures taken for reducing the time of the evaluation process, already highlighted in the previous INQAAAHE report of 2010, has increased the efficiency despite the rise in the workload mentioned.**

SINAES approved a Strategy Plan 2007-2012 which has been extended until the approval of the new plan in 2018. The annual operation in accordance with the general fulfillment of strategic objectives and measurement of indicators between 2012 and 2018 was carried out through individual Annual Operating Plans (AOP).

Although the accreditation activity was maintained in those years in the pattern observed in the data provided in the report, and the perception through the interviews with the different stakeholders is positive, **the absence of a formalised strategic plan represents a functional anomaly that inevitably has an impact on the functioning of SINAES for the purposes of planning and measuring achievements and performances.**

The Panel welcomes the definition of a new Strategy Plan of recent implementation that will facilitate the resolution of the analysis of the shortcomings detected previously: to include the accredited programmes for the first time; to identify how many applied for the second, third or even fourth time; which areas of knowledge are more demanded; to obtain a breakdown of data that allows to see an accurate overview of what has

been evaluated and what is in process, in order to know exactly which areas are less represented and which universities are involved.

The Strategy Plan is accompanied by a profound organisational and managerial restructuring that allows us to speak of a "new phase" of SINAES that, without a doubt, should be evaluated in the next external review undertaken in the future.

1.4 Resources

The staff of SINAES in charge of technical and administrative tasks have an adequate training for the development of their activities and among the figure of "researchers" who are responsible for the support and coordination of the accreditation processes, those with master's degrees stand out.

However, the Panel observed that the rise of competences and responsibilities of SINAES, increasing the number of applications for accreditation, represents a significant workload for the technical staff that has been prolonged over time. This fact has been perceived in the interviews with the technical staff. The Panel considers that the increase in the number of "researchers" and the staff supporting them, as well as a particular analysis on the individual workload, is critical for SINAES to meet the objectives and commitments of its 2018 Strategy Plan.

The Panel is aware of the difficulty that public bodies have in increasing the number of staff, and when transferring the issue to the Council it found that the governing body is aware of this need. As an example, in the study carried out for the administrative reorganisation of the agency, a study of each one of the SINAES job profiles was included. This analysis should benefit in the immediate future from the weakness identified by the Panel.

An example of the tension between the responsibility of assuming new competencies and the impact on human resources management can be found repeatedly in the interviews with different groups in relation to the hiring of a position with a curriculum-expert profile by SINAES.

The possibility of evaluating curricula of private universities represents a reinforcement of their technical capacities and a support to the realisation of a competence developed exclusively by the National Council for Private University Higher Education (Consejo Nacional de Enseñanza Superior Universitaria Privada, CONESUP). This new competence was well received by private universities since the approval period for changes in curricula took several years. SINAES assumed this responsibility by reducing the process to a very short time. However, the difficulty of being able to financially compensate such a specialised figure as the curriculum-expert means, generates a great deal of instability in the position, which has caused significant delays and that SINAES has not been able to transform into a positive perception, despite this new task constitutes a positive element of recognition and expansion of its competencies in the national HE system.

Throughout the interviews with the SINAES staff, it has become clear that the coexistence of a "dual" or "composite" hiring system is perceived as distorting among the staff members and represents an element that impacts on the working climate that could be reflected in performance. The Panel understands that this fact will have been properly diagnosed in the new personnel policy recently developed by SINAES and should be the object of attention.

The financial resources of SINAES are an element that has benefited in recent years from decisions resulting from the strengthening of SINAES' independence from CONARE. In Act No. 8798 of April 16, 2010, a particular income for SINAES for an annual amount equivalent to 0.5% of the Special Fund for the Financing of State University Higher Education for the corresponding year was created. This fact means an important advance in the economic independence of SINAES from CONARE, which represents the universities that the System accredits.

This independence is under development and will culminate in the future with the placing of SINAES to a different location than CONARE. At present,

for the fulfillment of its purposes, SINAES relies on the support of CONARE's management for administrative issues.

Furthermore, every year SINAES has in its budget a specific item destined to finance the training needs of its personnel. Annex 14 presents the procedure applied in SINAES so that staff can have access to training processes. The report included supplementary information on the training and development opportunities that some SINAES officials have received in the last two years, as well as the possibility of developing postgraduate studies, which could be contrasted in the interviews. However, it was also found that there are still concerns about more systematic and continuous training by staff members.

The Panel recommends developing a procedure to regulate the requirement for training based on a set of objectively defined criteria, in order to be more profile-oriented and gather information from the results for future reviews of the types of training available and the people who have benefited from them.

In relation to this formalisation of processes, the recommendations of the 2010 INQAAHE Report included "creating technological support to improve efficiency". In this sense, the interviews with the heads of the technical units of the universities, the experts of the peer panels and the technical staff of SINAES, have allowed the Panel to verify that no significant advances have been observed in the technological support to the processes and that the use of Word or Excel files to collect the information in a regular manner continues.

Strengths

- SINAES has a clear and well-established legitimacy in the legal framework
- Board members, staff and evaluators are governed by a Code of Ethics implemented in 2007

- Both mission and vision are clearly established and public and recognised by the different sectors and stakeholders HE in Costa Rica
- The SINAES accreditation decision-making process follows procedures designed for this purpose in a context of impartiality
- The budgetary autonomy has been reinforced especially within Act No. 8798 of 16 April 2010

Areas for enhancement

- The SINAES should finish the process of independence already advanced with CONARE including its location in new facilities
- An update of the procedure defining the roles of the national and international peers during the accreditation procedure and the visit should be carried out, in order to define in a clearer way the responsibilities of the international and national peers, as well as the technical support work of SINAES through the responsible researcher
- The new organisational and functional structure approved in 2019 should be implemented quickly, taking into consideration the opportunities for improvement identified in this report
- If SINAES maintains institutional accreditation among its functions, the agency should develop the criteria and guidelines for its implementation and put it in place in the Annual Operational Plan
- The recurrence of discussions on the conditions imposed on the accreditation process by its voluntary nature requires that SINAES contribute to this debate from its position within the HE system
- Study of workloads among staff members to better adjust the assignment of tasks and avoid work overloads. The Panel recommends developing a procedure to regulate and define the conditions of staff training in relation to their tasks, allowing the criteria to be objective to obtain results for future revisions of the

types of training available and of the people who have benefited from them

Conclusion of the panel's assessment

SINAES complies with the Guideline I in terms of structural considerations, achieving a strong performance in areas such as legitimacy, capacity to carry out its tasks. The HE sector recognises the capacities of SINAES to fulfil the objectives established by the law.

However, SINAES run its activities from 2012 to 2018 without approving a new Strategy Plan, extending a temporary situation for a longer period that would have been desirable for an organisation of this kind. This situation meant a functional anomaly that inevitably had an impact on the work of SINAES for the purposes of planning and measuring achievements and performances, even though the functioning was by Annual Operational Plans.

This situation has been corrected with the reforms carried out since the beginning of 2019 that imply an organic and functional reorganisation with special attention to the area of human resources that will presumably contribute to reinforce the areas of improvement identified in this guideline.

Assessment for the Guideline.

The Panel considers the Guideline substantially compliant.

II. Accountability of the EQAA

The EQAA has in place policies and mechanisms for its internal quality assurance, which demonstrate a continuing effort to improve the quality and integrity of its activities, its response to the changes to the context in which it operates and its links to the international community of QA.

		X	
Not compliant	Partially compliant	Substantially compliant	Fully compliant

2.1 Quality assurance of the EQAA

The SINAES operates with transparency, integrity and professionalism both from the instruments put in place as an independent agency and by the mechanisms required by the legal system. In this regard, SINAES is governed by Internal Control Act No. 8292 and the guidelines established by the Office of the Comptroller General of the Republic. In 2017, the Council authorised the institution to form part of the Inter-institutional Transparency Network, whose main purpose is to strengthen accountability in public HEI and citizen oversight.

It also undergoes internal control self-assessments carried out under CONARE guidelines that focus on organisational and administrative management processes. Finally, as already mentioned, it has a Code of Ethics that was approved by the SINAES Council in 2007.

Although SINAES has a clear and formal procedure for programme accreditation and appeals to its accreditation decisions, the agency does not have an explicit and up-to-date internal QA policy in place through adequate, appropriate and systematic procedures, as well as being monitored and evaluated by the department dedicated to such tasks. Such a department exists, but its interaction with internal control processes could not be determined by the Panel.

In the organisation chart there is a person responsible for the Department, but neither their competences, nor the results of their work are clearly established.

The areas of improvement detected in the INQAAHE's external review report and in the ECA MULTRA project's report have been identified and corrective mechanisms based on decisions and initiatives of the SINAES Board have been implemented. But these actions show the lack of both an internal QA model in force and a team aimed at internal control and improvement. This IQ system should formally and regularly incorporate feedback from the SINAES accreditation processes in order to identify weaknesses or risks and define and implement the corresponding improvement measures.

The Panel considers that the lack of definition of this internal QA policy makes it difficult for SINAES to establish mechanisms to assess its own activities in order to respond to the changing nature of HE, the effectiveness of its operations and its contribution to the achievement of its objectives, as determined for compliance with this GGP Guideline.

For this reason, **the Panel recommends the establishment of an internal QA policy for SINAES that is transversal to the entire organisation and aimed at the continuous improvement of processes.** The Panel considers that this measure would also serve as a benchmark for the member universities of the System.

The Panel highly appreciates the interest shown by SINAES in undergoing external review processes conducted by international and multilateral organisations such as INQAAHE, the Central American Accreditation Council (CCA) and the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA), but emphasises the need to align this high level of international self-requirement for the improvement of its performance as a national agency with a similar self-requirement at the internal QA level to carry out audits or periodic self-assessments and self-audits by the corresponding department responsible for IQA in SINAES.

2.2 Links to the QA community

SINAES has demonstrated a special sensitivity to participate in international networks and initiatives not only in the framework of Central America and Ibero-America, but with a more international reach as with Canada. This interest has given it international visibility and recognition, as demonstrated by the survey on this subject carried out among international agencies in 2015.

SINAES has been able to incorporate elements of good practices from other contexts in a clear learning process as demonstrated, among other initiatives, in the participation in the MULTRA project of ECA and the conclusions of the review developed by this European body.

The Panel also remarks that SINAES has always been aware of the benefit of internationalisation processes on the technical staff by participating in internships in other agencies or by incorporating staff in working visits organised by international agencies.

Nevertheless, the Panel considers SINAES a mature organisation in terms of internationalisation practices with sufficient experience to generate a greater influence by incorporating into its strategy a more proactive international policy, especially in the sub-region.

The development of SINAES in the context of Costa Rica's HE system allows the Panel to talk about good national practices in external reviews and peer evaluation management that could be of great interest in countries of the sub-region and even at the level of Latin America and the Caribbean. For this reason, the Panel encourages the Council of SINAES to assume this responsibility to the extent of its resources and without prejudice to national responsibilities in order to become in the medium term an agency not only of reference in Central America but also providing capacities at sub-regional level. The agreement with the University of San Marcos of Guatemala is a positive example of this potential.

Strengths

- SINAES is subject to the audits and regular accountability required by the statutory bodies of the Republic.
- SINAES maintains an outstanding interest in undergoing cyclical international evaluation processes by not only regional but also international organisations.
- Active and extended participation in international networks throughout the development of SINAES

Areas for enhancement

- The programme accreditation procedure is the foundation of the activity of SINAES so it is desirable that the implementation of the new model that has been put into consultation with stakeholders will be implemented to correct the identified areas of improvement
- SINAES should urgently undertake the design and implementation of a formalised IQA policy including all its processes and activities in accordance with the current situation
- Reinforcement of the structure underpinning the internal IQAS, which is currently reduced to a single person whose competences, tasks assigned and results of work could not be identified during the evaluation

Conclusion of the panel's assessment

The Panel considers that SINAES only partially complies with the part of the Guideline II related to the IQAS, since the IQAS requires a very important reformulation in order to be able to develop this area to its full capacity. It is necessary that SINAES will take up again the initiative of being a reference agency in the development of an internal quality assurance policy.

On the contrary, the links and the projection of SINAES in the national and international QA community are in full compliance with the Guideline and its

interest in cyclically undergoing review processes carried out by international organisations should be highlighted.

Assessment for the Guideline.

The Panel considers the Guideline substantially compliant.

III. The EQAA’s framework for the external review of quality in higher education institutions

The main concern of the EQAA is the promotion of quality education and student achievement. In doing this, it recognises that quality is primarily the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves, and, supports this principle in its criteria and procedures. These promote internal quality assurance (IQA) and provide higher education institutions with clear guidance on the requirements for self-assessment and external review.

		X	
Not compliant	Partially compliant	Substantially compliant	Fully compliant

3.1 The relationship between the EQAA and higher education institutions

SINAES is very sensitive to the autonomy of Costa Rican universities and HEIs and this sensitivity is reflected in the methodological documents to which the Panel has had access, as well as in the testimonies of the representatives of the HEIs interviewed. Its relationship with CONARE and its particular development with both public and private universities that belong to the System, and more recently with the para-university institutions, demands from SINAES a special zeal not only for autonomy and integrity, but also for the diversity of the institutions that are the objective of its accreditation processes.

An evidence regarding the autonomy of universities concerning external evaluation lies in the choice that some Costa Rican public universities have applied to foreign agencies for institutional accreditation processes (Universidad de Costa Rica and Tecnológico de Costa Rica by the European University Association – EUA – and the French agency Hcéres respectively) and evaluation of their IQAS (Universidad Nacional and Universidad Técnica Nacional de Costa Rica with ANECA). SINAES has been able to combine the complementarity of the programme accreditation model with other options for the internationalisation of QA evaluation processes requested by the

country's universities that can serve to achieve the objectives of its mission and vision.

On the other hand, SINAES has shown a great deal of understanding to the workload required by its programme accreditation procedure and, following the approval of Act 8798 of 2010 on the Strengthening of SINAES, also with regard to funding.

Concerning the length of the programme accreditation procedure, in 2015 a first study was conducted to analyse the average duration of the accreditation process for the period 2010-2014. This study showed that SINAES managed to reduce the average time of the accreditation process removing the analysis as one of the steps in the self-evaluation Report.

In 2017, a more recent and complete study on the state of the length of the accreditation process was carried out through a consultancy. The study led to redesign the SINAES accreditation process. As a result, a very important decrease of 66% in the processing time between the reception of the self-evaluation report and the visit of the peers was achieved.

The Panel highlights very positively the effort made by SINAES to reduce the time required for the accreditation procedure, complying with the recommendation of the 2010 INQAAHE Report. The challenge of this improvement is that the measures taken to reduce the length of the process, such as the rethinking of the SINAES investigator's support in the procedure, will not impact on the quality of the process itself in the future. This will have to be monitored by SINAES and attention should be paid in the next external review.

3.2 The definition of criteria for external quality review

The SINAES self-evaluation report highlights the attention to the institutional diversity of the programme accreditation procedure developed by SINAES. However, in the interviews held with the evaluators, the technical representatives of the universities in charge of the evaluation processes and the technical staff of SINAES, the opinions on this issue

reflected that this attention to diversity did not have a formalised methodological item.

The Panel considers that SINAES should not, in any case, sacrifice the accreditation model's level of requirement, reducing or failing to pay attention to the three fundamental missions of the university, for the sake of the necessary attention to institutional diversity.

The programme accreditation procedure is unique and applies identically to different degrees irrespective of the branch or field of knowledge of the degree, the nature of the university, its public or private ownership or its geographical location. However, the procedure is adapted to the needs of certain programmes linked to their professional development, such as architecture, engineering or law.

The programme accreditation procedure is undergoing a review on its scheme that is at an advanced stage of consultation in order to finish the final version. The Panel trusts that this new procedure will include in its standards mechanisms that reflect the institutional diversity and variability derived from the scientific field which the programme belongs. This goal should be met without compromising the level of compliance with the standards and allowing the optimisation of the information requested to such institutions.

This situation is reflected, according to the information provided by the interviewees, in the procedure for renewal of accreditation. According to the comments mentioned above, this renewal repeats the original procedure in practically the same way, replicating the constraints of the procedure for this purpose. In the interview with the representatives of the universities, it was highlighted that the procedure favours the repetition in the request of the same evidence, the duplicity of actions and the administrative workload that falls on the personnel of the universities in charge of developing the process.

According to the Council of SINAES and the CEO, the participation of stakeholders has been integrated on a regular basis for the new programme

accreditation procedure that is going to replace in the near future the model currently in force since 2002.

The consultation corresponds to the new spirit of transparency and collaboration with all stakeholders, which is recently being implemented by the SINAES Council. However, the Panel, while acknowledging the change and the new policy reflected in the self-assessment report, has not analysed the context where the design of the new procedure and its process of consulting stakeholders has taken place. The Panel emphasises that in the period of the review subject to analysis, it has not yet been systematised.

The representatives of SINAES in charge of the design shown that the various evaluation models for specific disciplines were developed based on the general degree model, so that the latter was enriched with the incorporation of international standards for the evaluation of specific disciplines in process of consultation with the corresponding professional associations. This has been the case the case of engineering, architecture and law.

In the interview with the representatives of the professional associations, the Panel found that the new Accreditation Manual had not been consulted with the representatives of the professional associations who attended the interview. Unfortunately none of the representatives of the associations of engineering, architecture and law attended the meeting, so that in these cases the Panel could not double checked the information.

In the interviews with the heads of the technical units of the universities, the Panel found that the SINAES made a call for consultation with all the universities in the System - through workshops, meetings with rectors and gathering all the comments on the draft submitted- although not all universities were presented to this consultation process, as could be checked in the interviews with the rectors and representatives of rectors.

Regarding the adaptation of the programme accreditation procedure to distance learning, on-line, non-traditional ways of delivery currently in use

in universities and transnational education, the Panel could verify the following information.

With regard to distance learning, Costa Rica has the public National Open University (UNED) created in 1977, which has taken part in the accreditation procedure with some twenty undergraduate and graduate and five postgraduate programmes. The Panel was able to verify in the interviews that the common accreditation procedure has specific elements to deal with the case of distance learning, as in the case of engineering, which are included as "additional" standards but it is not an independent procedure for this type of education.

On-line learning, whether delivered totally or partially by electronic means (blended learning), does not currently have a specific procedure.

Transnational education does not have additional standards either and the accreditation of their programmes is accomplished using the same procedure. These HEIs are represented in Costa Rica by the Universidad de la Paz, the Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza (CATIE) and Earth University.

Concerning the attention paid to institutional diversity, the Panel wishes to highlight that in 2019 SINAES has concluded the review and updating of the model for para-university programmes focused on institutions belonging to this sector of HE. For this update stakeholders were consulted, such as representatives of the institutions involved and the agencies in charge of regulating these organisations, as well as the business sector.

Although the wording of this procedure does not fall within the INQAAHE review period, **the Panel highlights the case of para-university institutions as an example of the awareness of SINAES towards institutional diversity, as well as the capacity to adapt to a change in the scope of its evaluation competencies**, which has been recognised by the different groups interviewed.

Although there is no standard in the procedure that analyses elements such as governance or management, because of the programme approach on accreditation, the Panel considers that the procedure transversally analyses the crucial points that can be required for such items.

There is no specific follow-up procedure for the accredited programmes by SINAES, although in those that request reaccreditation, the starting point is the previous accreditation report with the improvement plan and the identified areas for improvement. The technical staff of SINAES (researchers) include in their tasks monitoring activities of the accredited programmes according to the results of the accreditation report.

The Panel detected an important area of improvement in the programme reaccreditation procedure. The application for reaccreditation of a programme is subject to the judgement of the person in charge of its delivery and is, therefore, a voluntary process with no specific time lapse for its application. Thus, there are programmes accredited up to four times and others that have not completed a second cycle. The Panel found in the interviews that the accreditation procedure for successive reaccreditations is the same as the one for the first application.

Although the new accreditation procedure has recently been approved but is not yet in force, the Panel recommends that the renewal of the first and successive accreditations be considered as an advantage to the programme in terms of "rewarding" its interest on continuous improvement. In this way, the procedure should primarily focus on the areas of improvement of the procedure and maintain a constant attention on the standards that ensure the programme quality using components from the "risk analysis" to ease the procedure for both the HEI and SINAES, without diminishing the quality of the academic outcome.

3.3 The external review process

The SINAES carries out an accreditation procedure based on public standards and known to all the stakeholders involved in the process.

The accreditation procedure begins with a self-assessment report drawn up by the programme followed by a visit of variable length from three to five days in the case of the accreditation of a programme or a conglomerate. The visit finishes with a report from the panel evaluating the standards. The final stage of the process is the decision made by the SINAES National Accreditation Council after a hearing attended by the panel, where the evaluation report is explained in detail. This stage is linked to the improvement process since the Council, in dealing with all accreditation decisions made by SINAES, has elements to reinforce the consistency of the judgements and contributes to get a homogeneous assessment of the programmes regardless the area of knowledge to which they belong or the university of origin.

The SINAES publishes documents and gives information to the universities through the staff in the quality units so that they know the level of requirement of the standards and the nature of the information demanded to show compliance.

SINAES has documentation available on each of its procedures, so that users can have accessible information in order to manage the accreditation process. In addition, each accreditation case has its own researcher in charge who takes care of the programme in any additional requirements they might need.

The SINAES programme accreditation procedure is carried out by a panel of academic peers made up of one national and two foreign experts. In the case of foreign peers, they are supplied by accreditation agencies that have signed agreement with SINAES and mainly come from Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Spain. National peers voluntarily apply to SINAES, which selects them according to the criteria of recognised academic profile and experience in similar processes.

The rule of SINAES including two international peers constitutes an important internationalisation added-value of the process that is highlighted by the review Panel as a good practice.

However, the two-to-one relationship with the national peer and the fact that the agency's technical staff does not remain throughout the accreditation visit were two aspects negatively highlighted by the expert panel members interviewed due to two circumstances: by having to assume a greater administrative burden in the process due to the absence of the researcher of SINAES, on the one hand; and by having to assume exclusively those standards that have to do with the national legal or HE context, on the other.

The Panel recommends strengthening the training of the international experts concerning the national HE context and seeking ways to obtain more direct support from SINAES technical staff during the visit to achieve an improvement on this point, without compromising the international commitment developed by SINAES.

The participation of the two international peers was highly valued by the universities, the national peers and the staff of SINAES, despite the above mentioned difficulties. **Therefore the mandatory participation of international peers in the accreditation panels is considered as a good practice by the review Evaluation Panel.**

According to the procedure, the programme has the option of rejecting any of the peers, if it considers that there is a potential conflict of interests, but through a very reasoned and evidence-based declaration.

Feedback on the performance of the experts provided by the accredited programme and by the national evaluator to SINAES technical staff is used as a form of peer evaluation, but the Panel recommends that this process be formalised and done in a systematic way to improve the SINAES selection, training evaluation process of the peers.

National experts participate in SINAES training processes but international experts have a lack of training opportunities due to time constraints that the Panel considers should be reinforced in the future (see Guideline 1.3 above). The training of international peers is done once they have moved to

the visit before it starts and by the researcher who has moved to the place of the visit.

However, the Panel considers that the consistency of the judgements leading to the accreditation decision might be threatened by placing all the responsibility on the understanding of the national context in the Costa Rican peer. It is also up to the national peer to sometimes play the technical role of SINAES by clarifying to the international peers questions related to the legal and academic framework.

Therefore, the Panel considers that the consistency and independence of the judgements leading to the accreditation decision, should be strengthened with additional training on these issues for the international peers and the reinforcement of the support of SINAES technical staff to the accreditation panel. This support might be either face-to-face or by more frequent telephone or videoconference contact during the site visit.

SINAES does not specifically include any other expert profile in the evaluation panels belonging to any of the HE stakeholders, such as students, professionals in the particular area of the programme or employers. This inclusion of other stakeholder representatives is frequent in different international contexts such as Europe, Asia-Pacific or North America. The Panel recommends SINAES to carry out a reflection on the context of the Costa Rican HE sector in order to broaden the profile of experts in its accreditation processes with the consequent enrichment of evaluation perspectives and in order to obtain a decision more aligned with the growing complexity of HE.

Mechanisms to avoid conflict of interest between evaluators and the institution of the programme to be accredited are established at two levels. A previous one at the internal level, in the selection process of the peer made by the technical staff of SINAES, a scrutiny to identify cases of conflict in the documentation of the expert included in the database is carried out. Furthermore, the expert, before starting the work, must sign the Code of

Ethics in which there is an express commitment to work in accordance with that document.

The second level is external in nature and consists of the right of the programme to reject the appointment of one expert if a conflict of interest is supposed to occur. In this case the programme has to provide a clear evidence that backs this decision and then SINAES would have to select and appoint another evaluator.

The consistency of the panel decision expressed in the external report is reinforced by having to be decided by consensus of the peers involved in the accreditation procedure. In cases where there is disagreement, the panel may also turn to the opinion of the researcher coordinating the accreditation to find out how it has proceeded on other occasions so that the panel can reach agreements under these circumstances.

The procedure does not include the review of the report by the SINAES researcher before it is sent to the institution. Therefore, as transmitted to the Panel by the researchers, the reports include formal mistakes that could be avoided after a review. The Panel recommends implementing the necessary mechanisms to systematically conduct a review of the reports as part of the procedure.

Finally, consistency in the decision also commits the Higher Education Accreditation Council of SINAES which is responsible for making the final decision after the hearing session with the expert panel.

The time spent in the accreditation process has been subject to a detailed review by SINAES following the results of previous external evaluations (INQAAHE and MULTRA). This has led to the development of corrective measures which, as mentioned above, have had a very positive impact on the reduction of process times and process efficiency.

Once the evaluation report has been submitted to the Council, the programme has the possibility of objecting or correcting errors prior to the final decision is made. Likewise, the procedure does establish that, after the

Council's decision, the programme has a 8-day deadline to submit considerations considered relevant, but does not include a precise explanation for those cases where accreditation is not achieved.

3.4 The requirements for self-evaluation

SINAES conducts training and information sessions on its external evaluation procedures for the staff of the affiliated universities in charge of the procedure. A total of 1378 university staff have taken part in these sessions in the last five years.

This evidence was verified in the different interviews carried out with the representatives of the universities involved in these processes, as well as with the managing teams of the institutions. SINAES staff confirmed this point, although they pointed out that the training sessions had been usually reduced to attending doubts and comments by the SINAES researcher responsible for the programme, rather than being periodically and systematically scheduled and addressed to representatives of all affiliated universities.

The Panel recommends SINAES to schedule training workshops for university staff in charge of preparing the accreditation of programmes. These sessions should go beyond the periodic informative sessions for those responsible for quality units, broadening the number of university recipients of this training in evaluation tasks. These periodic workshops would not only contribute to give more confidence to those staff responsible for accreditation, but also to improve the preparation of the self-evaluation proposals and the evidences, which will definitively have a positive impact on the efficiency of the whole process.

Also, by increasing the "critical mass" of university staff trained and "empowered" by SINAES in the accreditation processes, it could contribute to a greater awareness of the accreditation processes in the institution's staff and thus in the future application for programme accreditation.

Finally, these meetings would allow SINAES and its technical staff to receive better feedback on the procedure from the university, which could be incorporated into the improvement cycle, as well as the participation of representatives of an important stakeholder in the process.

Strengths

- Mechanisms to introduce improvements in the accreditation procedure, as demonstrated in the measures implemented for the reduction of time in the accreditation process
- Strong commitment to internationalisation shown by the presence of international evaluators in the expert panel in a relationship of two to one with the national peer
- Individual and constant support to the expert panel by the SINAES researcher throughout the accreditation process
- With the adoption of new responsibilities such as the accreditation of para-university institutions, SINAES provides a particular and specific attention to the different types of institutions involved in the procedure
- The technical staff of SINAES involved in each accreditation procedure maintains a permanent connection with the responsible team of the university not only throughout the accreditation process, but also in the monitoring of the improvement plan and future reaccreditation where appropriate

Areas for enhancement

- Follow-up mechanisms to ensure that the reduction of time in the accreditation procedure does not affect the quality of the process should be implemented
- SINAES should make efforts with representatives of the HE system in Costa Rica to consider the presence of other stakeholders as experts in the evaluation panels, such as students or employers, who would

not participate as academic "peers" but as experts from a specific perspective and, therefore, could contribute a different point of view in specific aspects of the process.

- A new programme accreditation procedure should be designed and implemented in the short term
- SINAES should reinforce the training of the evaluators on the basis of the feedback, suggestions and opinions gathered by the technical staff
- To rethink the role of the researcher of SINAES in the site visit, in the light of the experiences and observations of the different stakeholders involved, mainly those responsible for the quality units of the universities and the national peers

Conclusion of the panel's assessment

The Panel considers that SINAES substantially complies with the part of the Guideline related to the relations with the HEIs subject to accreditation. However, the Panel considers that there are areas of improvement in the formalisation of mechanisms to collect feedback of the accreditation procedures from universities and incorporate them into the improvement cycle, as well as in the involvement of stakeholders in the evaluation instruments.

The Panel considers that SINAES has made an important effort to improve the external evaluation process in the different phases in which it is designed, particularly reducing the time of the whole process. But the Panel finds an important area of improvement in the training of international peers and in a better definition of the roles of the national peer within the site visit panel, as well as in the supporting role of the researcher in the whole process. The panel also considers as an important area of improvement the involvement of other profiles of HE stakeholders to accreditation panels such as students, professionals or employers.

This improvement will also contribute, in the Panel's opinion, to addressing the specificities of accreditation of degrees from specific disciplines (associated with professions) or particular fields (on-line, cross-border, etc.) that would benefit from having representatives from higher education sectors or experts from other fields with a closer profile.

Assessment for the Guideline.

The Panel considers the Guideline substantially compliant.

IV. The EQAA and its relationship to the public

The EQAA makes public its policies and decisions about institutions and programmes, discloses the decisions about its own performance and disseminates reports on outcomes of QA processes.

			X
Not compliant	Partially compliant	Substantially compliant	Fully compliant

4.1 Public reports on EQAA policies and decisions

SINAES provides public information on its website on the different evaluation procedures and activities that carries out.

The information includes the electronic version of the most relevant documents of the organisation, such as the strategic plan and the annual operational plans, the legal frame of reference and the detailed information of the universities belonging to the system, as well as the technical documents associated to the processes of external evaluation.

Furthermore, the website also includes a search engine for accredited programmes in Costa Rica, which is very useful for a wide range of visitors and is supported by SINAES as the body for that at the national level.

The information is completed with remarkable references to the "Vocational Fair", where future university candidate students in different geographical locations of the country are informed about the accredited programmes by SINAES in the universities of Costa Rica. The information is completed with references to the Register of Experts and how to become part of its staff.

The list of accredited programmes is very useful, although there is no access to the accreditation reports of SINAES that are not published.

The Panel recommends the SINAES Council to take the necessary measures to influence the national context so that the accreditation reports can be published or at least a "link" to the corresponding university site with such information, as an element of interest,

transparency to facilitate the decision making among future students. In this way, SINAES would be included in the group of international accreditation agencies that publishes its results.

The Panel is aware of the difficulty of publishing the reports, especially in a context where accreditation is on a voluntary basis and might potentially expose those programmes, which choose to accredit themselves against other programmes in other institutions which do not apply. However, the Panel believes that, as it happens in other international contexts, this possible risk outweighs the message of transparency projected by the university within the system.

The report may be the original or a shorter version in a language more accessible to an audience not necessarily academic or expert. This fact would also allow extending the discussion on the benefits of accreditation among other sectors of society, contributing to its perception as a public good for the improvement of the programmes involved and HE at large.

Finally, the perception of the information provided by SINAES is very positive among the different groups interviewed by the Panel. The SINAES is perceived by the HE sector as a body that provides useful information to the different stakeholders: future students and families, academic sector, university evaluation managers, professionals, employers, etc.

4.2 Other public reports

SINAES does not show in its website information about other types of analysis that it carries out within the framework of its competences, whether sectoral or by disciplines or by level of delivery (graduate or postgraduate). The case of the "Work Report" and the annual report of SINAES, which are published periodically, are not included in this case. The Panel is aware that the writing of these documents would require specialised staff for their preparation.

The self-evaluation report mentions some interesting synthesis studies about the timing of the accreditation procedure and others derived from

accreditations, which could be an important collection of publications of interest on the SINAES website and that do not appear in the extensive and important list of "Academic Research Products" on the website

(<https://www.sinaes.ac.cr/index.php/home/documentos-e-institucionales>).

Such would be the case of the reports associated with the analysis of the time span of accreditation process drafted by García-Aguinaga or those on the consultancy contracted for this purpose.

On the other hand, the Panel considers it important that the external review reports requested by SINAES to the CCA in 2009, INQAAHE in 2010 and ECA in the MULTRA project in 2013, as a result of its international commitment to improvement, should be more accessible to the public on its website, beyond including them as another item in the "Accountability" section on the "Institutional Documents" web page.

This could be achieved by means of a specific link emphasising SINAES commitment to international reviews, as is customary in agencies that undergo these processes. This would further highlight transparency and reinforce its commitment to external review as its own sign of identity. Especially if we bear in mind that all these reports are available in the networks of these organisations.

Strengths

- The organisation of the annual Fair where accredited universities can present themselves to a broader audience from secondary education
- The searching machine for accredited programmes available on the SINAES website
- The information to become expert of SINAES available at the website

Areas for enhancement

- To develop a plan of measures to reinforce external communication of all the activities accomplished by SINAES, including the advantages for students to enroll accredited programmes

- To take up the initiative to organise more fairs and information sessions in locations different than the capital city San José or the metropolitan area, in order to disseminate information and knowledge opportunities to young people in other parts of the country
- To improve the communication of the activities of SINAES and to establish mechanisms of interaction with society in general and not only with the sectors associated with higher education.
- To increase the information available to the public on the SINAES website to reach families and potential future students

Conclusion of the panel's assessment

The Panel considers that SINAES fully complies with Guideline IV with regard the relations established with the general public. SINAES has become a reference body for information on QA and accreditation of HE in Costa Rica. The Panel considers that the policy of SINAES towards publishing specialised documents should be more active also including the reports of the programme accreditation procedures carried out by the agency, although it is a practice that has not been universally developed.

The Panel recognises the effort of SINAES in publishing cross-sectional reports associated with the evaluation processes led by the organisation. Nevertheless, the Panel encourages the Council of SINAES to publish these reports in a systematic and cyclical manner and make them known to a wide public through its communication tools. Finally, the Panel recommends to develop mechanisms and initiatives available to SINAES to promote among the HE sector in Costa Rica that the accreditation reports can be made public in the future in a version easily understood by a broad audience beyond the experts in HE and QA.

Assessment for the Guideline.

The Panel considers the Guideline to be fully compliant.

V. Decision making

The EQAA has policies and procedures in place that ensure a fair and independent decision-making process in the final review of the institution or the programme. It provides effective procedures to deal with appeals and complaints.

		X	
Not compliant	Partially compliant	Substantially compliant	Fully compliant

5.1 The decision-making process

The SINAES Accreditation Council decides upon the outcome of the accreditation of a programme on the basis of the report of the peer panel in a face-to-face session with the Council attended by the accreditation panel. Decisions are made by consensus and determine whether or not to grant accreditation and the conditions under which is granted.

The decision is based on three complementary evidences: the external peer report, the self-assessment report and the improvement plan. This approach reinforces the basis for evaluation by broadening the documentary basis for the decision-making process. **The Panel considers that the presentation of the result in a face-to-face hearing before the Council by the peer review panel strengths the consistency and the opportunity to clarify issues on the side of the Council.** This stage benefits the consistency, impartiality and thoroughness of the judgements.

The decision provides information on weaknesses and strengths and underlines its nature as a tool for on-going improvement of the programme.

The decision-making procedure is described in the IQAS specification PRC-AG06 and has undergone numerous modifications and updates since it was drafted at the beginning of the programme. The report indicates at least twelve versions between 2012 and 2017.

An important issue of the relevance of updating the decision-making procedure has been the inclusion in 2012 of the "deferred decision" for

those cases where the Board of SINAES considers that the programme has reached a significant level of quality but needs to be improved. In that case, the decision is postponed for 18 months until the programme achieves the level of improvement required. At the end of this period, the programme submits the Report of Achievements made during the period granted by the Board for evaluation by an external professional, who certifies whether or not the aspects indicated as pending have been complied with. However, this specification does not include the criteria and guidelines applied by the Council in the case of favourable or unfavourable decisions.

The Panel recommends that the criteria applied by the Higher Education Accreditation Council of SINAES should be more explicit, public and shared, in the form of a brief guide of guidelines, for the sake of transparency and clarity in a very important part of the process such as the decision-making.

Some of the representatives interviewed mentioned the need for SINAES to precisely define certain minimum "thresholds" or levels of compliance with the basic criteria, thus establishing the "minimum quality" below which any programme in Costa Rica could not be offered to students.

This threshold of quality or minimum requirement defined in many countries where compulsory accreditation of all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes takes place was also mentioned in the interview with the rectors and heads of universities. It was raised as a balance to the need to establish benchmarking mechanisms to identify programmes placed on levels above the minimum threshold established or "excellence" parameters for the most internationalised disciplines.

Furthermore, in the interviews with peer evaluators, university officials and technical staff of SINAES, some opinions were raised demanding more information on the decision-making process and on the results, to be used as a sort of "case-law" or precedent, allowing people involved in the QA processes to use such information for their own needs in the development of the accreditation applications.

5.2 The EQAA's process for appeals and complaints

SINAES has a procedure and a guide for handling appeals in different circumstances, procedure PRC-AG10: "Reconsideration of SINAES Board Agreements in Accreditation Processes". These cases include, among others, the affiliation of a university or para-university institution to the System, the admission of a graduate or postgraduate programme to the accreditation process, and the accreditation and reaccreditation of graduate and postgraduate programmes and their conditions.

The same self-assessment report detects the need to homogenise the different applicable instruments and their circumstances. The procedure provides the hiring of a disciplinary expert who has had no contact or knowledge of the process to be reviewed. This expert will analyse the documentation of the appeal providing the Council with a recommendation on this regard.

The Panel recommends to formalise the procedure on complaints and appeals in a more detailed manner, putting in place mechanisms to inform the programme how to apply to the procedure and the rights thereof. The Panel also emphasises that the appeal decision should not return to the Council, but is submitted to another commission or collegiate group should be in charge of informing about the result.

Strengths

- SINAES has mechanisms in place to ensure the impartiality of the Council accreditation decisions based on peer review reports
- The public hearing of the results of the report of the peer panel before the SINAES Council is considered a good practice
- The decision to give the programmes a second chance with the "deferred accreditation" resolution is a positive example of detecting improvements and establishing corrective measures

Areas for enhancement

- The need to define a precise and feasible timetable for response times to the information demands and the requests for clarifications by the programmes taking part in the accreditation procedure, which should be shared and agreed upon both parties.
- The need to formalise in detail the procedure on complaints and appeals and to inform the programme how to apply to the procedure and the rights thereof.
- To establish the necessary mechanisms to ensure that the appeal decision should not return to the Council, but is submitted to another commission or collegiate group should be in charge of informing about the result

Conclusion of the panel's assessment

With regard to the decision-making process, the Panel recognises that the accreditation decisions of the SINAES Council provide information on weaknesses and strengths and underlines its character as an instrument for continuous programme improvement.

The Panel recommends that the criteria on which the decisions of the SINAES Council are based should be explicit and take the form of general guidelines to inform applicants and help strengthen the consistency of the judgements.

With regard to the procedure for complaints and appeals, the Panel recommends SINAES to formalise the procedure in a detailed manner, in order to provide the people responsible for the accrediting programme with sufficient information about the available mechanisms to apply and the rights thereof.

Assessment for the Guideline.

The Panel considers the Guideline substantially compliant.

VI. The QA of Cross Border Higher Education

The EQAA has policies relating to both imported and exported higher education. These policies take into account the characteristics of the providers and the receivers, and, refer to all types of transnational higher education.

			X
Not compliant	Partially compliant	Substantially compliant	Fully compliant

6.1 Criteria for cross-border higher education

The Act 8256 and Act 8798 establishes that the criteria and standards defined by SINAES have "the official character of a national academic quality standard", their scope of action is national and accreditation is on a voluntary basis for programme accreditation at graduate (for universities and para-universities) and postgraduate levels and holds also competences for institutional accreditation.

Cross-border HE education is not among the responsibilities of SINAES, but the external review of INQAAHE in 2010 included a recommendation on this regard and SINAES has incorporated it into its self-evaluation report.

For this reason, SINAES took part in the MULTRA agreement of ECA in relation to the recognition of accreditation decisions between agencies in Europe. This project allowed SINAES to carry out an evaluation coordinated by ECA to check its compliance with the criteria of ECA's agencies concerning the recognition of accreditation of joint-programmes.

Furthermore, SINAES analysed its practices from the perspective of the "Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education" established by OECD/UNESCO on the internationalisation of QA for accreditation agencies.

The Panel recognises that both initiatives are innovative and important in the context of Central America and Latin America to face the challenges derived by cross-border HE.

On the other hand, the Panel considers that the request to SINAES of the University of San Carlos in Guatemala to accredit programmes qualifies SINAES as a regional reference in QA for the universities of the region. In fact, this request has also consequences at the level of cross-border HE when a Guatemalan university, the oldest one in Latin America, accepts a Costa Rican national accreditation as an international quality label.

The Panel considers that the participation of SINAES in international networks such as RIACES and INQAAHE represents an added value in the international context of Costa Rica's accredited programmes in terms of recognition of degrees, regardless this approach is included among the legal competences of the body.

In a regional context of regional development of qualifications frameworks and declarations of recognition of diplomas, the accreditation of a programme by a body that is also subject to external review becomes a significant issue for regional integration going beyond what is established by the competences in each country.

6.2 Collaboration between agencies

The tables provided in the report and the attached annexes of documents demonstrate that inter-institutional cooperation and collaboration has developed since the beginning of SINAES based on solid institutional relations and becoming a key feature of SINAES' international strategy.

For this reason, **the Panel strongly recommends SINAES to develop its capacities as a regional reference agency in Central America.** Furthermore, it considers that SINAES should assume a more prominent role in international networks such as RIACES and INQAAHE and develop new initiatives such as the creation of SIACES in 2019, according to its experience in the region, as well as its 20-year trajectory.

Strengths

- Participation in international projects for recognition of accreditation decisions

- Analysis of the international guidelines established by OECD/UNESCO for cross-border HE
- Active participation in bi- and multi-regional networks since the beginning of the agency

Areas for enhancement

- Development of the capacities of SINAES as a regional reference body in Central America.
- SINAES should play a more prominent role in the international networks in which it takes part, as well as in the new initiatives in which national accreditation systems converge, in accordance with its 20-year history and experience

Conclusion of the panel's assessment

The Panel considers that, although SINAES does not have among its responsibilities the attention to cross-border education, the agency has developed competencies for the internationalisation of its activities, which favour its full compliance with the contents of this Guideline. Its participation in projects of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions of joint-programmes, incorporates key elements related to QA assurance practices in cross-border HE. Furthermore, its participation in networks of international agencies that involve different regions of the world such as RIACES in Ibero-America or INQAAHE at the global level, shows a level of cooperation between agencies sustained over time and with an impact on its processes.

Assessment for the Guideline.

The Panel considers the Guideline fully compliant.

E. Conclusions

Compliance with INQAAHE guidelines

The review of the Panel of Experts and the result of the analysis of the evidence and information gathered during the visit to SINAES, is positive and satisfactory in terms of compliance with the GGP of INQAAHE that performs substantially.

The following table summarises the Panel's findings for each of the guidelines of INQAAHE's review methodology:

	Guidelines	Panel's evaluation
I	The structure of the External Quality Assurance Agency (EQAA)	Substantial
II	Accountability of the EQAA	Substantial
III	The EQAA's framework for the external review of quality in higher education institutions	Substantial
IV	The EQAA and its relationship to the public	Fully
V	Decision making	Substantial
VI	The QA of cross border higher education	Fully

F. List of Recommendations

Bearing in mind that the review evaluation of SINAES is positive and substantially complies with INQAAHE's GGP, the Panel wishes to gather the recommendations for improvement identified in the analysis shown in the previous sections of this report to contribute to make a clearer picture from the point of view of on-going enhancement for SINAES as well as for the bodies involved in HE in Costa Rica.

- The SINAES should finish the process of independence already advanced with CONARE including its location in new facilities

- An update of the procedure defining the roles of the national and international peers during the accreditation procedure and the visit should be carried out, in order to define in a clearer way the responsibilities of the international and national peers, as well as the technical support work of SINAES through the responsible researcher
- The new organisational and functional structure approved in 2019 should be implemented quickly, taking into consideration the opportunities for improvement identified in this report
- If SINAES maintains institutional accreditation among its functions, the agency should develop the criteria and guidelines for its implementation and put it in place in the Annual Operational Plan
- The recurrence of discussions on the conditions imposed on the accreditation process by its voluntary nature requires that SINAES contribute to this debate from its position within the HE system
- Study of workloads among staff members to better adjust the assignment of tasks and avoid work overloads. The Panel recommends developing a procedure to regulate and define the conditions of staff training in relation to their tasks, allowing the criteria to be objective to obtain results for future revisions of the types of training available and of the people who have benefited from them
- The programme accreditation procedure is the foundation of the activity of SINAES so it is desirable that the implementation of the new model that has been put into consultation with stakeholders will be implemented to correct the identified areas of improvement
- SINAES should urgently undertake the design and implementation of a formalised IQA policy including all its processes and activities in accordance with the current situation

- Reinforcement of the structure underpinning the internal IQAS, which is currently reduced to a single person whose competences, tasks assigned and results of work could not be identified during the evaluation
- Follow-up mechanisms to ensure that the reduction of time in the accreditation procedure does not affect the quality of the process should be implemented
- SINAES should make efforts with representatives of the HE system in Costa Rica to consider the presence of other stakeholders as experts in the evaluation panels, such as students or employers, who would not participate as academic "peers" but as experts from a specific perspective and, therefore, could contribute a different point of view in specific aspects of the process.
- A new programme accreditation procedure should be designed and implemented in the short term
- SINAES should reinforce the training of the evaluators on the basis of the feedback, suggestions and opinions gathered by the technical staff
- To rethink the role of the researcher of SINAES in the site visit, in the light of the experiences and observations of the different stakeholders involved, mainly those responsible for the quality units of the universities and the national peers
- To develop a plan of measures to reinforce external communication of all the activities accomplished by SINAES, including the advantages for students to enroll accredited programmes
- To take up the initiative to organise more fairs and information sessions in locations different than the capital city San José or the metropolitan area, in order to disseminate information and knowledge opportunities to young people in other parts of the country

- To improve the communication of the activities of SINAES and to establish mechanisms of interaction with society in general and not only with the sectors associated with higher education.
- To increase the information available to the public on the SINAES website to reach families and potential future students
- The need to define a precise and feasible timetable for response times to the information demands and the requests for clarifications by the programmes taking part in the accreditation procedure, which should be shared and agreed upon both parties.
- The need to formalise in detail the procedure on complaints and appeals and to inform the programme how to apply to the procedure and the rights thereof.
- To establish the necessary mechanisms to ensure that the appeal decision should not return to the Council, but is submitted to another commission or collegiate group should be in charge of informing about the result
- Development of the capacities of SINAES as a regional reference body in Central America.
- SINAES should play a more prominent role in the international networks in which it takes part, as well as in the new initiatives in which national accreditation systems converge, in accordance with its 20-year history and experience

SINAES has made an effort to incorporate the recommendations for improvement identified in the review accomplished in 2019 by INQAAHE and, given the ever-changing environment of HE in the country, it has had to face new challenges arising after that analysis by developing mechanisms to deal with those changes.

The purpose of this report is also to contribute to the new improvement cycle inaugurated by SINAES after the INQAAHE review, which takes also place in the organisational and managerial renewal undertaken in 2019. It

includes in its planning the design for the immediate future measures that contribute to respond to the areas for improvement identified during the review and detailed in this section of the report.

This new organisational setting, together with the 20-year experience of SINAES, will contribute to give support to SINAES to implement the necessary measures to continue with its cycle of improvement and being a national and regional benchmark for the quality of Costa Rica's higher education system.

Agency: Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior (SINAES) de Costa Rica

Site visit date: July 3-5, 2019

Sending date of the draft review report: August 4, 2019

Date of Agency's comments of factual mistakes:

- August 16, 2019, Friday at 17:18 h Costa Rican Time zone,
- Received by the Secretary of the Panel on August 19, 2019 at 09:00 h CET time Zone

Final review report sending date: August 30, 2019

Request of the CEO of INQAAHE to clarify parts of the English version:
September 17, 2019

Final version of the external review report: September 30, 2019

The secretary of the external review panel states that this document constitutes the final evaluation report of the agency indicated above.

Madrid, 30 September 2019

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'R' followed by 'Ll' and a horizontal line extending to the right.

Rafael Llavori

Annex 1 – Agenda of the visit (In Spanish)

Lunes 1 Julio	Actividad	Lugar
	Llegada a Costa Rica	Aeropuerto
	Transporte Aeropuerto-Hotel	
	Estadía en el Hotel	Hotel

Martes 2 Julio	Actividad	Lugar	Asistentes
7.15-8.00	Transporte Hotel-MEP		
8.30-9.30	Representantes Ministerio de Educación Pública	MEP	M.Ed. Giselle Cruz Maduro Viceministra de Educación. Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica
10.30-12.00	Consejo del SINAES y Dirección Ejecutiva	Sala sesiones (EFCD)	M.Ed. Josefa Guzmán León, Presidenta M.Sc. Gerardo Mirabelli Biamonte, Vicepresidente MAE. Sonia Acuña Acuña M.Sc. Edwin Solórzano Campos Ph.D. Juan Manuel Esquivel Alfaro Dra. Leda Badilla Chavarría Ing. Walter Bolaños Quesada MBA. Arturo Jofré Vartanián M.Sc. Laura Ramírez Saborío, Directora Ejecutiva MAP. Angélica Cordero Solís, Secretaria de Actas
12.00-13.00	Almuerzo Evaluadores		
13.15-14.30	Pares evaluadores del SINAES	Tercio Izquierdo Auditorio (EFCD)	Dr. Arnoldo Araya Leandro, Contaduría M.Sc. Beatriz Badilla Baltodano, Farmacia

			<p>Dra. Enriqueta Zúñiga Chaves, Educación Especial Dra. Jenny Reynolds Vargas, Biología Dr. José Francisco Dittel Gómez, Odontología M.Sc. Juana Coto Campos, Química Dra. Ligia Rojas Valenciano, Enfermería M.Sc. María Adelia Alvarado Vives, Enfermería María del Carmen Delgado Chinchilla, Enseñanza del Inglés Mag. María Julieta Solórzano Salas, Enseñanza de la Educación Especial M.Sc. Sonia Mora Rivera, Computación</p>
14.30-15.00	Reunión de evaluadores	Sala Zentrum (EFCD)	
15.00-16.00	Personal administrativo del SINAES	Tercio Izquierdo Auditorio (EFCD)	<p>M.Sc. Laura Ramírez Saboría, Directora Ejecutiva M.Sc. Pablo Madrigal Sánchez, Administrador Institucional Lic. Alejandro Camacho Vargas, Analista Contable M.Sc. Diana Alfaro León, Profesional en Talento Humano Licda. Ana Gabriela Quesada Dávila, Asistente Administrativa Licda. Natalia Umaña Bonilla, Contratación Administrativa Bach. Priscilla Zamora Peña, Asistente Administrativa Dra. Gisela Coto Quintana, Coordinadora de Calidad M.Sc. Julio Oviedo Aguilar, Comunicador Institucional Licda. Cindy Salgado Sanabria, Asistente Comunicación Licda. Karina Salazar Obando, Secretaria de Actas MAP. Angélica Cordero Solís, Secretaria de Actas Bach. Denis García Aguinaga, Administración Financiera Dipl. Carolina Montero Segura, Recepcionista Bach. Marchessi Bogantes Fallas, Secretaria Dirección Ejecutiva Bach. María José Blanco Mata, Asistente Administrativa Bach. María José Blanco Mata, Asistente Administrativa</p>
16.15	Transporte EFCD-Hotel		

Miércoles 3 Julio	Actividad	Lugar	Asistentes
8.30-10.00	Rectores o sus representantes de IES con experiencia en acreditación.	Sala Hotel	Dra. Marlen León Gizmán, Universidad de Costa Rica Dr. Norman Solórzano Alfaro, Universidad Nacional MTE. Eric Rodríguez Acuña, Universidad Véritas Dr. Pablo Guzmán Stein, Universidad de Ciencias Médicas MBA. Maricelle Chan Aguilar, Universidad Earth MA. Juan José Vásquez, Universidad para la Paz M.Sc. Marianela Núñez Piedra, Universidad Latinoamericana de Ciencia y Tecnología Dr. Roberto Rodríguez Barquero, Universidad Fidélitas Ing. Ana Patricia Ramírez Vargas, Universidad Americana Alexander Hernández Camacho, Colegio Universitario de Cartago Lic. Carlos Zúñiga Madrigal, Universidad Latina de Costa Rica
10.00-10.30	Evaluadores	Sala Hotel	
10.30-12.00	Directores de Unidades Técnicas de Calidad	Sala Hotel	Master. Andrea Soto Grant, Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica M.Sc. Marta Jiménez, Universidad de Costa Rica MBA. Maricelle Chan Aguilar, Universidad Earth Dra. Hazel Arias Mata, Universidad Estatal a Distancia Ph.D. Mayela Dadbud Moreira, Universidad Latinoamericana de Ciencia y Tecnología Licda. Ericka Anchía Angulo, Universidad Nacional M.Sc. Camila Ordoñez Lacle, Universidad de Iberoamérica Licda. Mitzy Vado Chacón, Universidad Santa Paula Msc. Vivian Bagnarello González, Universidad Hispanoamericana Xinia Campos Badilla, Universidad Fidélitas Ing. Isabel Aguilar Jiménez, Universidad Latina de Costa Rica M.Ed. Roberto Brenes Delangton, Escuela Técnica Agrícola e Industrial Ing. Erick Palma Rojas, Universidad Internacional de las

			Américas MTE. Eric Rodríguez Acuña, Universidad Véritas Msc. Cristina Gómez Fonseca, Universidad Escuela Libre de Derecho.
13.30-15.00	Representantes de asociaciones de estudiantes	Sala Hotel	José Pablo Alfaro López, Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad Nacional Lidia Amanda Marín Sánchez, Universidad Hispanoamericana Jorge Luis Escobar, Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza Giancarlo Aguilar Picado, Universidad Véritas César Guzmán Montero, Universidad Latina de Costa Rica Kevin Nájera Barboza, Colegio Universitario de Cartago Rita Robles Loaiza, Universidad Fidélitas Francesca Albini Albini, Universidad Católica Eliana Quimbayo Bolaños, Universidad de Costa Rica
15.15-17.00	Representantes de asociaciones profesionales	Sala Hotel	Lic. Juan León Blanco, Colegio de Abogados Licda. Dayanni Picado Valverde, Colegio de Contadores Públicos Dra. Gabriela Guillén Fallas, Colegio de Médicos Lic. German González Sandoval, Colegio de Orientación Dra. Yajaira Quesada Rojas, Colegio de Farmacéuticos Lic. Pablo Fajardo Zelaya, Colegio de Ciencias Económicas MSc. Cynthia López Valerio, Colegio de Profesionales en informática y computación

Jueves 4 Julio	Actividad	Lugar	Asistentes
7.15-8.00	Transporte Hotel-EFCD		
8.00-9.45	Personal de la División de Acreditación	Tercio Izquierdo Auditorio (EFCD)	M.Sc. Andrea Fonseca Herrera, Investigadora M.Ed. Sandra Zúñiga Arrieta, Investigadora M.Sc. Sughey Montoya Sandí, Investigadora M.Sc. Tatiana Barboza Solórzano, Investigadora Rosa Adolio Cascante, Investigadora Lic. José Miguel Rodríguez García, Investigador Licda. Sandy Cascante Pérez, Gestora de la Información Mag. Cynthia Espinoza Prieto, Registro de Expertos. Licda. Pamela Cerdas Arce, Asistente Procesos de Acreditación Licda. Ericka Madrigal Vásquez, Asistente de Investigación Lic. José Miguel Rodríguez García, Investigador
9.45-10.15	Rellamada al Director Ejecutivo o al Personal del SINAES en caso de ser necesario	Sala Zentrum (EFCD)	
10.15-10.45	Evaluadores únicamente	Sala Zentrum (EFCD)	
10.45-11.45	Resumen oral del informe de los evaluadores al Consejo y Dirección.	Salón Multiusos (EFCD)	M.Ed. Josefa Guzmán León, Presidenta M.Sc. Gerardo Mirabelli Biamonte, Vicepresidente MAE. Sonia Acuña Acuña M.Sc. Edwin Solórzano Campos Ph.D. Juan Manuel Esquivel Alfaro Dra. Leda Badilla Chavarría Ing. Walter Bolaños Quesada MBA. Arturo Jofré Vartanián M.Sc. Laura Ramírez Saborío, Directora Ejecutiva MAP. Angélica Cordero Solís, Secretaria de Actas
11.45-13.00	Almuerzo	Salón Multiusos (EFCD)	

13.00	Transporte EFCD-Hotel		
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Viernes 5 Julio	Actividad	Lugar	Asistentes
Desconocido	Transporte Hotel-Aeropuerto		
Desconocido	Salida de Costa Rica	Aeropuerto	

Annex 2 - Review Panel

The members of the INQAAHE's Review Panel are:

- Francisco Cadena, Chairperson of the Panel, is Full Professor of Chemical Engineering in the National Polytechnic School of Ecuador and has been President of the Council for Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CEAACES) of Ecuador between June 2013 and June 2017.
- Martín Strah, Academic Panel Member, Director for Development and International Relations of the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU) of Argentina.
- Rafael Llavori, Secretary of the Panel, is Head of Unit for Institutional, and International Relations of the National Agency of Quality Evaluation and Accreditation (ANECA) of Spain.