



Progress Report on Compliance by the National Accreditation System of Higher Education of Costa Rica (SINAES)

**Presented to
International Network for Quality Assurance
Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)**

**Document approved by the CNA in meeting 1539-2021
on October 15, 2021**

November 2021

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Acronyms

ACCM:	Improvement Commitment Compliance Progress (Avance de Cumplimiento del Compromiso de Mejoramiento)
AL:	SINAES Legal Advisory
ANECA:	National Quality Assessment and Accreditation Agency of Spain (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación de España)
CDI:	Integration Committee (Comisión de Integración)
CGR:	Office of the Comptroller General of Costa Rica (Contraloría General de la República)
CI:	Institutional Communication
CINDE:	Costa Rican Investment Promotion Agency (Coalición Costarricense de Iniciativas de Desarrollo)
CM:	Improvement Commitment
CNA:	National Accreditation Council (Consejo Nacional de Acreditación)
CNEA:	Nicaraguan National Council of Evaluation and Accreditation (Consejo Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación de Nicaragua)
CONARE:	National Council of Rectors (Consejo Nacional de Rectores)
CSO:	Occupational Health Committee
CSUCA:	Central American Higher University Council (Consejo Superior Universitario Centroamericano)
DE:	SINAES Executive Director
DEA:	Evaluation and Accreditation Division (División de Evaluación y Acreditación)
DSAG:	Division of Management Support Services (División de Servicios de Apoyo a la Gestión)
EAV:	Virtual Academic Encounter (Encuentro académico virtual)
ECA:	European Consortium for Accreditation
EQAA:	External Quality Assurance Agency
Hcéres:	High Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (Haut Conseil de l'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur)
IA:	Self-Evaluation Report
HEI:	Higher Education Institution
ILPEM:	Special Improvement Plan Achievement Report
INDEIN:	Department of Research, Innovation, and Development (Dirección de Investigación, Innovación y Desarrollo)
INQAAHE:	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

MEP:	Ministry of Public Education
IPSAS:	International Public Sector Accounting Standards
PAO:	Annual Operating Plan
PCPE:	Process for accredited degree program study plan changes
PEI:	Institutional Strategic Plan
PGR:	Attorney General's Office (Procuraduría General de la República)
SEVRI:	Institutional Risk Control Assessment System (Sistema de Valoración de Control del Riesgo Institucional)
SIACES:	Ibero-American System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior)
SICOP:	Integrated Public Procurement System
SINAES:	National Accreditation System of Higher Education (Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior)
STEM:	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TEC:	Costa Rican Technological Institute
HT:	Human Talent
IT:	Information Technologies
ICT:	Information and Communication Technologies
UACA:	Universidad Autónoma de Centro América
UAM:	Universidad Americana
UCIMED:	Universidad de Ciencias Medicas
UCR:	University of Costa Rica
UH:	Universidad Hispanoamericana
UIA:	Universidad Internacional de las Américas
UISIL:	Universidad Internacional San Isidro Labrador
ULACIT:	Universidad Latinoamericana de Ciencia y Tecnología
UNA:	Universidad Nacional
UNED:	Universidad Estatal a Distancia
UNIBE:	Universidad Iberoamericana
UNIRE:	Costa Rican Private University Rectors' Unit Association (Asociación Unidad de Rectores de las Universidades Privadas de Costa Rica)
UPEACE:	University for Peace
USAC:	Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala
UTN:	National Technical University (Universidad Técnica Nacional)

I. Foreword

The purpose of this report is to respond to the comments made by the INQAAHE panel of experts to the National Accreditation System of Higher Education (SINAES) in its final report for 2019. This is the result of two years of work during which SINAES has made progress in several areas. It should be noted that SINAES, like all organizations and everyone else, has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020-2021 period. The pandemic has forced it to reinvent itself without pausing in the fulfillment of its mission.

The report seeks to give a detailed account of the tasks in which it needed to advance and improve. It also includes several additional items that should be mentioned even though they were not expressly requested by International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), since they attest to SINAES's progress in complementary areas such as consolidation of the Division of Management Support Services (DSAG) and the Division of Research, Development and Innovation (INDEIN).

The information in this report covers the period from November 7, 2019, when the note with INQAAHE's decision was received, to July 31, 2021.

II. Introduction

During the 2019-2021 period, SINAES faced a changing scenario deriving from both internal and external factors that have marked its recent development:

A) SINAES has achieved its administrative independence. SINAES was created on July 1, 1999 and has been consolidated by Law 8256 and Law 8798. Through official memorandum C-307-2027 dated December 15, 2017, the Attorney General's Office ratified SINAES's status as CONARE's highest level semi-autonomous body and clarified the scope of its instrumental juridical personality.

The decision by the Attorney General's Office created a new panorama, administratively, of the institution's work. "This key event has meant a structural and operational reformulation of the organization. It is linked to a new way of conceptualizing its administrative work and therefore to a phase of adaptation, learning, and significant challenges" ([Annex 1](#)). [Annex 1](#) contains the executive director's work report, the 2018-2022 strategic plan, and the work plan associated with the 2023-2027 strategic plan.

Internally, SINAES consolidated its administrative management independence from the National Council of Rectors (CONARE), which entailed a restructuring of both its administrative processes and its work areas. Section 4.2.1 of this report goes into this in greater detail.

B) Externally, the situation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic forced the agency to migrate all its operations to a virtual mode for both the daily tasks assigned to its staff and the processing of accreditation. At the same time, the state of the country's public finances dictated a new resourcing and fund management scenario for all public institutions, which has affected SINAES's financial situation.

This is the context in which this report has been prepared for INQAAHE. The report refers mostly to aspects where INQAAHE's November 7, 2019 decision note asked SINAES to step up its efforts at the two-year anniversary of its certification of best practices.

However, as already mentioned, the report also includes recently-generated aspects SINAES considers pertinent for fleshing out the core topics referred to by INQAAHE in its note.

This report is organized as follows:

Section III gives the key elements of SINAES's institutional context over the last two years, a period that coincides with the national and international health crisis that has forced the agency to change the management of its processes to remote modalities for both staff matters and accreditation processing. The context is also permeated by the country's public policies that have led to limited resources for all public institutions.

Section IV presents SINAES's progress on the opportunities for improvement identified by the INQAAHE panel of experts in its November 7, 2019 decision note. Section V gives other contributions associated with the opportunities for improvement noted by the panel of experts in their November 2019 final report. The main conclusions are listed in section VI.

III. Context for the Preparation of this Report



3.1 Methodology for the Preparation of this Report

To move ahead with the tasks associated with this report, a task team consisting of the DE and two DEA officers was created whose basic tasks have been to assist those responsible for the assigned tasks and handle the final organization of this report.

In light of the external INQAAHE assessment report and particularly based on the panel of experts’ decision note, at the end of 2019 a work plan was defined to move ahead on the necessary improvements (Annex 2). This work plan organized the tasks by specific topics to be addressed and defined the work group members responsible for coordinating the compliance tasks. The necessary information was then collected for the preliminary integrated report, which was shared with the SINAES team for feedback. After this, the report was shared with the CNA for its approval.

The general lines of this work plan were shared with INQAAHE representatives in a virtual meeting in June 2020 (Annex 3).

3.2 National Context Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic

3.2.1 National Economic Context

Starting in March 2019, the global COVID-19 pandemic forced national authorities to restrict mobility and socialization, the consequence of which was a steep drop in domestic production and employment. The joint Labor Ministry / Health Ministry Directive 073 of March 9, 2020 (Annex 4) established the following:

Article 4. All ministerial authorities are instructed, and decentralized public administration agencies are urged, to temporarily implement working from home in all their respective agencies, to the extent possible during the work week, as a necessary and complementary measure in the face of the coronavirus alert, using expedited procedures. For compliance with or observance of the foregoing, the necessary mechanisms will be established to ensure the continuity of public services.

Although the country had been experiencing worrisome unemployment rates before the pandemic, the health crisis caused an even steeper rise in unemployment. Total unemployment or poor-quality employment in the first quarter of 2021 reached a critical level of 35.1%.

The gross domestic product, which reflects the economy’s capacity to create employment and determines the level of domestic income for defining public tax revenue, contracted sharply in 2020, resulting in a negative growth rate of 4.1%. For 2021, the Central Bank estimates a positive, though relatively modest growth rate of 2.9%.

3.2.2 Tax Policy Implications for SINAES

In December 2018, Law 9635, “Law for the Strengthening of Public Finances”, took force. The main objective of this law is to balance the central government’s total debt ratio with the gross domestic product. (“Law for the Strengthening of Public Finances,” Law 9635 of 2018). The law provides tools in four areas:

- Reform of the sales tax to a value-added tax, expanding its application to services and a number of previously exempted products;
- Reform of the income and profit tax to expand the tracts for the wage tax, payments to abroad, and other items;
- Reform of the public sector wage law to restrict the growth of public sector compensations; and
- Issuance of new “fiscal responsibility” provisions, creating a “fiscal rule” that seeks to reduce public sector expenditure growth according to scenarios that depend on the government’s level of indebtedness.

In the case of SINAES, the financial reality described in the above points has had the following impacts:

- The fiscal rule has created a restriction on the funds available for execution. The amount the government can spend in year x+1 is restricted compared to year x. The impact started in 2020, which used 2019 as a reference.
- Due to the restriction imposed by the rule, internal spending on staff hiring, accommodations, transportation, advisories, training, and general services has been limited.
- Thus, SINAES was unable to hire the staff foreseen to cover the jobs indicated in SINAES’s Annual Operating Plan (PAO).
- In addition to the restriction imposed by the fiscal rule, the amount of funding SINAES has received from the Costa Rican government has been reduced.

The impact of the preceding points is projected to continue for at least the next five years.



3.3 Measures Taken by SINAES in the Context of the Pandemic

To comply with the requirements of the National Accounting Office set forth in the note DCN-UCC-0402-2021 of March 22, 2021, the SINAES Management Support Services Division (DSAG) conducted, with the representative participation of all areas, a SWOT analysis of the institution, in the framework of the pandemic, identifying the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats given the short-, medium- and long-term economic and operational situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic ([Annex 5](#)). This instrument indicated the contingency actions summarized below:

3.3.1 Short-term Measures

In observance of Directive 073-S-MTSS ([Annex 4](#)), all SINAES staff worked from home from March 2020 to the second quarter of 2021.

The agency’s regulations for working from home ([Annex 6](#)) were approved in February 2020. In April 2020, the guidelines ([Annex 7](#)) associated with these regulations occasioned by the health alert for the COVID-19 virus were approved to establish and enforce internal provisions; both are still in effect. An addendum to the employment agreement is in place stating that SINAES will temporarily implement its processes virtually, working from home.

From the moment SINAES started with working from home, the Human Talent (HT) department has been remitting a weekly form to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security with the number of staff members working in this manner. In addition, the home addresses of staff members are kept updated at the National Insurance Institute (INS) for renewing the associated risk policies.

With implementation of working from home, SINAES has continued to strengthen its technological teams and tools and to build capacities for all staff in the use of different Microsoft Office applications:

- Teams as a system for external and internal institutional videoconferencing, as well as instant messaging;
- Use of the Team-Maker tool;
- Use of One Drive;
- Use of SharePoint;
- Use of Planner;

- Ongoing communication using the institution’s internal chat system;
- Work team creation for project coordination;
- Management system for storage of documents on the cloud;
- Remote virtual private network (VPN) access; and
- Constant remote technical support for staff.

The agency is also developing a document management system consisting of new flows that will permit automation of processes carried out manually in different SINAES areas.

With regard to information technology infrastructure, SINAES has been developing a project for autonomy in technological services, which for many years have been provided by CONARE. During 2021 it has been acquiring and implementing solutions for both data security and institutional data storage and backup in order to ensure proper management, availability, and protection as needed.

These measures are related to the institutional working-from-home project and are aimed at providing additional tools for staff to automate their work and ensure data security and availability.

In addition, virtual follow-up meetings have been held as follows:

- Executive Director (DE) with the directors of each division (weekly);
- Division directors with their respective teams (every two weeks);
- National Accreditation Council (CNA) meetings (twice a week); and
- Weekly reporting on the work of all staff members.

Since March 2020, SINAES has been operating under the working-from-home mode, establishing activities to maintain active communication among staff and CNA members and with higher education institutions (HEIs).

SINAES purchased new technological equipment for all its staff, replacing desktop computers with portable equipment. In turn, it also provided portable equipment to CNA members to encourage the use of virtual platforms and reinforce activities that are workable from home. During the first quarter of 2021, a preventive and corrective maintenance plan was initiated for this computer equipment to make sure it is kept in top working condition.



Since its creation in March 2020, SINAES’s Occupational Health Committee (CSO) has been monitoring COVID-19-related issues in order to provide staff with adequate information. The work plan for 2021 adds the delivery of materials for staff members’ workplace ergonomics ([Annex 8](#)).

Also during 2021, the Integration Committee has worked interdepartmentally with HT and the CSO to provide staff with talks on physical and mental health and other areas of interest as a result of the global health emergency.

3.3.2 Long-term Measures

Although SINAES has been working from home since March 2020 due to the pandemic, in December 2020 the CNA approved the new regulations for working from home ([Annex 6](#)) and an internal procedure to promote and regulate working from home in the agency as an instrument to drive modernization, reduce costs, increase productivity, reduce fuel consumption, help reconcile personal, family, and work life, contribute to environmental protection, and support public employment policy through the use of ICTs.

In addition, it continues with its projects for implementation of performance evaluation software and action plans to improve the organizational climate and minimize risks by ensuring staff health.

3.3.3 Contingency Actions for the Pandemic

An immediate response to the pandemic was the development of COVID-19 contingency actions, which are constantly reviewed and updated. The following have been the main activities of this plan:

Strategic Actions	Responsibility	Comments
The DE asked staff to work from home due to the start of the pandemic.	DE	All the staff members signed on and adapted to the new conditions. Employees send in their work reports to their supervisors every week.

Strategic Actions	Responsibility	Comments
The CNA worked virtually.	CNA	The National Accreditation Council holds its meetings 100% virtually.
Training and support for adapting the SINAES team to working from home.	DSAG and IT	SINAES staff members were provided with portable equipment. Microsoft 365 tools such as TEAMS, ONE DRIVE, FORMS, POWER AUTOMATE and PLANNER were implemented for the collaborative work of all staff.
Remote VPN access to the SINAES internal network and the VoIP switchboard was enabled.	DSAG and IT	Firewalls were configured for enabling VPN (virtual private network) service through a virtual channel to the agency’s internal services, such as data sharing and data and VoIP systems.
Tools such as Mailchimp and Vtiger CRM were implemented for contact management and more efficient sending of invites and bulletins.	DSAG, IT, Communication	A Mailchimp account was opened for generating invites, bulletins, and a landing page for automating the communication mechanism with internal and external SINAES customers. Vtiger CRM was installed for centralized contact management.
The use of institutional social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, was promoted.	DSAG and IT	SINAES manages Facebook; training was given to the communication department on the use of the tool, so more agile mechanisms were generated for external and internal communications. The use of YouTube was promoted for posting videos; for this, all SINAES’s virtual activities were enabled on this channel and transmitted simultaneously



Strategic Actions	Responsibility	Comments
The CNA approved the DE's proposal for consulting with affiliated HEIs on processing accreditation virtually.	DE and DEA	Official memorandum SINAES DE-177-200 was sent. The DE and DEA team have met with each of the SINAES-affiliated HEIs for making the proposal, and most of them agreed to adopt the virtual mode. External evaluation visits and half-term reviews have been made virtually and guidelines have been created for dealing with these processes virtually.
The working-from-home addenda were signed by all staff members.	DE, AL and HT	All staff signed the addendum.
Permanent communication system	DE, CI and IT	The bulletin "Así vamos" was created for weekly communicating of the agency's key events.
The Department of Research, Innovation, and Development transformed its training to the virtual mode.	INDEIN	The second STEM CR program (for 200 teachers of accredited programs) and Research Bases program were started.
Academic activities were carried out virtually to support HEIs with tools and analysis for dealing with the pandemic.	DE, CI, DEA and INDEIN	By July 2021, more than 20 activities had been carried out. The talks can be found on the SINAES YouTube channel. https://www.youtube.com/user/SINAESCostaRica
Creation of the Occupational Health Committee	CSO	The committee sent out messages for raising awareness of individual actions to take for COVID-19.

Strategic Actions	Responsibility	Comments
The communications area built awareness in SINAES on measures to take for COVID-19.	CI and CSO	The communications area kicked off its activity by sending daily messages on measures to take for COVID-19. Afterwards, this activity was taken over by the Occupational Health Committee.
Strengthening of the Integration Committee	CDI	Online activities were organized to build awareness on different issues.
Strategic meetings follow-up	DE	Weekly meetings were held to monitor the COVID-19 emergency, daily actions, and the PAO: President with the Executive Director, DE with her direct reports, DSAG with its team.
Staff training	HT	Conducted virtually. The entire team has benefitted.
Continuity in the issuing of CNA decisions	CNA	Decisions made by the CNA were issued virtually.

Source: Camacho-Vargas. Financial Statements.

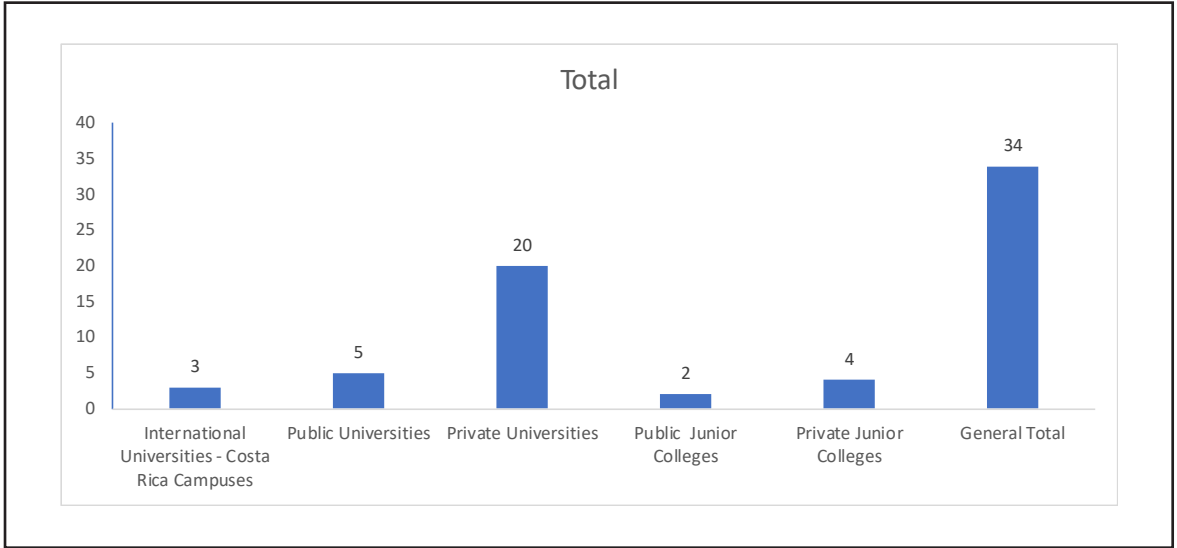


3.4 Accreditation Processing within the Framework of the Pandemic

3.4.1 Affiliated Institutions and Accreditation Processing

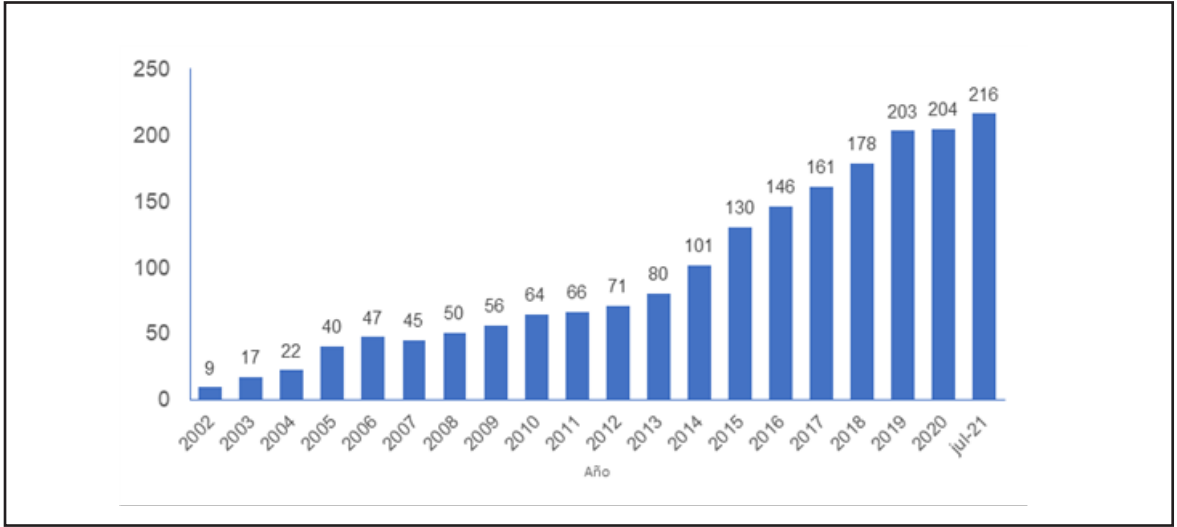
At July 2021, SINAES had 34 public and private affiliated HEIs (Figure 1) and a total of 216 accredited degree and study programs (Figure 2).

Figure 1. SINAES: Affiliated HEIs at July 31, 2021



Source: Cascante-Pérez, S. (July 2021).

Figure 2. SINAES: Accreditations and Reaccreditations Accumulated Annually. 2002 - July 2021



Source: Cascante-Pérez, S. (July 2021).

By way of context, Figure 2 shows the number of SINAES-accredited degree and study programs between 2002 and July 2021.

3.4.2 Management of Accreditation Processing: Virtuality

While its staff migrated to working from home, SINAES had to urgently solve the way accreditation was being processed, particularly the external evaluation visits and Improvement Commitment Compliance Progress (ACCM) reviews, for which there was a strong physical presence component. In addressing this situation, it had to keep in mind that the HEIs were facing an unforeseen and urgent need to redefine all their academic and administrative processes from physical to virtual, leading to a change in their priorities. This had potential implications on the processing of accreditation.

This was the context in which the DE and DEA presented a joint proposal to the CNA to virtualize the process and the CNA decided not to postpone accreditation processing, migrating it to a virtual mode. To that end, during the first period of the pandemic (April 2020) the DE held individual virtual consultation meetings with all the SINAES-affiliated HEIs to assess their availability and willingness to participate in virtual external reviews and ACCM and Special Improvement Plan Achievement Report (IMPEM) reviews. Official memorandum SINAES-177-2020 (Annex 9) was also sent out explaining the work method and guidelines to be developed. More recently, through official memorandum SINAES-DE-482-2021, the HEIs were informed that these measures would be extended to 2022.

Parallel to its meetings number 1398 and 1400 on April 21 and 28, 2020, respectively, the CNA agreed on the new method for managing accreditation processes virtually with regard to ACCM reviews, peer visits, and accreditation ceremonies (Annex 10).

SINAES focused its efforts on preparing the instruments for making virtual processing feasible. The DEA therefore prepared internal and external guidelines for virtualizing the assessments that had previously been carried out physically.

The internal and external guidelines for virtual external reviews and ACCM reviews are attached. The ILPEM reviews lack their own guidelines, but the dynamics are quite similar to the ones for the ACCM review (Annexes 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15).

At the same time, the CNA made two decisions that were communicated to the affiliated institutions in a timely manner:

- 1. Accreditation fees were adjusted, considering that accreditation processes would be handled virtually, reducing transportation and accommodation costs (Annex 16).



2. Deadlines were adjusted for delivery of the pertinent documents for accreditation. In particular, it was decided that self-evaluation reports could be delivered the day after the accreditation expiration date, extending the delivery deadline from the previous decision, which set the self-evaluation report delivery deadline at three months prior to expiry of accreditation ([Annex 17](#)).

Additionally, the HEIs were notified of a new, modified IA delivery deadline, which will be reviewed in point 4.1.1.7.

As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, as of 2020 most of the external review and ACCM review processes have been virtual.

Table 1. SINAES: External Review Visits, by Review Mode. 2020 - July 31, 2021

Type of Visit	External Review Visit	
	2020	2021 (July 31)
In situ	4	0
Ex situ	22	21
Mixed	1	0

Source: Cascante-Pérez, S. (July 2021).

Table 2. SINAES: Review of Improvement Commitment Compliance Progress Reports, by Review Mode. 2020 - July 31, 2021

Type of Review	Completed ACCMs	
	2020	2021 (July 31)
Pre-pandemic	4	
Document review	7	5
Document review and virtual meetings	15	2

Note: The data in the above table correspond to ACCMs analyzed and approved by the CNA

Source: Cascante-Pérez, S. (July 2021).

From 2020 to July 2021, some 48 external reviews and 33 ACCM reviews were done virtually. During the rest of 2021 and for 2022, SINAES will continue to do its assessments virtually.

As can be seen in the above sections, SINAES made progress on its core tasks and also implemented in a systematic and organized manner a new way of working, addressing HEI needs and the reality caused by the pandemic and achieving SINAES’s objectives.

3.5. Research, Development and Innovation Activities

To promote innovation, quality, and improvement in Costa Rican higher education, in 2018 SINAES created and incorporated the División of Research, Development and Innovation (INDEIN) into its Organic Regulation as a complement to the accreditation work. With INDEIN, SINAES opens spaces for coordination and collaborative work with the HEIs and other interest groups in the realm of education and accreditation.

The purpose of INDEIN is threefold:

- Manage and develop research, development and innovation projects and actions that contribute to identification of accreditation progress and challenges, domestically and internationally, and to innovation and quality improvement of Costa Rican higher education;
- Manage and develop evaluative and participatory research into the results, impacts, and methodological procedures associated with accreditation; and
- Implement knowledge transfer, training, and updating of professionals in the fields of self-assessment, external assessment, curricular design, and other issues needed for achieving excellence in degree and study programs and management of higher education.

SINAES’s Regulation for Research, Development and Innovation, approved by the CNA in 2021, establishes that the INDEIN will be able to manage, develop, and support the following types of projects ([Annex 18](#)):

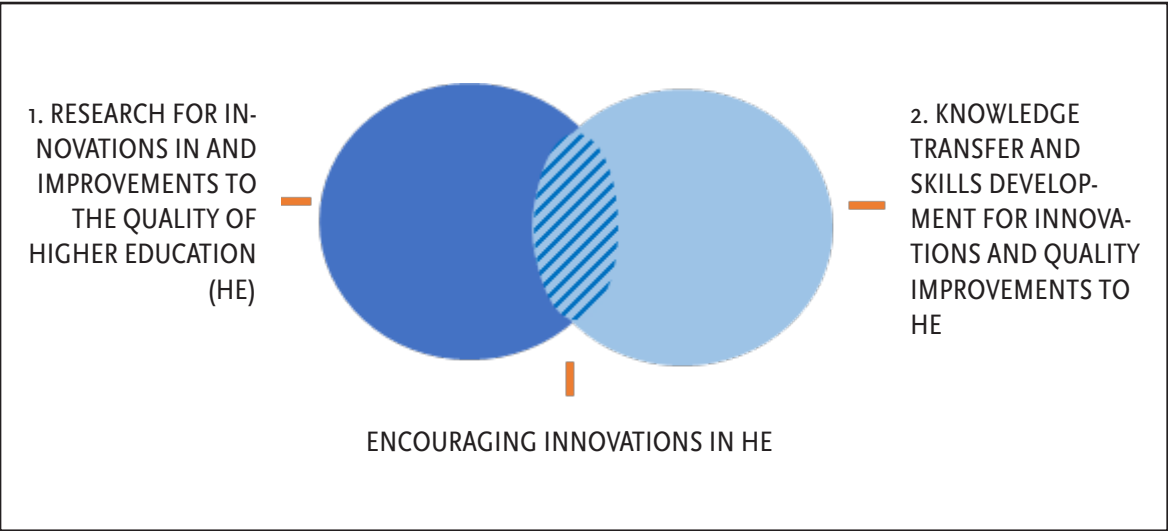
- a. Research projects for innovation in and quality improvement of higher education, systematization, assessment, and meta-assessment.
- b. Training and knowledge transfer projects for innovation in and quality improvement of higher education.



This Regulation establishes that actions and projects managed and developed by INDEIN serve as an incentive for affiliated HEIs and their accredited degree and study programs and as support for other authorities whose work impacts the quality of higher education and relates to SINAES’s mission and objectives.

Figure 3 shows the two key processes carried out by this division.

Figure 3. SINAES: Key INDEIN Processes



Source: INDEIN-SINAES, 2021.

At present the division has two full-time staff members, a division director, and a core processes assistant. In addition, it has the partial support of two DEA staff members.

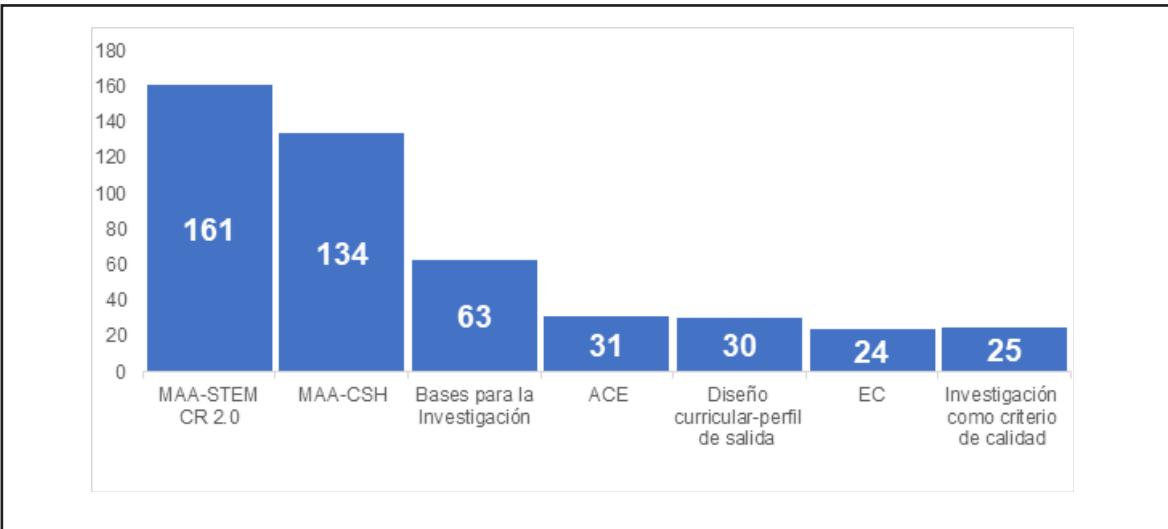
3.5.1 Knowledge Transfer and Capacity Building Achievements

In its initial stage, INDEIN has focused its efforts on knowledge transfer and capacity building. From 2019 to September 2021, training sessions have been held for a total of 468 participants on topics concerning the CNA-approved Guidelines for Research, Development and Innovation and assessment criteria for the SINAES degree program assessment model (Figure 4):

- Active learning methodologies (ALM) in social sciences and humanities (CS & H) (2019-2020);
- Active learning methodologies (ALM) in STEM (2020-2021);

- Curriculum design fundamentals, the function of the exit profile and scenario elaboration as a way to formulate it (2019);
- Student-centered learning (SCL) and tools for implementing it (2021);
- Competency assessment in health science studies (2021);
- Research basics (BI) (2019-2020); and
- Research as a crosscutting theme for quality higher education (2021).

Figure 4. Number of Training Participants by Thematic Area, INDEIN, 2019-2021



Source: INDEIN, 2021.

The training in active learning methodologies in STEM, social sciences and humanities has had the broadest scope in terms of number of participants, since the topic is pertinent, relevant, and useful for university professors, especially for remote teaching during the pandemic.

These topics were selected on the basis of training needs assessments that have made it possible for SINAES to offer its affiliated HEIs (universities and para-universities) training contextualized to their needs.

Participating in this training were quality unit technical staff, curriculum design advisors, SINAES staff, and, primarily, professors at the affiliated HEIs.

In the case of the training in research basics and active learning methodologies in STEM, social sciences and humanities - developed by SINAES with the help of Harvard University-affiliated Laspau - a learning replication stage was conducted at the end of the programs in which participating professors shared what they had learned with other



professors at their universities. At present, this stage in the training for the social sciences and humanities area has concluded, with a total of 521 more people sharing the learning from the program. In the other two areas, this stage is still underway.

Development of International Internships

SINAES sponsored a two-day academic internship in 2019 through the academic governance and leadership program developed with the support of Laspau. Held on the campus of Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the topics were connected to the training program in active learning methodologies for social sciences and humanities (2019).

Participating were 27 staff members from the following 22 SINAES-affiliated universities: UCR, UNA, TEC, UNED, UTN, UCIMED, UACA, UNIBE, Hispanoamericana, UIA, Fidélitas UAM, ULACIT, Católica, Veritas, Latina, UISIL, La Salle, UAM, UPEACE, Santa Paula, Libre de Derecho and San Marcos. One CNA member and a SINAES DEA research manager also participated.

The program centered on the challenges after institutional transformation and provided an opportunity for exploring innovative ideas from different perspectives with the support of world-class experts, in addition to debating and analyzing new models for advancement in education and the role of universities for molding sustainable societies.

Experience-sharing sessions were also held on the campus of Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Design of Training Courses on the SINAES Moodle Platform

In 2021, INDEIN began developing flipped classroom training activities on the SINAES's Moodle platform. This represents a significant breakthrough that lets INDEIN gradually shape a training program that can be periodically offered to interest groups.

Two workshops were given on the competency-based curriculum approach. In the first, "Student-centered Learning and Tools for its Implementation," 31 trained curriculum design advisors participated. The second, "Competency Assessment in Health Sciences," involved the participation of 24 professors in this field of studies.

The third training activity designed on the Moodle platform consisted of a workshop, "Research as a Crosscutting Theme for Quality Higher Education," in which 25 professors participated. The division's collaborative efforts made it possible to bring in two nationally and internationally recognized experts as facilitators for this workshop.

Development of Virtual Academic Forums (EAVs)

Since declaration of the COVID-19 health emergency in 2020, INDEIN has obtained the ad honorem collaboration of some 57 experts (42 national and 15 international experts) who have given talks through the EAVs offered by SINAES to the domestic and international community every month. Collaborative ties have also been formed with diverse groups such as the National Observatory on Inclusive Education (ONEI), the National Institute for Women (INAMU), the National Council of Rectors (CONARE-OLAP), CONESUP, the National Syndicate of Guidance Professionals (SINAPRO), the Costa Rican Investment Promotion Agency (CINDE), different national HEIs and their accredited degree and study programs, Turnitin América Latina, and Harvard University-affiliated Laspau. The following topics were addressed from April 2020 to September 2021:

- Experiences in virtual mediation in SINAES-affiliated higher education institutions;
- University teaching in the twenty-first century: building innovative strategies for teaching and learning;
- How to flip your online class when the world is flipped;
- Assessment for learning: challenges in virtuality;
- Rethinking Costa Rican life from different fields of wisdom;
- Pedagogical mediation and technologies in junior college teaching;
- Collaborative learning challenges in virtual environments;
- Academic integrity as a quality process;
- Self-evaluation and improvement in HEIs: challenges in virtuality;
- What can we learn from the pandemic with regard to how we evaluate the university and student experience?
- Addressing clinical practice in the fields of medicine during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Inclusive education in virtual learning environments;
- The future of e-learning and how to ensure educational quality using these tools;
- Professional 4.0: professional competencies required for employability;
- Educational guidance: challenges in virtuality;
- Curriculum shifts: implications of course virtuality in the COVID-19 context;



- Vocational guidance processes and methods in virtual environments;
- National Institute for Women (INAMU): hidden curriculum in trainer training;
- Open educational resources: a valuable opportunity in the university;
- Institutionalization of university entrepreneurialism and innovation programs in times of coronavirus;
- Risk management in higher education quality assurance;
- Global competencies in different contexts: a comparative analysis for new university curriculum designs;
- Experiences of higher education institutions in virtualization: virtual student monitoring to maximize student permanence in distance learning;
- Research as a quality and innovation criteria in higher education institutions (HEIs);
- Activity with guidance professionals. Emerging challenges in educational guidance: innovation, active methods, and interculturality;
- Activity with guidance professionals. Family and education;
- How to implement the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in higher education: the experience of the National University of Distance Education (UNED) in Costa Rica;
- Motivational aspects in education in virtual learning environments;
- Autonomous learning strategies in virtual environments; and
- Virtual program curriculum design.

Each of these talks had the synchronous participation of 100 to 400 people from 22 countries (Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela, Peru, Canada, the U.S., Mexico, Portugal and Spain).

The participants included university and junior college professors, researchers, university authorities, HEI curriculum and quality technicians, university administrators, guidance professionals, professional high school and business representatives, and students, among others.

The videos of these activities have been shared on social media and YouTube. In addition, resources have been generated with the responses to participants' questions that were not answered during the activity due to a lack of time. Furthermore, the ONEI prepared

and shared with the Costa Rican academic community and the world a document entitled "Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Resources and Support Materials." Also shared have been the different speakers' publications, such as digital books written by them.

These activities have enabled SINAES to provide the HEIs with information and trends concerning higher education in the context of the pandemic while at the same time helping it build collaborative relationships nationally and internationally, contributing to its positioning and internationalization.

3.5.2 Achievements in Research for Innovation in and Quality Improvement of Higher Education

It should be noted that the February 2021 approval of the Regulation for Research, Development, and Innovation marked the start of INDEIN's research work. Below is a description of the main actions that were undertaken:

Development of the Research Basics in Teaching and Learning for Costa Rican University Professors Program

The Research Basics in Teaching and Learning for Costa Rican University Professors program, implemented by SINAES with the support of Harvard University-associated Laspau, marked a milestone in the coordination and integration of research and training. The practices of university professors are nurtured by the results of research on teaching and learning, the contributions of didactics in their field, and the different learning theories. This program, launched in 2020 by SINAES, addressed topics related to the educational research approach known as Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

SoTL consists of a systematic inquiry into student learning to enhance the practice of teaching by making the inquiry or research findings public (Kozanitis, 2020). SoTL considers university professors experts in the teaching, learning, and research in their fields.

As an outcome of this training, the 60 participating university professors systematized their experiences and teaching and learning results in the courses they give at SINAES-affiliated universities and prepared 51 academic articles.

With this training, the professors took a step towards research into their own practice, discovered valuable findings for enhancing their teaching and learning, and shared these findings with their colleagues in each university.



Participation of SINAES as Co-organizer of International Projects for Boosting Research

INDEIN handled SINAES’s participation as co-organizer of two projects based on international partnerships for promoting research in higher education and quality.

The first involved institutions in different geographical areas around the world and brought together international organizations such as the University of Chile, Laspau, LatinSoTL, PROF XXI, STHETI, CINDA, and SINAES. It consisted of the publication of a digital book entitled *Innovating and Transforming Disciplines: Key Experiences in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean 2021-2022*, which will include academic articles on the findings of research on teaching and learning in different fields from HEIs in different latitudes, promoting the participation of the participating professors in SINAES’s research basics program.

The second project consisted of the partnering of SINAES with the University of Chile’s School of Health Sciences to develop the “XXI Conference on How to Continue Education in Health Sciences in Times of COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities.” These forums provide a space for reflection and academic encounter in Latin America and the Caribbean on the lessons learned, opportunities, and challenges revealed by the pandemic. The following two core topics will be addressed: The consequences of emotional health in the educational community, and the achievement of learning and clinical competencies involved in training.

INDEIN handled the participation of three accredited degree programs in three affiliated universities (UCR, UCIMED, and UNIBE), which shared their experiences in these areas during the pandemic.

Analysis of the Findings of External and Virtual ACCM Reviews

An analysis is underway of the results of SINAES’s virtual external review and virtual ACCM review in the second half of 2020, conducted from the external and internal standpoints. This section shows some of the systematized data to date, since the report is still under preparation.

The first stage of this analysis involved consultations on organizational and implementation aspects of the two processes with the degree and study program representatives, external peer reviewers, and ACCM reviewers who took part in the virtual external reviews and ACCM reviews conducted in the second half of 2020.

The systematized results to date show that all stakeholders evaluated the experience positively for both the virtual external reviews and the virtual ACCM reviews (Annex 19).

Table 3 shows the evaluations of the external peer reviewers who participated in the virtual external reviews.

Table 3. SINAES: Evaluation of the Peers who Participated in the Virtual External Reviews in the Second Half of 2020

Aspects Evaluated	Yes		No	
	Absolute	Percentage	Absolute	Percentage
SINAES provided information for issuing an opinion on the creditable situation of the assessed study/degree program.	34	100%	0	0%
The consultations prior to the virtual assessment were satisfactorily handled by SINAES.	34	100%	0	0%
A technical test was conducted between the consultant, peer team, and IT officer of the study/degree program prior to the virtual visit.	34	100%	0	0%
The virtual meeting agenda was followed as agreed.	34	100%	0	0%
The punctuality of the scheduled virtual activities was adequate.	33	97%	1	3%
The order in which the virtual activities on the external review agenda were carried out was adequate.	34	100%	0	0%
The people convoked for the virtual meetings participated as planned in the agenda.	31	91%	3	9%
Moderation of the virtual meetings by the team of peer reviewers was adequate.	33	97%	1	3%
The work performed by the consultant responsible for advising the study/degree program in the virtual visit was adequate.	34	100%	0	0%
The digital tools and platforms used during the virtual external review were adequate.	34	100%	0	0%
The quality of didactic and pedagogical resources provided by the study/degree program during the virtual meetings was adequate.	31	91%	3	9%
The virtual external review experience implemented by SINAES due to the pandemic was positive.	34	100%	0	0%
I would participate again in a virtual external review organized by SINAES.	32	94%	2	6%

Source: Questionnaire applied March-April 2021. INDEIN-SINAES.



Table 4 shows the evaluations of the study/degree program representatives that participated in the virtual external reviews.

Table 4. SINAES: Evaluation of the Study/Degree Program Representatives Who Participated in the Virtual External Reviews in the Second Half of 2020

Aspects Evaluated	Yes		No	
	Absolute	Percentage	Absolute	Percentage
The study/degree program consultations prior to the virtual assessment were satisfactorily handled by SINAES.	25	96%	1	4%
A technical test was conducted between the SINAES accreditation consultant, peer team, and IT officer of the study/degree program prior to the virtual external review visit.	24	92%	2	8%
The virtual meeting agenda was planned jointly and followed as agreed.	26	100%	0	0%
The induction provided by SINAES for the virtual peer reviewer visit was adequate.	25	96%	1	4%
The behavior of the peer reviewer team was courteous and respectful when consulting during the virtual assessments.	26	100%	0	0%
The punctuality of the scheduled virtual activities was adequate.	26	100%	0	0%
The order in which the virtual activities on the external review agenda were carried out was adequate.	25	96%	1	4%
The people convoked for the virtual meetings participated as planned in the agenda.	26	100%	0	0%
Moderation of the virtual meetings by the team of peer reviewers was adequate.	26	100%	0	0%
The peer reviewer team demonstrated sufficient knowledge for assessing the virtual study/degree program.	26	100%	0	0%

Aspects Evaluated	Yes		No	
	Absolute	Percentage	Absolute	Percentage
The peer reviewer team provided contributions for improving the study/degree program during the virtual assessment.	26	100%	0	0%
The work performed by the consultant responsible for advising the study/degree program in the virtual visit was adequate.	26	100%	0	0%
The digital tools and platforms used during the virtual external review were adequate.	26	100%	0	0%
The virtual external review experience implemented by SINAES due to the pandemic was positive.	25	96%	1	4%

Source: Survey taken March-April 2021. INDEIN-SINAES.

One of the systematized recommendations for the virtual external review was to consider implementation of mixed assessment modes where the national peer reviewer would physically tour the degree program facilities to assess aspects such as improvements to infrastructure, laboratories, libraries, and communal areas, among other things.

The external reviewers' performance, for its part, was evaluated positively by the study/degree program representatives. For the future, some peers recommended an internal peer team evaluation of each member's performance.

In addition, the assistance of the SINAES technical staff was considered professional and their knowledge of communications and coordination of the virtual external reviews was considered adequate. However, one of the suggestions was to improve SINAES's induction for the virtual external review.

As for the virtual ACCM reviews, Table 5 shows the evaluations of the ACCM reviewers who participated in the virtual ACCM reviews.



Table 5. SINAES: Aspects Evaluated by the ACCM Reviewers Doing the Virtual Mid-accreditation Assessments in the Second Half of 2020

Aspects Evaluated	Yes		No	
	Absolute	Percentage	Absolute	Percentage
SINAES provided information for issuing an opinion on the ACCM of the assessed study/degree program.	16	100%	0	0%
The consultations prior to the virtual meetings were satisfactorily handled by SINAES.	16	100%	0	0%
The virtual meeting agenda was followed as agreed.	15	94%	1	6%
The punctuality of the scheduled virtual activities was adequate.	16	100%	0	0%
The order of the virtual meetings was adequate.	16	100%	0	0%
The people convoked for the virtual meetings participated as planned.	16	100%	0	0%
The work performed by the consultant responsible for advising the study/degree program in the virtual meeting was adequate.	16	100%	0	0%
The digital tools and platforms used during the virtual reviews were adequate.	16	100%	0	0%
The quality of didactic and pedagogical resources provided by the study/degree program during the virtual meetings was adequate.	15	94%	1	6%
The experience of the virtual ACCM review meetings implemented by SINAES was positive.	16	100%	0	0%
I would participate again in a virtual ACCM review that includes virtual meetings with study/degree program representatives.	16	100%	0	0%

Source: Survey taken March-April 2021. INDEIN-SINAES.

Table 6 shows the evaluations of the study/degree program representatives that participated in the virtual ACCM reviews.

Table 6. SINAES: Aspects Evaluated by the Study/Degree Program Representatives Who Participated in the Virtual Mid-accreditation ACCM Review, in the Second Half of 2020

Aspects Evaluated	Yes		No	
	Absolute	Percentage	Absolute	Percentage
The consultations prior to the review were satisfactorily handled by SINAES.	24	89%	3	11%
The virtual meeting agenda was followed as agreed.	24	89%	3	11%
The behavior of the ACCM reviewer was courteous and respectful when consulting.	25	93%	2	7%
The punctuality of the scheduled virtual activities was adequate.	25	93%	2	7%
The people convoked for the virtual meetings participated as planned in the agenda.	25	93%	2	7%
Moderation of the virtual meetings by the ACCM reviewer was adequate.	25	93%	2	7%
The work performed by the ACCM reviewer of the study/degree program was adequate.	27	100%	0	0%
The ACCM reviewer provided contributions for improving the study/degree program.	27	100%	0	0%
The work performed (contributions, clarifications, attention) by the SINAES accreditation consultant responsible for advising the study/degree program in the follow-up stage was adequate.	26	96%	1	4%
The digital platforms and tools used during the virtual ACCM reviews were adequate.	26	96%	1	4%
The experience of the virtual ACCM review meetings implemented by SINAES due to the COVID-19 pandemic was considered positive by the study/degree program.	26	96%	1	4%

Source: Survey taken March-April 2021. INDEIN-SINAES.



The ACCM reviewers and study/degree program representatives who participated in the virtual mid-accreditation ACCM reviews evaluated the virtual internal procedures and process positively.

Their main recommendations included improving delivery of the documents sent by the study/degree program for speeding up the reviews, planning and coordination of the virtual meetings, and communication among the parties involved, in addition to ensuring command of the digital platform to be used in virtual meetings.

For the second stage of this analysis, two online questionnaires were prepared, one aimed at the SINAES authorities, CNA members and DE on the virtual external review process, and the other aimed at the evaluation and accreditation consultants responsible for assisting in external reviews and virtual ACCM reviews. This information is currently being systematized for preparation of a report that will integrate the results of both processes from both external and internal viewpoints.

Feedback with SINAES Interest Groups

It is especially important to INDEIN to know the outlooks, needs, and expectations of SINAES's interest groups, so the division periodically consults with the affiliated HEIs and accredited degree programs on different issues in order to contextualize its support for quality higher education and identify topics for future research, development, and innovation for improving the quality of higher education.

In the first semester of 2021, SINAES carried out three consultation processes: "Active Learning and its Contribution to Virtual Course Mediation during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Prospective Challenges," "Diagnostic of Competency-based Curriculum Approach Features in the University," and "Formative Needs of SINAES-affiliated Higher Education Institutions."

The results have become a reference for the 2022 work plan.

Design of Two Research Project Folders

In the second semester of 2021, two research project folders were planned in connection with the 2021 PAO and SINAES's Research, Development, and Innovation lines. The CNA approved the research topics and four projects were developed in the second half of 2021:

- State of the art in accreditation of higher education in the world: transformations during the COVID-19 pandemic and prospective challenges;
- State of the art in assessment and accreditation of engineering degrees in Latin America: prospective challenges and achievements;
- State of the art in research as a quality criterion for professional training in the twenty-first century; and
- State of the art in curricular shifts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With regard to the impact of research findings, the projects are designed to compile pertinent, relevant, and innovative information that can feed back into the following:

- a. The design of the new SINAES assessment model currently in process;
- b. The institutional tasks needed for the curriculum contingency shifts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- c. The internal quality assurance processes of the accredited degree programs.

Strengthening of research in higher education and quality is projected for 2022 in order to generate feedback for the HEIs, the accredited degree and study programs, and SINAES's internal tasks and decision-making.

IV. Opportunities for Improvement Indicated by the INQAAHE Panel of Experts in their November 7, 2019 Decision Note



Section 3.5 has referred to the tasks undertaken by INDEIN, but it should be noted that the responsibility for managing and monitoring accreditation processes falls on the Evaluation and Accreditation Division (DEA). [Annex 1](#) (section 4.2) describes the actions taken by this division. In addition to its other duties, this division is responsible for managing external review visits, monitoring ACCMs, and preparing technical inputs to support the CNA's decision-making in both accreditation and consultations with external agents on different topics. The DEA manages curriculum in terms of reviewing the study plans of accredited private university degree and study programs. Its information management responsibilities also include organizing and feeding information on all the processes in the different accreditation stages into the databases in order to follow up on and provide input for decision-making by SINAES authorities.

This is the division that has been working on preparing all SINAES's instruments, from accreditation models to guidelines and different proposed changes to SINAES's activities. In addition, this division has analyzed SINAES's regulations, developing proposals for updating the system.

Moreover, it has an ample repository of national and international professionals with extensive experience in accreditation with both SINAES and other agencies, both national and international. Because of this repository, the division is able to propose peer teams.

Within this framework, many of the achievements mentioned below have resulted from the work of both divisions, together with the other SINAES areas indicated in Figure 5.

4.1. External Review Capacities

INQAAHE Indication: Criterion 1.4.1 The EQAA has a well-trained, qualified, staff able to conduct external evaluation effectively and efficiently in accordance with its mission statement and its methodological approach.

In this aspect, two issues addressed by the INQAAHE panel are especially significant:

- Update the procedure that defines the roles of national and international peers during accreditation and visits in order to clarify their responsibilities and the support provided by the researcher in charge. Make efforts with higher education system representatives to consider the presence of other stakeholders as experts on 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.
- Reframe the role of the SINAES researcher in the site visit, in the light of the experiences and observations of the different stakeholders, primarily national peers and those responsible for the universities' quality units. The INQAAHE

panel's external review of SINAES led to recommendations regarding the need to strengthen training of the peer team. This training was recommended for building capacities in the peer reviewers hired by SINAES.

With regard to this topic, SINAES is working on the guidelines for induction of external peer reviewers for addressing the current accreditation model as well as the new accreditation model. Peer training through Moodle courses was included in SINAES's 2022 PAO.

SINAES's efforts to improve its accreditation procedures in the period following the 2019 INQAAHE panel review can be classified into two types. On the one hand, it made a series of procedural changes to bolster its offering of instruments and guides for communicating and documenting the accreditation or closely related processes, thereby helping to clarify the processes for all participants in the accreditation process, including the team of reviewers, the evaluation and accreditation consultant, and the professionals responsible for the study/degree programs being accredited.

A second subset of projects is being carried out to implement process improvements and add new components to SINAES's accreditation work. These proposed accreditation procedure innovations derive from the report on INQAAHE's review of SINAES and compliance with its strategic planning (SINAES, 2018. 2018-2022 Strategic Plan). These two groups of efforts are presented in section (4.1.1) Revision and Improvement of Current Procedures, and section (4.1.2) Process Innovation.

4.1.1 Revision and Improvement of Current Procedures

The following progress has been made on improving and documenting SINAES's accreditation procedures in the period covered by this review.

4.1.1.1 Guidelines for Remote External Reviews

During 2020, SINAES communicated to the higher education community its "Guidelines for Virtual External Review Visits during the COVID-19 Health Emergency", which SINAES has been updating and which respond to the need to continue with accreditation in the context of the health emergency. The guidelines reproduce the contents of the physical external review, preserving the same activities but adapting them to remote implementation with the help of information and communication technologies. To be specific, the external review activities are conducted primarily through the use of videoconferencing. As was mentioned earlier, the HEI's were consulted on their consent to this change of modality prior to the publication of these guidelines.



The following guidelines were approved in this context:

- Guideline for general aspects to be addressed during meetings of the evaluation and accreditation consultant in the external review stage. The goal of this guideline is to establish general topics and guidelines to consider for effective meetings with both study/degree program representatives and the peer reviewer team during the external review stage. Also included is the induction process implemented by the accreditation consultant with external reviewers;
- Guideline for virtual review of Improvement Commitment Compliance Progress (ACCM) - external document;
- Guideline for virtual review of Improvement Commitment Compliance Progress (ACCM) - internal document;
- Guideline for virtual external review visits during the COVID-19 health emergency - internal document; and
- Guideline for virtual external review visits during the COVID-19 health emergency - external document.

The goal of these guidelines is to guide HEIs and DEA staff in the virtual ACCM reviews and peer visits.

The new guide to accreditation currently under construction will integrate remote external review processes as a regular mechanism to which SINAES can recur.

4.1.1.2 Updating of Accreditation Forms

In this study period SINAES reviewed and updated the forms used by peer reviewers and evaluation and accreditation consultants during external reviews. These forms are already in use and the files are available on the SINAES intranet as well as the SINAES website.

4.1.1.3 Improvement of Study Plan Review Procedures

The amount of work spent modifying study plans has been increasing. Proposed study plan modifications for accredited degree programs of private universities can be sent to SINAES provided they are part of the accreditation improvement commitment. [Annex 1](#) gives the data on the number of study plans that have been reviewed.

In order to improve SINAES’s procedure for analyzing, reviewing, and approving

proposed study plan modifications (PCPE) in private HEI accredited degree or study programs, the existing procedure was updated and new [annexes](#) were added.

The DE informed CNA members of this update in meeting number 1493 of May 4, 2021 ([Annex 20](#)). In addition, the internal bulletin “Asi Vamos,” edition 44 of May 4, 2021, informed SINAES staff of this update and gave the link where it can be consulted. Bulletin 58 also communicated the updated version of the Guide for Study Plan Change Proposals, which is available on the SINAES website.

This version of the procedure admits some changes that have been taking place in practice, facilitating curriculum review management within SINAES.

4.1.1.4 Formalization of Accreditation Procedures

As part of the SINAES quality area’s process for formalizing and documenting SINAES procedures and guidelines, the ones for accreditation were reviewed and updated. They describe the accreditation process in detail and are available to the different people involved in this process to help them understand it.

The accreditation procedure and specific guidelines, updated and systematized according to the quality area’s format, can be found in [Annex 21](#). In addition, [Annex 22](#) gives the list of approved procedures and guidelines.

To date, the DEA has prepared a total of 115 documents, distributed as follows in Table 7.

Table 7. SINAES: Total DEA Procedures 2021

Type of Document	DEA
Procedures	8
Guidelines	18
Forms	84
Guides	5

Source: Quality Management, 2021.



4.1.1.5 New Version of the Affiliation Regulation

In 2021, the document “Proposed Reformulation of the Regulation for Affiliation of Higher Education Institutions to SINAES” ([Annex 23](#)) was submitted to the CNA for analysis. The key improvements in this proposals are summarized as follows: a single affiliation regulation was created by merging the two existing regulations (for universities and junior colleges); the fee for affiliation was waived for universities; the distinction between full members and associate members was eliminated; the administrative procedure was simplified; the accreditation requirements were redefined by institution; and conceptual and nomenclature improvements were made. All these changes are aimed at facilitating the affiliation process to encourage more HEIs to join SINAES. The proposal was analyzed by the SINAES Council ([Annex 24](#)).

4.1.1.6 Improvements in Monitoring and Communicating of Decisions

To improve follow-up on CNA decisions and facilitate their communication to both HEIs and other recipients, a tool was prepared to control the status of the decisions and monitor their prompt and proper communication.

The tool is designed as a dashboard that provides information on the status of the decisions. It is currently being enabled through implementation of a document manager that systematizes and regulates decision-sending and shows their status. A synthesis of the project and its progress status can be seen in the project presentation ([Annex 25](#)).

4.1.1.7 Change in the Deadline for Receiving Self-Evaluation Reports (IAs)

In meeting 1474 ([Annex 17](#)) the SINAES Council approved a modification of the deadline for receiving IAs from the degree and study programs wishing to renew their SINAES accreditation. Before this change, degree programs in the process of accreditation renewal had to deliver the self-evaluation report three months prior to expiration of the accreditation period. With the recent change, the IA can be delivered on the day the accreditation period expires. This change was made in response to HEI and SINAES technical area recommendations, the idea being to expand IA contents for accreditation such that progress on compliance covers the entire period for which the HEIs were accredited.

4.1.2 Process Innovation

In its 2019 final review report, the INQAAHE panel of expert reviewers gave SINAES a series of recommendations concerning management of the SINAES expert teams. It

specifically recommended:

- “...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.” (p. 61)
- “...SINAES should reinforce the training of the evaluators on the basis of the feedback, suggestions and opinions gathered by the technical staff.” (p. 61)
- “... 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.” (p. 30)

To address this set of recommendations, a project was designed to overhaul the selection process for SINAES evaluators ([Annex 26](#)). The project started with an analysis of SINAES’s process from different approaches and backgrounds to identify aspects for improvement. The lessons learned from this study led to the formulation of a general proposal to revamp SINAES’s evaluator selection process. Within the general proposal are sub-proposals, which are described briefly below:

A) Proposed General Policy for Evaluator Selection

The first innovation is the formulation for the first time of an explicit policy that clearly describes the individual qualities SINAES looks for in evaluators and the characteristics it considers for forming its peer teams. The draft policy establishes conditions for the individual peer profile as well as the evaluator group profile. The policy was analyzed and approved by the SINAES Council in Minute 1477-2021 of February 26, 2021 ([Annex 27](#)):

“The policy defining peer evaluators is designed to achieve an evaluation of the quality of higher education accreditation processes. The professionals making up the evaluation teams, called academic peers, are professionals in their fields whose expertise is evaluated before and after the external review process. These evaluators are responsible for validating the information presented to SINAES by the degree programs, using as a basis the Institutional Accreditation Model. Considered in their selection are aspects such as knowledge of the field of teaching and learning, research, outreach, university management, professional practice, and an understanding of the quality processes in higher education.

The external review teams for the SINAES accreditation processes consist of academic peers who, as a group and in a complementary manner, have a diverse and multinational vision of higher education institutions and an updated vision



of the discipline they are evaluating, incorporate the student experience, and have prior training and experience in evaluation processes for accreditation.”

The formulation of this new evaluator management policy incorporates SINAES's intention of having people with a professional profile in the discipline in addition to an academic profile. It also establishes the vision of what a team of evaluators should be, emphasizing an interest in forming teams in which the members complement each other. As can be seen, the new policy incorporates the issues noted in the 2019 INQAAHE review, such as having a student viewpoint within the evaluation team, and it underlines the need for evaluators to have a professional practice so that they have academia - working world interaction criteria. It also incorporates the need for evaluators to be trained in evaluating.

B) Proposed Incorporation of a Student Evaluator

Following the recommendations of the final review report (INQAAHE, 2019), a project was proposed to include a student peer evaluator on the external review team. The project is based on an awareness that this is practically unheard of in external reviews in Latin America and that only on specific occasions have student evaluators been used in the Costa Rican accreditation culture. A pilot project was therefore planned to evaluate a student contribution to the accreditation process, its impact on the university community, and its management before making a definitive decision to include a student evaluator on the evaluation team ([Annex 26](#)). The draft pilot plan has been presented to the Council.

C) Proposed Performance Evaluation of Stakeholders in the Accreditation Process

A key recommendation by the INQAAHE panel on the evaluation of experts stated the following:

“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, and evaluation process of the peers” (INQAAHE, 2019; p. 41).

In response to the recommendations of the SINAES external review, a 360° evaluation was included in the proposal for overhaul of the peer selection process. This will permit evaluation of the performance of not only the peers contracted by SINAES but also the other SINAES stakeholders and will provide feedback on the process. The technical bases of the proposal can be seen in the general proposal for revamping the SINAES evaluator selection process ([Annex 26](#)).

A committee was formed to develop and implement this proposal.

D) New Degree Accreditation Model

On November 17, 2019 (Minute 1349-2019) and February 4, 2020 (Minute 1378-2020), the CNA approved the guidelines of the new accreditation model for degree programs and the respective information sources ([Annex 28](#)).

To evaluate progress on the degree program accreditation model project and define action lines, in 2020 the study “Needs Assessment and Proposed Restructuring of the Degree Program Model Project and Associated Projects” was presented to the CNA ([Annex 28](#)). The document recounted the development of the degree program accreditation model project from its start, reviewing the breakthroughs and pending tasks. It also presented an approach strategy for the different subprojects, which the CNA has been addressing through the analysis of various proposals.

In brief, the status of this project is shown in the May 2021 report ([Annex 29](#)), in which the existence can be seen of a new draft document for the degree program accreditation model that includes evaluation of degree programs offered remotely.

In addition, based on one of the recommendations of the INQAAHE panel of experts, SINAES consulted with professional associations on the model guidelines to obtain their working-world feedback. This topic will be addressed later. [Annex 30](#) includes the report on comments received from the professional associations.

Simultaneously, and also in response to the SINAES external review recommendations, a study was done for proposing to the CNA a modification of the current accreditation decision-making mechanism, changing it to a weighting system in combination with the qualitative analysis by the Council members. In particular, this proposal aims to improve two aspects of the decision-making process: transparency for all participants, and consistency over time.

In its regular meeting 1501-2021 on June 4 ([Annex 31](#)), the CNA appointed a committee to analyze the degree program accreditation model and present a draft action plan for its finalization. This committee has been working and has already presented a first draft of the proposed degree program accreditation model, which will be analyzed for approval by the CNA starting in September.



4.2 SINAES Resources

INQAAHE Indication: Criterion 1.4.2 The EQAA has the physical and financial resources needed to fulfil its goals and carry out the activities that emerge from its mission statement and objectives.

4.2.1 Consolidation of SINAES’s Administrative Autonomy

Law 8256 of April 22, 2002, recognizes the National Accreditation System of Higher Education (SINAES) and establishes provisions for its creation, objectives, powers, and responsibilities, among other aspects.

According to Law 8256, to fulfill its duties SINAES shall have a National Accreditation Council, a director, and professional and technical support staff.

SINAES was created as a public entity with the highest level of delegation, as established by the Attorney General’s Office (PGR) in note C-307-2017, giving it the capacity to acquire and manage its own financial rights and obligations.

The PGR stated that SINAES has instrumental juridical personality, which confers on it the highest level of delegation by CONARE, so it has full legal capacity to manage the resource budget transferred to it by the central government in performance of Article 3 of Law 8798 as well as any other resources it receives pursuant to the provisions of Article 20 of Law 8256. As a result, SINAES has been managing its budget independently from CONARE since fiscal year 2019.

Due to the changes deriving from these pronouncements, SINAES has faced challenges for dealing with the provisions, goals and responsibilities set forth in the aforementioned laws - operational and functioning challenges that have been handled by the organizational structure.

Article 4 of the SINAES Organic Regulation approved in 2018 established its organic structure. The transformation began with a decision reached by the CNA in a special meeting on September 2, 2016, as recorded in Article 5 of Minute number 1080-2016, and a new organic structure was approved, based on the powers and responsibilities assigned by law to SINAES, for the purpose of strengthening its management and achievement of its goals and objectives. This new structure is described and regulated in Article 4 of the SINAES Organic Regulation published in Scope 81 of April 20, 2018, of the official journal La Gaceta.

To fulfill the objectives and responsibilities assigned to it by law, SINAES has adopted the following structure (Figure 5):

1. National Accreditation Council, under which come the following support and advisory units and internal auditing:

- National Accreditation Council;
- Office of the Secretary General of the National Accreditation Council;
- Legal Advisory; and
- Internal Auditing.

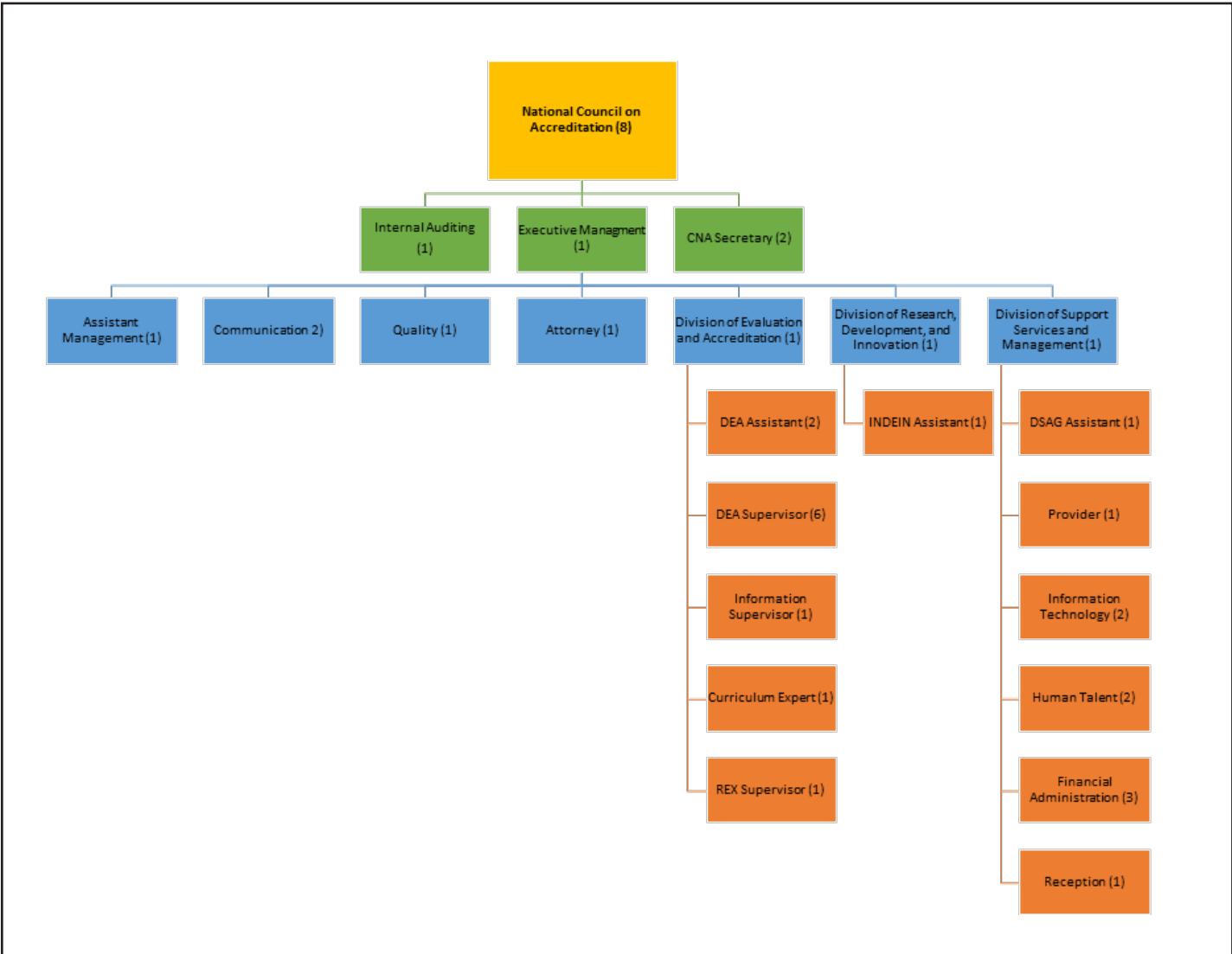
2. Executive Director’s Office, under which come the following functional areas:

- Executive Director’s Office;
- Evaluation and Accreditation Division (DEA);
- Division of Research, Development, and Innovation (INDEIN); and
- Division of Management Support Services (DSAG).

As can be seen from the above, consolidation of SINAES’s administrative independence led to the creation of Internal Auditing and the organization into four consolidated divisions, including, notably, DSAG and INDEIN, whose work was mentioned earlier. The DEA brings together the tasks SINAES has been carrying out for accreditation processing.



Figure 5. SINAES Organizational Chart



Source: Human Resources, 2021.

Due to the delegation process, SINAES took over administrative management on January 1, 2019, including financial management (budget, accounting, and treasury), staff management (human talent), information technologies, and institutional procurement.

At the beginning of its independence, since SINAES is a CONARE agency it worked with the administrative procedures established by CONARE, but in 2019 it started working with the quality area on establishing its own procedures for the areas.

4.2.2 Implementation of the New Organizational and Functional Structure

When it gained its administrative independence, SINAES consolidated the DSAG, since SINAES was now responsible for all the administrative aspects previously handled with CONARE's help. The DSAG is supported by several departments, notable among which are the following:

Institutional Procurement. In March 2019, the Internal Regulation for Administrative Procurement, which defines the procurement department's competencies, general tasks, and organization, was published. The following are the department's main tasks:

- Processing everything related to contractor selection procedures;
- Receiving and dispatching materials and supplies from the agency's warehouse; and
- Programming, controlling, and recording purchases.

Two institutional procurement procedures and eight guidelines were prepared in 2019 and 2020 and disseminated in March 2021. All the procedures and guidelines take into consideration the provisions of the Administrative Procurement Law and the Internal Regulation for Administrative Procurement, within which the following have been developed:

Institutional Procurement Procedures

Code	Procedure
PR-DSAG-PROVo1	Procedure for the Procurement of Goods and Services
L-DSGA-PROVo5	Processing of Motions to Challenge, Revoke, and Appeal
L-DSGA-PROVo7	Supplier Sanctions and Warnings
L-DSGA-PROVo8	Price Readjustment Processing
L-DSGA-PROVo1	Annual Purchase Planning and Procurement
L-DSGA-PROVo3	Preparation of User Requests
L-DSGA-PROVo2	Procedure for SINAES Professional Services Procurement
L-DSGA-PROVo6	Bid and Performance Bonds
L-DSGA-PROVo4	Procurement Types
PR-DSAG-PROVo2	Procedure for Incoming and Outgoing Inventory (in the process of approval)

Source: Procurement Management, 2021.



Every year a procurement plan is made in which the expense items subject to administrative procurement are described according to the Annual Operating Plan.

Budget and Financial Management. After its administrative separation from CONARE, SINAES has been responsible for independently managing its budget.

As part of the budget process, beginning in the second semester of 2018 SINAES has been independently submitting its institutional budget to the Office of the Comptroller General of Costa Rica (CGR) and managing data for stakeholders such as the Ministry of Public Education (MEP). Since 2018, SINAES has been consistently responsible for managing all budgets and communications described by the legal framework.

Within this context, the tasks of the financial management department have included the following:

- Carrying out PAO and budget planning, preparation, and execution: internal planning for preparing the documents needed for budgetary processes, together with the DE, division heads, and CNA;
- Carrying out budget modification and extraordinary budgetary sub-processes;
- Handling budget execution reporting (monthly and biannual) and budget settlements;
- Carrying out CGR procedures: procedures for budgetary issues, uploading to the Public Budget Data System (SIPP), ordinary and extraordinary budgets, and budget modifications, as well as quarterly, biannual, and annual budget executions and all PAO-related information;
- Handling Finance Ministry (Budget Authority Technical Secretariat) procedures: compliance with Decree 461641-H on reporting ordinary and extraordinary budgets, budget modifications, and quarterly, biannual and annual executions;
- Handling MEP procedures: requests for reports and budget documents for the respective scheduling of transfers;
- Carrying out institutional budget management tasks: uploading (maintenance and monitoring) of ordinary and extraordinary budget and budget modification data;
- Handling internal queries concerning budgetary matters; and
- Supporting budget-related procedural and regulatory actions.

Starting in 2020, the SINAES budget area has been preparing internal procedures and is currently in the validation phase, after which it will be submitting the procedures for approval.

Budget Procedures in the Process of Approval

Code	Procedure
PR-DSAG-AGF-11	Preparation of the Budget Execution and Settlement Report
PR-DSAG-AGF-12	Formulation and Presentation of the Annual Operating Plan and Ordinary Budgets
PR-DSAG-AGF-13	Formulation and Presentation of Budget Modifications
PR-DSAG-AGF-14	Formulation and Presentation of Extraordinary Budgets
PR-DSAG-AGF-15	Control of Budget Commitments and Reserves

Source: Budget Management, 2021.

Accounting. In 2019, SINAES created the accounting department, which issues financial information based on IPSAS. Starting in the first quarter of 2019, financial statements have been prepared independently and audited at the close of fiscal years 2019 and 2020.

The responsibilities of the accounting department are as follows:

- Record accounting, financial, and budget transactions for the accounts receivable, accounts payable, treasury, budget, investment, durable assets, inventories, and general accounting areas;
- Quantify, measure, and analyze the economic reality of institutional operations;
- Issue financial statements, reports, and any accounting, financial, or budgetary information requested by the National Accounting Office, the Office of the Comptroller General of Costa Rica, the Finance Ministry, or international entities;
- Facilitate management and control through reliable and timely accounting information for decision-making;
- Supervise and notify of any risk or deviation in the institution’s financial situation;
- Report regularly to management on the institution’s financial situation;
- Prepare the procedures, instructions, and manuals for control of accounting, financial, and budgetary activities; and
- Prepare SINAES’s financial statements, based on the IPSAS, for control, analysis, and supervision of the institution’s accounting, financial, and budget situation.

At present the accounting department has the following specific tasks and procedures:



Accounting Procedures in the Process of Approval

Code	Procedure
PR-DSAG-AGF-01	Preparation of the Financial Statement Report
PR-DSAG-AGF-02	Preparation of Bank Reconciliations
PR-DSAG-AGF-03	Accounting Close and Issuance of Digital Account Books
PR-DSAG-AGF-04	Presentation of Tax Statements
PR-DSAG-AGF-05	Property, Plant and Equipment Asset Management

Source: Accounting, 2021.

External audits have been an institutional practice as of the 2019 yearly close, since this was the first year the agency exercised independent accounting. This was the practice in both 2019 and 2020, and in both cases the external auditors issued a clean opinion, certifying that the accounting information reasonably represented the financial situation and was in compliance with the IPSAS, since SINAES had been recognized in note DCN-UCC-0569-2019 of May 20, 2019 as an independent accounting entity before the Costa Rican Finance Ministry’s National Accounting Office, thereby acquiring the responsibility and obligation to prepare its own financial statements based on the version of the standards adopted by the governing body.

At the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, a study was prepared jointly with the DEA of the direct and indirect costs of the agency’s primary core activity, assessing both person-hour costs and onsite visit costs. These costs varied depending on the accreditation process involved.

Treasury. The institutional treasury department is responsible for managing financial resources and bank relationships, as well as everything related to income, outlay, and investment management. This includes collection for the agency’s services, supplier and staff payments, banking transactions, and any other cash flow activity.

After it became administratively independent SINAES developed a series of subledgers to give the treasury department better control and traceability of the agency’s spending and income, including cash flow, income from services and collection.

It should be noted that as of December 2019 SINAES has managed an accumulated surplus from 2015 to 2018 through an extraordinary budget. For this task an investment regulation was created and approved by the CNA in meeting 1369 of November 29, 2019. In addition, SINAES has created an investment committee and set up an investment portfolio that has been producing income.

Human Talent. With SINAES’s independence came the need to create a human talent department, which consists of two staff members.

When it was created in 2019, the HT department consisted of only one person responsible for its operational activities such as payroll processing, administrative tasks, recruitment and selection, and day-to-day management activities. In July 2020 an additional staff member was hired through the recruitment and selection process CA-02-2020. The idea was to make HT management more strategic with a management model involving task division, new sub-processes, and intensification of activities that leverage the institutional strategy. [Annex 32](#) gives the HT work plan report for Q4 2020 and the HT 2021 work plan, which were presented after the department was expanded and serve as instruments for leveraging the institutional strategy.

Table 8 summarizes the change in the way processes are handled when the new HT office was created.

Table 8. SINAES: Changes in the Handling of Processes - New HT Office

		Single-person HT Office	New HT Office		
Operational Focus		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Payroll processingRecruitment and selectionAdministrative tasksDaily operational activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Employee requests and managementStaff recruitment and selectionAdministrative hiringJob manualInduction and orientationPerformance evaluationSuccession and career plansTraining and developmentPolicies, processes, and proceduresOrganizational culture and climatePayroll managementCompensation and salary structureBenefitsRecognition programsEmployee relationsEthics and complianceOccupational healthHuman talent projectsDepartment digitization	Strategic Focus	

Source: Human Talent (2021).



Assistance. This department is responsible for contracting national and international evaluators by preparing terms of reference and monitoring contracts and endorsements with the legal department up to the processing of fee payments. The tasks of this department include the following:

- Preparing technical studies of bids for providers and processing them in the Integrated Public Procurement System (SICOP);
- Reviewing compliance with the technical studies done by other agency divisions and processing them in SICOP;
- Requesting and following up on requests for purchasing goods and services;
- Coordinating procurement details with requestors of goods or services;
- Managing and monitoring of different actions with evaluators, providers, and SINAES staff members;
- Organizing and updating the evaluator files, document file, and technological tools with the respective documentation of the position’s processes and projects;
- Providing client service as needed;
- Providing logistics support for implementation of the department’s activities;
- Updating the procedures for the contracting of experts and the accommodations and transportation logistics; and
- Creating Excel tools for speeding up processes in other divisions.

Committees. The following institutional committees were created in 2020 to manage SINAES’s different work areas:

Committee	Objective
Internal Control Committee	Implement and regulate everything related to best internal control practices
Infrastructure Committee	Handle everything related to proper management and maintenance of SINAES’s physical space
Staff Integration Committee	Provide a pleasant environment through integration, social, and training activities
Occupational Health Committee	Oversee the integral health of staff members and advise the authorities on staff safety
Investment Committee	Manage the investments of the agency’s financial resources
International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS) Committee	Oversee compliance with the public sector accounting standards
Peer Overhaul Committee	Overhaul the selection process for SINAES’s external professionals
Academic Encounters Committee	Organize institutional academic meetings in the framework of the SINAES Chair
SINAES Chair Master Conference Committee	Develop all the activities for the annual master conference in the framework of the SINAES Chair

4.2.3 SINAES Infrastructure

Since its creation as a CONARE program SINAES has been located in the Franklin Chang Building. At present it is using a space of three hundred ninety-nine square meters (399.66 m²) in this building. With the implementation of its instrumental personality and according to its Strategic Plan objectives, a project was launched to provide SINAES with its own infrastructure, for which studies were started in 2017 of different potential alternatives, including remodeling, leasing, building, and buying a property, in addition to evaluating market alternatives.



In December 2020 the CNA decided in CNA-01-2021 to ask management to start the respective Finance Ministry and CGR proceedings for buying a property. Given the national economic situation, however, and after more than one year of staff working from home, the CNA decided in July 2021 to suspend its efforts to obtain SINAES's own infrastructure until it can determine the financial viability of buying and maintaining a building according to budget provisions and the situation of the country's finances, as well as the agency's own situation.

4.2.4 Consolidation of the Appointment of the Evaluation and Accreditation (DEA) Director

On April 20, 2018, the SINAES Organic Regulation was published in the Costa Rican official journal. Article 14 of this regulation states that “SINAES will have an Evaluation and Accreditation Division under the Executive Director that will be led by a professional with the qualifications defined for the position. This division manages the evaluation and accreditation of study/degree programs and higher education institutions and supports the quality processes of education. It also participates with senior management and other functional departments on carrying out actions for enhancing the public value and leadership of the National Accreditation System of Higher Education (SINAES)” ([Annex 33](#)).

In addition, in Minute number 1321-2019 ([Annex 34](#)) of its May 31, 2019 meeting the CNA approved the SINAES Job Manual, which establishes the position of DEA director.

For more than two years, since approval of the SINAES Organic Regulation, the DE has been responsible for leading the DEA, so the DE has managed the division's tasks in addition to her own tasks. During this period several DEA director selection processes were carried out ([Annex 35](#)), the first in 2019 and a second one in 2020. Finally, on May 7, 2021, the CNA agreed on the appointment of a DEA director in Minute 1494-2021.

4.2.5 Progress on Technological Support

SINAES created the IT department, which has two staff members. When SINAES became administratively independent from CONARE it started developing a project called “Technological Transformation of SINAES.” This has entailed an effort in investment and staff toward achieving efficient management in line with current technological trends, without overlooking the security aspect that goes along with technology.

Tasks assigned to the IT department include the following:

- Managing and administering the information technologies and computer systems;
- Developing, implementing, and administering the information systems used for managing all the agency's data and information;
- Administering the cloud platforms purchased by SINAES;
- Administering and making advanced configurations for management of the SINAES technological infrastructure;
- Defining data security policies and standards and creating procedures and general guidelines for implementing IT governance;
- Planning and analyzing the evolution of information and communication technology resources in accordance with the agency's needs;
- Advising on and controlling procurement of information and communication technology resources (licenses and integrated solutions);
- Training SINAES staff members in information technologies;
- Ensuring data security, network access, and backup systems;
- Implementing mechanisms, methodologies, technical standards, and reference frameworks to ensure business continuity;
- Administering and monitoring SINAES's data network infrastructure to provide efficient network services and ensure user access;
- Implementing backup methods and strategies to ensure data availability to SINAES users and prevent loss or theft of institutional data;
- Manage and administer information technology services such as Active Directory, VLANS, DNS, DHCP, and antivirus dashboards that allow for communication between data networks and servers, ensuring access to all SINAES technological resources;
- Ensuring the functioning of Internet access services such as firewalls, exit rules, broadband management, access policies, page blocking, access lists, etc., to protect SINAES data and prevent cyber-attacks;
- Administering virtualization services and establishing business continuity mechanisms, ensuring the operability of all IT services;
- Administering and handling IP telephony services to ensure effective internal and external communication among all SINAES staff members;
- Providing corrective, preventive, and predictive maintenance for all SINAES



technological equipment to improve their efficiency and proper functioning so that SINAES users can perform their duties properly;

- Controlling and auditing the effective operation of SINAES computer networks, information systems, and databases to ensure availability and access to all SINAES technological services at all times;
- Supervising to make sure all computer systems and technological equipment have the most recent updates to ensure functionality and data security; and
- Generating technical reports with ongoing analysis of database performance and functions and the status of SINAES information systems and equipment to monitor their performance, prevent errors, improve their efficiency, and prevent technological obsolescence.

[Annex 36](#) lists the projects carried out by the IT department in the recent period (2020-2021). Below is a list of the procedures the department has been working on for its activities.

IT Procedures in the Process of Approval

Code	Procedure
PR01-TI01	Procedure for IT Infrastructure Management (Network Architecture, Administration, Maintenance, and Monitoring)
PR02-TI03	Procedure for Information System and Database Management
PR01-TI03	Procedures for IT Asset or Inventory Management
PR01-TI04	Procedures for Data Custody and Backup Management

Source: Information Technologies, 2021.

Lastly, SINAES has procured a document management system which is currently 60% complete. The RFP and the procurement details are included in [Annex 37](#). The goal is to automate, control, and digitize the specific activities and functions affecting the life cycle of institutional documents and to optimize internal processes, reducing decision-making times. For the moment, the focus of these improvements is on DSAG processes and monitoring of the CNA secretary's decisions.

4.2.6 SINAES Financial Income

SINAES's funding comes from current transfers from the Costa Rican national budget, its own income from evaluation and accreditation services provided to HEIs, return on

investments or cash deposits in public financial institutions, recovery of funds from administrative management, and other minor and occasional income.

SINAES's major source of income consists of current transfers received monthly from the MEP.

In 2019, it received through an extraordinary budget the free surplus accumulated from 2015 to 2018, when the institutional finances were managed by CONARE. To manage these funds, SINAES created the "Regulation for Management of SINAES Financial Investments," approved by the CNA in meeting 1369 of November 29, 2019 and communicated by means of official memorandum ACUERDO-CNA-380-2019 on December 5, 2019 ([Annex 38](#)).

An investment committee consisting of the Treasury, DSAG director, and DE, was created to manage the funds. Its purpose is to analyze the different types of investment and periodically review interest rates and stock market options in order to create an investment portfolio that safeguards SINAES's funds with a composition that minimizes implicit investment risks.

According to the audited financial statements at the 2020 close, the return on investments was 4%.

As a cross-check strategy, the treasury department works collaboratively with the HT department (payrolls) with an external review prior to payroll payment, incorporating this as a control point prior to payment.

Treasury Procedures in the Process of Approval

Code	Procedure
PF-DSAG-GF-o6	Management of Payments with Administrative Procurement
PF-DSAG-GF-o7	Management of Payments without Administrative Procurement
PF-DSAG-GF-o8	Petty Cash Management
PF-DSAG-GF-o9	Management of Travel and Transportation Expenses (Travel Allowances)
PF-DSAG-GF-10	Management of Collection and Income from Sale of Services
PF-DSAG-GF-16	Management of Income from Current Transfers
PF-DSAG-GF-17	Management of Investments

Source: Treasury, 2021



4.3 Human Talent Development

INQAAHE Indication: Criterion 1.4.3 The EQAA provides systematic opportunities for the professional development of its staff.

4.3.1 Consolidation of the Human Talent (HT) Department

The INQAAHE panel of experts indicated a concern regarding the systematic opportunities SINAES provides for the professional development of its staff.

SINAES seeks to act according to the provisions of Law 8256 and other applicable rules and regulations and requirements, so in January 2019, as has already been noted, it strengthened its organic structure with HT to help fulfill its mission, vision, and objectives.

From 2019 to the present, SINAES has grown with the addition of 20 staff members as shown in [Annex 39](#).

Due to the importance of regulating the employment relationship between SINAES and its staff members, it was extremely important for the agency to have a key document establishing the obligations of both employer and employees.

Therefore, by means of Article 12 of its ordinary meeting 1317-2019 in May 2019, the CNA approved the Autonomous Work Regulation ([Annex 40](#)).

It also hired an external consultant to establish staff functions, obligations, and responsibilities and create SINAES’s Job Manual.

The manual organizes the activities, duties and responsibilities of each position and establishes a new salary structure for SINAES. The goal of the job description and analysis is to clearly and simply define the functions of each job and the factors needed for carrying them out successfully. An essential aspect is having suitable staff who perform efficiently and identify with the work.

The Job Manual and salary structure were approved by the CNA in its May 31, 2019 meeting in Minute number 1321-2019 ([Annex 34](#)).

Job manuals are clearly dynamic instruments. Both activity contents and requirements can be modified by management, so job profiles should be adapted and adjusted to the agency’s changing needs and the content may be periodically reviewed to ensure updated information.

On this basis, in 2020 the HT department worked in stages on updating the job profiles. The stages ([Annex 41](#)) were implemented to ensure clarity, transparency, and the participation of all staff members and to reflect the reality of the functions being

performed, since it is extremely important to reflect the functions of each job in order to meet institutional goals and objectives.

The HT department prepared the necessary instruments for carrying out its work, including the following:

Code	Procedure
L-DSAG-TH05	Guidelines for Attendance, Punctuality, and Clocking In and Out - January 2020 (April 2021 update) (Annex 42)
L-DSAG-TH11	Guidelines for Use of the Institutional ID - January 2020 (Annex 43)
L-DSAG-TH12	Guidelines for Working from Home during the COVID-19 Health Alert - April 2020 (Annex 7)
I-DSAG-TH01	Instructions for Reporting Absences - November 2020 (Annex 44)
PR-DSAG-TH23	Procedure for Working from Home in SINAES - December 2020 (Annex 45)
	On December 15, 2020, the SINAES regulation for working from home was published in the official journal La Gaceta No. 293 (Annex 6).
PR-DSAG-TH24	Procedure for Requesting Vacation Days - February 2021 (Annex 46)

In addition, based on a self-diagnosis in August 2020, the HT department developed an initial work plan for implementing a modern talent management system aimed at building organizational culture and complying with institutional policies. The plan contains the objectives, goals, activities, monitoring, strategies, and evaluation of projects to be developed and continued throughout 2021.

The HT strategic plan consolidates strategies for ensuring the best human talent management and development practices, keeping in mind the SINAES vision and staff characteristics and establishing concrete objectives and needs. Table 9 shows the HT management subsystems.



Table 9. SINAES: HT Management Subsystems

Incorporation	Implementation	Maintenance	Development	Control
Recruitment and Selection Staff Induction and Re-induction	Organizational Structure Job Manual Regulations Performance Evaluation PAO	Compensation Benefits; Employee Relations Workplace Health and Safety	Training Organizational Development Change Management Succession Plans	Indicators Information Systems Human Talent Audits

The first subsystem, Incorporation, includes a study of the status of the quantity and quality of human talent needs in the face of the agency’s internal capacities.

The second subsystem, Implementation, involves definition of the characteristics and requirements the organizational structure needs in order to function, along with the human qualities and competencies needed for achieving the organization’s objectives. In response to these needs, jobs were designed and profiles were defined for each position, which in the public sector are consolidated in the manual of functions for all the institution’s jobs.

The third subsystem, Maintenance, involves the management of compensation; this is where staff members’ monetary compensations (salaries) and job benefits are measured in line with their contributions toward achievement of the institution’s objectives.

The fourth subsystem, Development, is linked to staff performance management and includes all the practices for evaluating staff performance; this helps identify individual contributions to SINAES, strengths, and areas for improvement.

A performance evaluation benefits and leads to the design of training plans in line with needs and strategies. In addition, different actions are included for strengthening the capacities, skills, attitudes, and aptitudes of SINAES staff as well as for recognizing excellence. The main instruments used for developing this subsystem are the annual training plans, which are prepared from a training needs assessment.

Lastly, the fifth subsystem includes metrics that permit measurement of the performance and efficiency of a specific process or activity, making it possible to design preventive tasks that help detect potentially critical situations before they occur.

The full document can be consulted in [Annex 32](#), “HT Q4 2020 Work Plan Report.” The activities comprising the work plan for the last quarter of 2020 can be seen in [Annex 47](#), “Activities Planned for Q4 2020.”

[Annex 48](#), “Activities Carried Out in 2020,” reports the activities carried out in 2020 by the HT department in the different assigned projects and processes.

To give continuity to the basic, key aspects of HT management proposed in the last quarter of 2020, the HT department developed a work plan for 2021. This plan is based on the identification of human talent as the most important asset organizations have, comprised by everyone who contributes with their work, dedication, and effort.

The plan contemplates SINAES’s mission, the strategic objective of “promoting modern and efficient management,” and projects 2 and 3 of this strategic objective, design and implementation of a modern personnel management system, which includes “strengthening of the organizational culture to optimize institutional results and comply with environmental and social responsibility policies.”

The work plan also contemplates a shift from the traditional model to the strategic human talent management model as shown in Table 10.

Table 10. SINAES: Transition to the HT Management Model

Traditional Model	Strategic HT Management Model
Centralized	Delegation
Based on rules and their compliance	Variety of practices and procedures contingent on the organization
Authority	Flexible decision-making
Specialization	Competency-based model
Only the heads of human resources are responsible for human resource management	Leadership and management by department/division heads



This instrument also establishes strategic factors for the HT department such as mission and vision.

Mission: Advise the entire institution comprehensively on HT issues and manage the department's activities toward achieving SINAES's objectives.

Vision: Be the advisor and manager of HT development in SINAES, providing timely and quality service.

The work plan includes the following processes and projects:

- Staff recruitment and selection;
- Staff induction;
- Job manual updating;
- Workload measurement study;
- Performance evaluation;
- Compensation;
- Benefits;
- Training;
- Procedures and guidelines;
- Organizational culture and climate;
- Indicators;
- Administrative management; and
- Preparation of the work budget and plan for 2022.

The complete work plan can be seen in [Annex 32](#), "HT 2021 Work Plan." The activities comprising the work plan for this year can be seen in [Annex 49](#), "Activities Planned for 2021."

4.3.2 Organizational Climate Study

The INQAAHE panel of experts indicated that "the coexistence of a "dual" or "compound" hiring system is perceived by staff members as being distorting and poses an impact on the work climate. The Panel understands that this will have been duly diagnosed in the new personnel policy and should be the object of attention."

Organizational climate is the management component comprising the characteristics that identify an organization. It includes everything from staff members' perceptions of their organization to their influence on organizational structure and management style.

Through the "climate" variable, we approach the workers' "emotions," that is, the universe of their perceptions and feelings towards their work environment.

The climate influences people and determines their behavior and attitude towards the organization, being a differentiating factor between them and even between units within the same organization.

Since the last period, SINAES has been implementing actions that have decisively influenced the staff's work dynamics. Necessary changes are being made within the organization to consolidate its independence and achieve the objectives set for it by law through the creation of a more efficient and agile operational structure.

These actions within SINAES could lead to reactions or side effects reflected in its climate, however, so in September 2019 an external consultant was hired to diagnose the organizational climate.

The study employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques: in-depth interviews of key informants; focus groups with the participation of all segments of the organization; a survey of a representative sample of staff members; and, finally, a document review.

Upon completion of the January-February 2020 diagnostic, a final report was presented to the CNA and staff members with an interpretation of the data and recommendations for taking the necessary corrective actions.

In October 2020 the HT department was asked to start work on an action plan for improving the organizational climate according to the results of the organizational climate diagnostic ([Annex 50](#)) and institutional policies.

The aim of this project is to strengthen SINAES's organizational climate in compliance with the 2018-2022 strategic plan objective of "promoting modern and efficient management," and particularly project 3, which requires building the organizational culture, to optimize institutional results and compliance with environmental and social responsibility policies.



A work plan was set up in December 2020 for the consultancy, divided into three stages. It includes, among other things, the basic activities, timeframes by activity, approach methods, use of tools and work instruments, expected outputs, a results verification mechanism, and an output validation mechanism.

The second stage began in May 2021 and will run until the start of December 2021. In this stage, workshops will be given to train staff members on developing effectiveness and positive coexistence habits for achieving personal and institutional goals, identifying the need for change, and implementing specific actions to improve the organizational climate and achieve the objectives, considering institutional improvement.

In the last stage, the HT department will receive training on implementation of the improvement plan activities in order to monitor the plan and measure medium- and long-term results.

4.3.3 Training of SINAES Staff

The objectives of the training process are to ensure staff members’ professional development through the acquisition and building of soft skills and technical knowledge, in line with SINAES’s needs, and to ensure that once this learning is achieved it can be replicated and applied for meeting goals.

To this respect, the HT department has taken steps to train staff members. One of these steps was to elaborate an instrument for detecting training needs, which has served as the main input for preparing the HT department’s institutional training plan. Aimed at management and staff, this tool seeks to identify training needs in order to give them the skills and knowledge to develop professionally while also collaborating towards achieving PAO and Institutional Strategic Plan (PEI) objectives. The instrument for detecting training needs can be seen in [Annex 51](#), “Detection of Training Needs.”

In 2019 and 2020, staff members participated in the following personal and professional development activities (171 courses for a total of 2,215 hours), distributed as follows:

Training with certification and SINAES funding:

- Non-traditional Methodology for Teamwork Competency (a total of 246 training hours);
- How to Prepare Posters;
- How to Prepare a Regulation for Preventing and Sanctioning Workplace Harassment;

- Dashboard Creation with Power BI - Basic Level;
- Preparation of Succession and Career Plans by Competency;
- Specialization in Business Statistics;
- Building of Soft Skills within the Organization;
- Process-based Management;
- Jurisprudence in Administrative Procurement;
- Lead Cybersecurity Professional;
- Methodology for Redacting Technical Reports;
- IPSAS;
- Principles of Effective Customer Service in Public Offices;
- Virtual Specialized Internal Control and Risk Management Program;
- Complete 2016 Excel Program;
- Technical Securities Market Training Program;
- Redaction of Minutes and Records;
- Internal Control System; and
- Workshop on Improvement of the Use of Punctuation Marks.

Training without certification and free of charge (administered by SINAES):

- How to Deal with Anxiety;
- Conscious Eating;
- Critical Analysis of the New Draft Administrative Procurement Law;
- Strategies for Supervision and Evaluation of Staff Working from Home;
- Practical Leadership Strategies for Managers; and
- IPSAS 39 Benefits for Employees.



[Annex 52](#), “Record of 2020 Training Activities,” gives the specifics of the training received by staff members.

During 2021, some of the SINAES staff have received training in 21 courses (for a total of 1,117 hours), distributed among the following topics:

- Complete 2016 Excel Program;
- Virtual Specialized Internal Control and Risk Management Program;
- International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS);
- ITIL 4 Foundation;
- Specialization in Business Statistics;
- Virtual Specialized Program in Administrative Procurement for Public Administration; and
- Technical Securities Market Training Program.

Due to the country’s difficult fiscal situation, which also affects public institutions, for budgetary reasons no more training will be included during 2021.

[Annex 53](#), “Record of 2021 Training Activities,” gives the specifics of the training received by staff members.

4.3.4 Performance Evaluation

Performance evaluations are nothing new, since it is absolutely clear that the public administration provides services to society to satisfy collective needs, effectively administering available resources to achieve its objectives. Transparency is therefore increasingly demanded and required by oversight bodies and society itself. Transparency tends to be linked to a more trustworthy, responsible, and open government, furnishing information on its internal processes, decisions, and performance.

Thus it is reasonable to expect performance evaluation in the public sector to be aimed at evaluating, verifying, assessing, and rating the actions of a staff member according to the functions, competencies, and responsibilities assigned to their position.

In December 2018, the Legislative Assembly decreed Law 9635, “Strengthening of Public Finance,” Title III of which establishes the importance and obligation of a performance evaluation of public servants in all areas and offices of Costa Rican government institutions.

Based on this, in order to meet the goals of the 2018-2022 PEI, in December 2020 SINAES outsourced this task to comply with both Law 9635 and Executive Decree No. 42087-MP-PLAN, “General Guidelines for Public Servant Performance Management” ([Annex 54](#)).

A work plan was first set up for the performance evaluation, which included, among other things, the basic activities, timeframes by activity, approach methods, use of tools and work instruments, expected outputs, a results verification mechanism, and an output validation mechanism.

The project consists of the following stages, the first of which has already been completed:

1. Diagnostic of the current occupational structure of SINAES with regard to the requirements of the new law in order to determine asymmetries and propose effective high-impact solutions. In addition, as support for the process, a review of the current institutional planning system with regard to the requirements of the new law and current regulations in order to facilitate performance evaluation using contribution indicators of both workers and work areas;
2. Proposal of a manual of institutional indicators that give traceability and interoperability to the SINAES staff members’ performance evaluation, harmonized with the planning system and competencies required by the different organizational structure processes;
3. Proposal of a conceptual, operational, and methodological model for the SINAES staff performance evaluation system in line with the procedural and methodological framework required by law;
4. Meeting with staff to communicate the process in December 2020; and
5. Staff training on “Performance Evaluation Generalities” in March 2021.

The second stage of the project, which began in May 2021, involves the following:

1. Implementation of a robust, effective software system using DELPHOS ÉLITE as a viable high-impact technical and financial solution due its high value-added for the public service provider and citizens;
2. Training and meetings with SINAES staff for implementation and use of the software tool;
3. Launch, testing, and communication of the tool;
4. Incentive plan for satisfactory evaluations; and
5. Remedial plans and plans for professional development of human capacity.



[Annex 55](#) gives the technical proposal for outsourcing of the design, development, and implementation of a performance evaluation system and software tool.

4.3.5 Staff Comprehensive Care Programs

For comprehensive staff care, the HT department is developing projects in occupational safety, occupational medicine, psychosocial factors, ergonomics, and occupational health. Occupational health and safety refers to the regulations and procedures for reinforcing protection of the physical safety and wellbeing of staff members. Costa Rica’s national occupational health policy recognizes that workplace environment and conditions that ensure the health, safety, and general wellbeing of workers constitute an essential right in labor relations.

Occupational safety: One of the main fields of action in workplace environment and conditions is occupational safety. This discipline combines techniques used by occupational risk prevention professionals in workplaces and work activities through the identification, analysis, assessment, and control of any risk factors that might trigger an incident or accident in the workplace.

According to law, public institutions with more than 50 people on their payroll must set up an occupational health department. However, with 33 staff members SINAES has a joint bipartite occupational health committee (CSO) with two DE-appointed representatives and two staff-appointed representatives.

The committee’s specific purpose is to investigate the causes of occupational risk, determine measures to prevent them, and ensure compliance with occupational health provisions in the workplace.

Within this area, HT works together with the committee on investigating workplace accidents or incidents should they arise. It also keeps statistics on sick leaves, an absenteeism indicator, and workers’ compensation claims submitted to the National Insurance Institute (INS).

Occupational Health is based on the following five areas: occupational safety, psychosocial factors, ergonomics, occupational medicine, and environmental health.

Occupational Medicine: Occupational medicine is the medical specialty that, acting in isolation or with the community, studies preventive measures for obtaining the highest level of physical, psychological, and social wellbeing of workers to which they can aspire.

At present all SINAES staff members have the benefit of general practitioner care at the Biblical Clinic.

Psychosocial Factors: Work may have positive or negative effects on the physical and mental health of a worker.

In recent years occupational health has considered other occupational risk factors such as work-related stress and stress from personal and family life.

The effects and consequences of exposure to psychosocial risk factors can be varied and numerous. This being said, since 2020 the SINAES Integration Committee has been encouraging activities that contribute to the staff’s comprehensive wellbeing.

In 2020 it had to innovate and adapt the work plan due to the emergency measures taken as a result of the national COVID-19 health crisis, specifically working from home for all SINAES staff since March 2020.

In this pandemic-provoked humanitarian crisis we have confirmed that emotional salary is a key factor for SINAES, and SINAES has concerned itself with not only the operational side but also the emotional and human side, promoting and sponsoring talks on physical and emotional health, personal finance, ergonomics, etc.

Due to the pandemic, the Integration Committee decided to innovate and carry out virtual activities. The activities for 2020 and 2021 can be seen in [Annex 56](#).

4.4 Mechanisms for Reviewing SINAES Activities

INQAAHE Indication: Criterion 2.1.2 The EQAA has in place mechanisms that enable it to review its own activities in order to respond to the changing nature of higher education, the effectiveness of its operations, and its contribution towards the achievement of its objectives.

The report of the INQAAHE panel of experts notes that SINAES urgently needs to undertake the design and implementation of a formal internal quality assurance policy that includes all its processes and activities according to the current situation, requiring a major overhaul of the quality department in order to develop this area to the max.

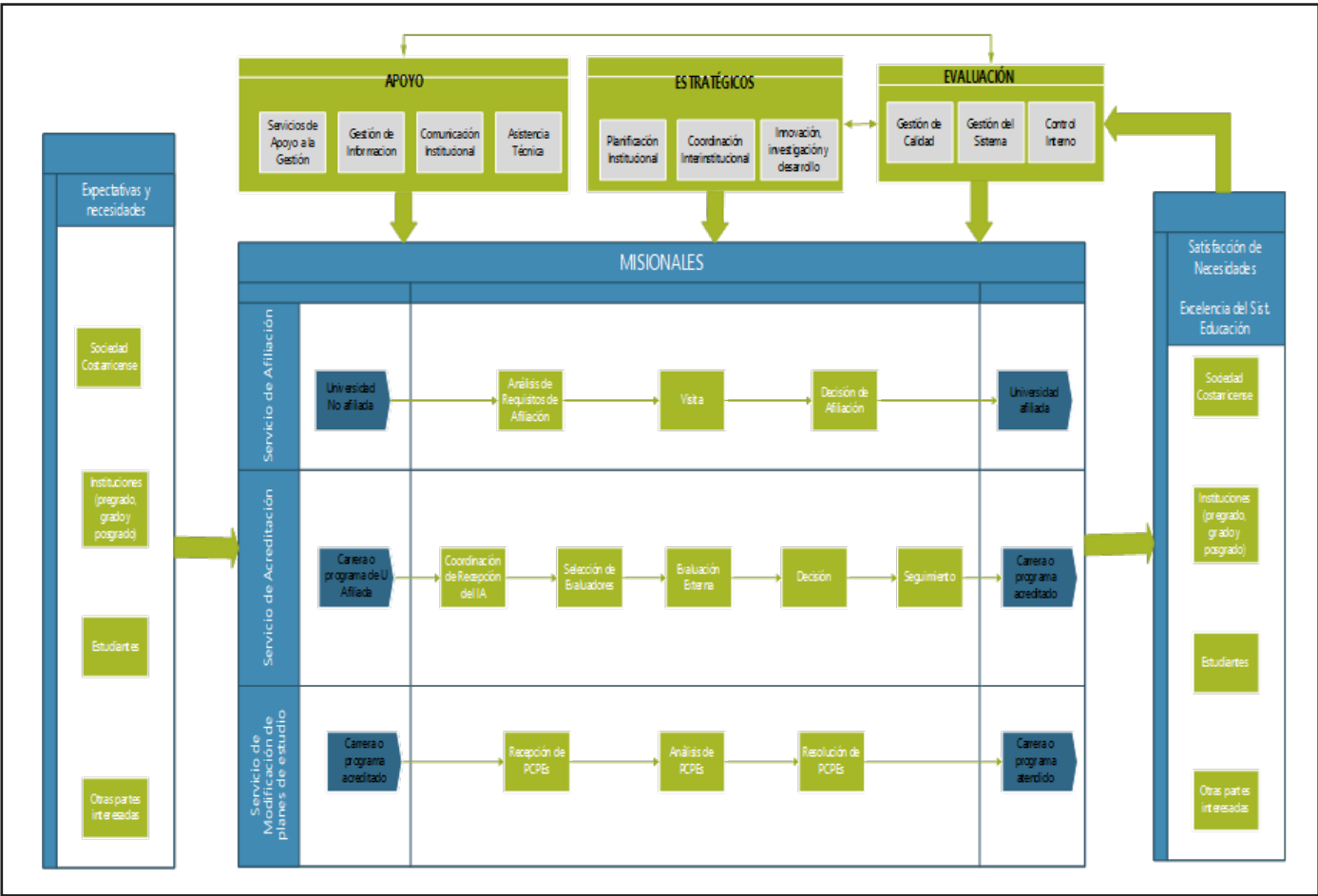
To this regard, the SINAES Job Manual assigns the following tasks to the quality department:

- Analyze pertinent information and data for process optimization studies, time studies, requirement compliance audits, and inspections, among other studies, in order to improve the essential processes of the National Accreditation System of Higher Education;



- Control compliance with external review requirements of second-level accrediting agencies and quality certification processes through preparation, compilation of self-review information, and proposals for improvement and monitoring of improvement plans with the goal of improving the operation, process quality, and prestige of the National Accreditation System of Higher Education;
- Evaluate the SINAES Institutional Risk Control Assessment System (SEVRI), which entails creating a risk assessment method, preparing the matrices and criteria to be used, requesting the cooperation of those involved, analyzing information for institutional reporting, and presenting the reports to the Director and the CNA in order to achieve institutional objectives and take measures for managing those risks;
- Propose improvements to quality assurance models and procedures for both accreditation and support processes through a review of compliance with requirements, best quality practices, and feedback from internal and external SINAES entities in the interest of continuous improvement of the processes being carried out;
- Develop external feedback processes through reporting, enabling of online documents, and joint preparation of instruments with researchers for the purpose of obtaining base data for improving SINAES's processes; and
- Support institutional planning through the contribution of criteria to achieve compliance with the planning and verification stages of the SINAES quality cycle.

Figure 6. Diagram of SINAES Macroprocesses and Processes



Source: Quality Management, 2021.

The quality department has carried out the following activities:

4.4.1 Proposed SINAES Macroprocesses

SINAES macroprocesses were proposed in a prepared document ([Annex 57](#)) that gave rise to the already elaborated procedure project.

Figure 6 shows the current SINAES processes and the changes it has had in its operations. A new process will soon be included for recognition of agencies and their accreditations.

The following can be understood from Figure 6:

SINAES's mission processes are:

- Accreditation;
- Affiliation; and
- Accredited degree program study plan changes (PCPEs).

The support processes are:

- Management support from the Division of Management Support Services;
- Institutional communication;
- Information management; and
- Needs detection and technical assistance.



The strategic processes are:

- Institutional planning;
- Interinstitutional coordination; and
- Research, development, and innovation.

The evaluation processes are:

- Quality management;
- System management; and
- Internal control.

4.4.2 Institutional Procedures Project

With regard to the elaboration, review, and approval of procedures, guidelines, and other SINAES quality system documents, considerable progress has been made on different quality system documents: procedures, guidelines, forms, instructions, and guides.

Of the 281 quality system documents that were proposed, 61 are procedures, 62 are guidelines, 143 are forms, 10 are instructions, and 5 are guides. Of these 281 documents, 137 are for DSAG, 117 are for DEA, 26 are for the senior division, and one is for INDEIN.

The SINAES procedure documentation work plan was established for the purpose of updating and validating procedures, processes, and guidelines so that SINAES has a standardized method in place for carrying out its activities and is able to achieve its objectives (Annex 58).

The progress is in various stages. Some procedures, guidelines, guides, forms, and instructions are already completed and approved, signed, and communicated. Others are in advanced stages of development (stage 5 to stage 10) depending on the methodology. The record of progress on procedures is found in Annex 59.

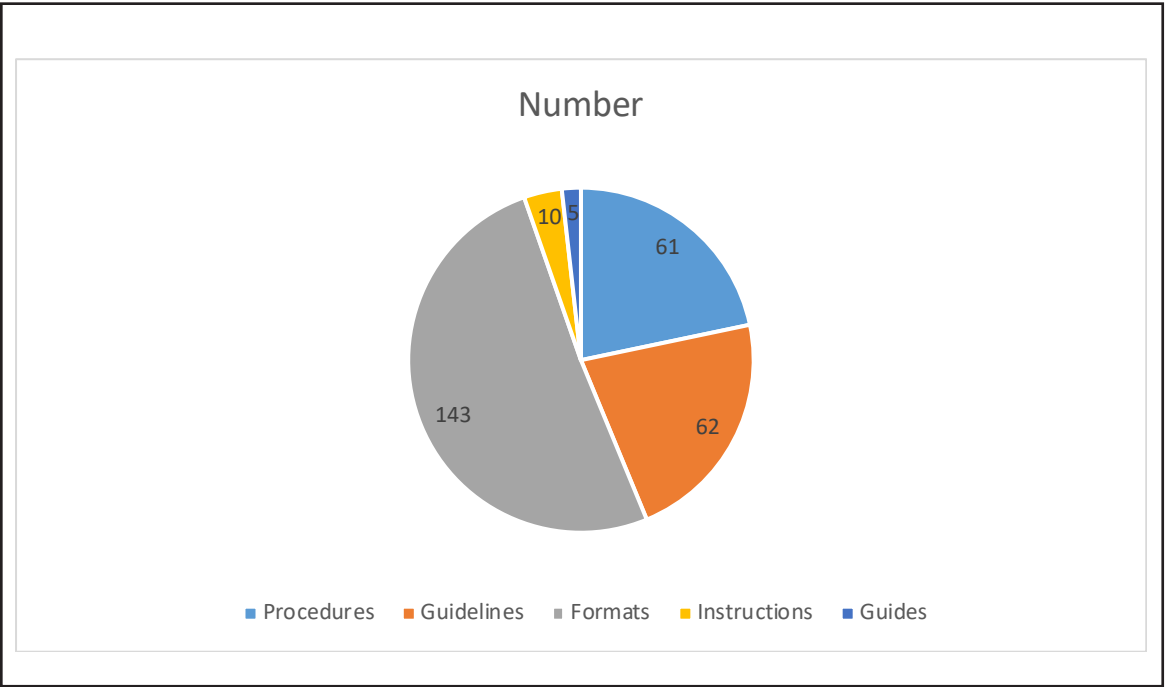
The emphasis in 2020 was on finishing accreditation procedures. Of the DSAG procedures concerning the contracting of DEA evaluators, the ones for contracting of new and repeat evaluators and for accommodation and transportation of evaluators have been approved.

With regard to progress, 60.1% of the quality system documents have been completed and 7.8% are in the final adjustment stage.

Of the completed documents, 57.4% are for DEA, 30.8% are for DSAG, and 8.9% are for the DE.

Figure 7 shows the number of finalized documents by document type.

Figure 7. Number of Prepared Procedures, Guidelines, Forms, Instructions, and Guides



Source: Quality Management, 2021.

Proposed Internal Quality and Internal Control Policies

The PR-CA03 procedure, “Self-review, Control, Monitoring, and External Review for Internal Improvement” (Annex 60), was defined to establish the guidelines for self-review, monitoring, internal improvement plans, evaluation processes, and feedback from external parties. This procedure is also mentioned in point 4.5 of this report.

SINAES has elaborated an internal quality policy (Annex 61), and an internal control policy was presented for the first time to the CNA in its February 2, 2021 meeting (Annex 62). The latter policy was approved in the CNA’s April 27, 2021 meeting (Annex 63). The policy approval decision authorizes the DE to implement a procedure for putting the policy into effect for regulation and responsibility in matters of internal control.

The internal control policy predates the SEVRI, and a work plan exists for covering the different internal control components through a committee that has already been



appointed by the DE ([Annex 64](#)). Implementation of the control policy requires definition and approval of the guiding framework of the SEVRI, planned for this year, by means of the strategies defined by the committee created for this purpose.

The CNA also stated in its decision that internal control policies apply to all SINAES staff, that directors will be responsible for risk assessment in the processes and projects in their areas, and that the CNA will be responsible for promptly addressing the recommendations, provisions, and comments of the different control and oversight bodies for the strengthening of the internal control system.

The general and specific policies approved by the CNA are as follows:

In accordance with the provisions of the General Internal Control Law No. 8292, the Internal Control Rules for the Public Sector (N-2-2009-CO-DFOE) of the Office of the Comptroller General of Costa Rica, and the principles of transparency and accountability, and for the purpose of ensuring the achievement of institutional objectives and goals, SINAES, as a public institution, is incorporating the internal control system as a tool inherent to its daily operations, respecting its particularities and the applicable technical and legal framework.

a) The institutional internal control system will provide security in the attainment of objectives and the protection and conservation of public assets against any loss, squandering, misuse, irregularity, or illegal act; it will demand reliable and timely reporting and ensure operational efficiency and effectiveness.

b) The institutional internal control system will include the following components: control environment, risk assessment, control activities, information systems, and monitoring, which through institutional self-review will improve quality and help achieve institutional objectives.

c) The institutional internal control system will conceive risk assessment and self-review as mechanisms that benefit institutional decision-making.

d) The institutional internal control system will involve the various levels of the organizational structure for assuming the inherent responsibilities.

4.4.3 Internal Quality Auditing

SINAES has had its own internal auditing department since 2019. As part of the auditing department's work plan, at the beginning of 2021 it performed an operational audit of the quality unit ([Annex 65](#)).

The following positive conclusions were obtained in Operational Audit AO-01-2021. It should also be clarified that this report establishes areas for improvement that need to be addressed and that were requested by the CNA.

- Based on scope of the study and the results of the audit tests, the quality management department, which reports to the SINAES Executive Director, was found to be the process of construction and approval - this last by the CNA - of the technical, regulatory, and methodological bases for the design and implementation of policies, procedures, and general rules for internal control and quality that will enable it to carry out its responsibilities in these areas according to standards of effectiveness and efficiency.
- The SINAES Procedure Documentation Project has sufficient elements for extracting and verifying compliance with the defined audit criteria. The audit found 98% compliance by management with respect to the criteria defined and evaluated according to the phase or progress reported for each document at the review date. This percent of compliance demonstrates the DE and quality management department's effectiveness in carrying out this project.

It should be noted that a 98% compliance of the evaluated criteria was found with a review of a sample of 126 items (approximately half the population of documents corresponding to the SINAES Procedure Documentation Project).

[Annex 65](#) also shows the recommendations deriving from the audit report.

4.4.4 Institutional Strategic Plan (PEI) Risk Assessment Matrix

Based on the PEI, an assessment was made of the most significant compliance risks, for which several work meetings were held ([Annex 66](#)). Several types of risks were identified in the matrix, giving the following results:

- Based on the percentages obtained in the assessment, most of SINAES's projects classify as low-risk (51.4%), a sizable number classify as moderate risk (37.8%), and a few fall into the category of minor risk (10.8%).
- The moderate-risk projects are those concerning infrastructure, equipment, organizational culture, personnel management, new degree and study programs, accreditations, affiliations, and the graduate and post-graduate degree re-accreditation and accreditation model.



- The low-risk projects concern communication, INDEIN projects, accreditation rules, information technologies, indicator management, accreditation times, and interinstitutional agreements.
- The minor-risk projects refer to new projects that complement SINAES’s essential functions such as the support program for design of the profile and professional skills of graduates in education or the support program for design and implementation of strategies for monitoring graduates’ employability and professional updating, carried out from 2019 to 2021.
- A preliminary risk assessment has also been made and control points included in SINAES quality system documents.

4.4.5 Strategic Planning

With the help of a consulting firm, SINAES is formulating its strategic plan for 2023-2027. [Annex 1](#) includes the work plan and timeline for preparing the 2023-2027 PEI. The objectives of this process are to assist in environmental scanning; facilitate the dynamics for an internal scan; review SINAES’s mission, vision, and values; formulate the divisions’ tactical plans; and disseminate the plan among SINAES staff and the CNA.

Within the environmental scan is a document review of key inputs that guide SINAES’s operations. A strategic comparison is also being made with other accrediting agencies internationally to identify best practices that could be implemented in SINAES. SINAES’s internal documentation will also be reviewed to gain an understanding of its institutional situation. As part of the data compilation effort, an instrument was sent out for response by external partners (rectors, directors of academic assessment units, directors of accredited degree programs, academic vice rectors, CONARE, CONESUP, UNIRE, professional associations, CINDE, Civil Service Directorate, National Advisory on Counseling, and INQAAHE itself). SINAES staff and the CNA were also consulted separately.

Workshops are also being conducted with CNA and department representatives as well as a select few staff members as key informants. Once this stage is concluded, division workshops will also be conducted with all staff in each division.

The process, to be completed in November 2021, will give SINAES strategic guiding elements, especially pertinent strategic objectives, and strategic initiatives for making them possible, in addition to strategic risks that will need to be managed. The divisions will also have tactical plans in place to guide their work for the next five years in a particularly challenging situation marked by a potential post-pandemic economic recovery and already approved laws - and others under analysis - that imply major challenges for SINAES.

4.5. Self-review Capacities

INQAAHE Indication: Criterion 2.1.3 The EQAA periodically conducts a self-review of its own activities, including consideration of its own effects and value. The review includes data collection and analysis, to inform decision-making and trigger improvements.

As has been mentioned, the PR-CA03 procedure, “Self-review, Control, Monitoring, and External Review for Internal Improvement,” has been prepared and approved ([Annex 60](#)). The main goal of this procedure is to formulate the SINAES self-review, improvement plan, and progress monitoring process. It also seeks the continuous improvement of the entire agency, to wit, DEA, DE, INDEIN and DSAG. In its new structure, this analysis is key to SINAES’s improvement.

The procedure refers to SINAES’s self-review and feedback from external parties (peer reviewers and study or degree program representatives participating in the accreditation processes).

One of the objectives is to establish a SINAES self-review and external review process for international recognition of best practices or for improvement purposes. The procedure applies to all SINAES’s key and support processes for essential functions that are reviewed for improvement purposes and to the committee that will eventually be created. It was prepared by the SINAES quality consultant, consulted extensively with the different SINAES offices, and finally approved by the DE in August 2021. The procedure is developed in the following three sections:

1. Feedback from external parties (universities, peer reviewers, professional associations, or other stakeholders);
2. Self-review for the purposes of internal improvement; and
3. External review for the purposes of accreditation.



4.6 Quality Criteria Consultation Processes

INQAAHE Indication: Criterion 3.2.2 The standards or criteria developed by the EQAA have been subject to reasonable consultation with stakeholders and are revised at regular intervals to ensure relevance to the needs of the system.

SINAES has a general accreditation model for degree programs, approved by the CNA in 2009, and assessment models for post-graduate programs and junior college and distance studies, in addition to models with specific criteria for certain disciplines. Recently, SINAES has focused on updating the model for university degree programs.

4.6.1 Progress on Definition of the Degree Program Accreditation Model

In Minute number 1429 of May 12, 2018, the CNA approved the PEI for the 2018-2022 period. One of the strategic objectives was defined as “OE2: Consolidate the updated accreditation models and higher education quality research and innovation.”

Within this context, SINAES is focusing on the task of reformulating the degree model.

The document “Needs Assessment and Proposed Restructuring of the Degree Program Model Project and Associated Projects” ([Annex 28](#)) indicates the progress on SINAES accreditation models.

The following has been defined for the degree model:

- The quality guidelines and model structure, approved by the SINAES CNA;
- The degree model text body, most of which is approved. Definition of the relationship between the weighting system and the accreditation decision-making mechanism; and
- Progress on the decision-making mechanism in Minute number 1402, Article 5, of May 5, 2020 ([Annex 67](#)).

Under construction at present is the “Guide for Quality Higher Education Accreditation,” which will provide a guide to the accreditation process for all stakeholders and at all stages of the process.

Since the model asks the degree programs under review to give the opinions of diverse groups on different evaluation topics and considering that these opinions need to be gathered through surveys provided by SINAES to the HEIs for their use, SINAES has an initial version of these instruments ([Annex 68](#)).

A document is currently being prepared that analyzes the context of the country’s post-graduate offering, reviews national, regional, and international post-graduate quality standards, and adapts the guidelines for the degree model to make it applicable to the types of post-graduate programs in Costa Rica.

Other Models

The general vision of specific models is that they are sets of quality guidelines and evidence that complement or in some cases replace the quality guidelines of the general model, the idea being to maintain consistency in the evaluation tool while making it specific to the discipline or modality.

At the end of 2020, SINAES received the results of the consultancy, which provided it with a draft of specific criteria for degree programs in medicine, incorporating the aspects requested by the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) ([Annex 69](#)). This proposed model with specific criteria for medicine programs is currently in the process of approval by the CNA.

In the case of the HEI accreditation model, the DEA has prepared analyses and proposals to make sure SINAES has this model. This topic will be addressed again in point 5.1 of this report.

4.6.2 Consultation on the Draft Degree Model

Separate groups were consulted for preparing the new degree model. Four higher education offices associated with SINAES and the quality units of nine affiliated universities contributed general comments on the 2019 version of the proposed degree program accreditation model. These were then systematized in the document “Systematization of the Feedback Received from Higher Education Institutions on the SINAES Degree Model” ([Annex 70](#)). [Annex 70](#) also contains the systematization of a validation workshop conducted with the universities’ technical quality units in February 2020. The goal of the workshop was to get expert opinions on proposed categories for the new evaluation model for accrediting degree programs.

SINAES has a specific model applicable to the programs offered in the National University of Distance Education (UNED). Since progress had been made on preparing the degree program model, it was adapted to the distance learning characteristics of the UNED’s degree programs ([Annex 71](#)). As a first stage of consultation, the adapted model was submitted to the UNED for consultation at the beginning of 2020. To review the model, a task force was created with SINAES technical staff and UNED personnel, particularly from the UNED’s quality unit.



Following up on a recommendation by the INQAAHE panel of experts, SINAES consulted with the professional associations with which it has a cooperation agreement on the progress made on the degree program model. The idea was to receive their contributions and comments as part of the validation process.

The following professional associations were consulted:

- Professional Association of Economists
- Costa Rican Professional Association of Physicians and Surgeons
- Costa Rican Professional Association of Pharmacists
- Professional Association of Public Accountants
- Costa Rican Professional Association of Lawyers
- Professional Association of Professionals in Information Technology and Computing
- Professional Association of Guidance Counselors
- Costa Rican Professional Association of Journalists
- Professional Association of Licenciates and Professors

Comments were received from the Professional Association of Economists, the Professional Association of Guidance Counselors, the Costa Rican Professional Association of Physicians and Surgeons, and the Costa Rican Professional Association of Pharmacists. SINAES has systematized the information provided by the aforementioned professional associations to guide improvement of the accreditation model. The systematization of the comments that were received can be found in [Annex 30](#).

4.7 Guidance for External Agents

INQAAHE Indication: Criterion 3.4.1 The EQAA provides clear guidance to the institution or program in the application of the procedures for self-evaluation, the solicitation of assessment/feedback from the public, students, and other constituents, or the preparation for external review as necessary and appropriate.

The INQAAHE panel of experts indicated the importance of reinforcing periodic and systematic training of the representatives of all affiliated HEIs. The panel recommended scheduling training workshops for HEI staff responsible for preparing the degree and study program accreditation, increasing the number of recipients. This would not only

help raise awareness of the accreditation processes but also help SINAES and its technical staff obtain better feedback for improving their work.

Until the first quarter of 2020, when the effects of the pandemic reached Costa Rica, SINAES's training strategy had characteristically been to organize in-person training events where personal interaction was emphasized. In its self-evaluation report to INQAAHE (SINAES, 2019), SINAES thus reported training activities with national peers in meetings prior to the external review visit, as well as induction meetings for the entire evaluator team prior to the external review. Similarly, the training strategy for the university community personnel participating in the accreditation processes had also been based on face-to-face meetings with SINAES academic staff. To ensure understanding of and participation in the processes, the training meetings were carried out with diverse outreach and in different geographical locations with a significant variety of university communities. Thus, the IA (SINAES, 2019) reported the training of 1,378 people from 2013 to 2017.

With the arrival of the pandemic and the imposed economic, social, and health conditions, the continuation or increase of these efforts was suspended, mostly because the method being used until then was no longer an option. Primarily, however, during 2020 and the start of 2021, the priorities of HEI personnel, consultants, and academic staff have been to keep their institutions running under the conditions imposed by the pandemic.

SINAES's response to the pandemic conditions was to implement remote external evaluations as set forth in the "Guidelines for Virtual External Review Visits during the COVID-19 Health Emergency" ([Annexes 11](#) and [12](#)). As has been mentioned, [Annex 19](#) shows the results of the evaluation of SINAES's experience with virtual visits and ACCM reviews.

To meet the needs of degree and study programs and evaluators in terms of accreditation information, induction, and methodologies, SINAES used ICTs to intensify its handling of evaluator questions and requirements and service for the degree and study programs in the process of accreditation. These guidance, induction, and advisory activities were carried out by the staff working in accreditation. No mass accreditation training activities were thus reported. Instead, specific activities were carried out for each degree or study program seeking accreditation.

Although this type of service turned out to be essential during the emergency, it is not considered an adequate permanent channel for solving the need to train the evaluators or HEI members participating in these processes.

Having a permanent training strategy that is economical, broad in scope, and able to work without the need for physical attendance was considered a necessity and integrated into the revamped SINAES evaluator selection process (Rodríguez-García, 2020, [Annex 26](#)). This proposal established the mandatory training of peer evaluators as a condition for their hiring by SINAES. This new requirement made it necessary for the proposal to

restructure the selection and hiring process, putting training as an activity to be carried out immediately after registering as a provider. The draft procedure proposes to have providers invited to participate in SINAES peer training offered remotely and permanently via a massive open online course (MOOC).

The idea of this training strategy is to have a resource available 24/7 regardless of a person's geographical location. The course would be organized through the Moodle platform and would include the necessary contents for adequate peer role specifications and performance. The training course would be automated; when a SINAES peer candidate passes the evaluation proposed by the course they would be automatically authorized to continue with the selection process and eventual hiring.

The strategy of training through the use of ICTs is also being considered for serving the HEI population. Considering both the current pandemic situation and the foreseen post-pandemic economic consequences, SINAES needs to have training mechanisms in place that go beyond face-to-face meetings and have a reduced cost but also an extremely broad scope. It is therefore looking to design technological solutions such as the one in process for external evaluators. This way training modules can be designed for students, teachers, university consultants, and others. Nevertheless, this approach does not exclude a future combination of ICT-mediated training and in-person training meetings when health conditions so permit. At present, SINAES is designing the expert evaluator training and preparing a general proposal to address the training of the university community.

Lastly, between 2020 and 2021 there have been 28 virtual academic meetings on different topics related to the quality of higher education. The talks can be found on the SINAES YouTube channel.

V. SINAES's Progress in Other Areas



Although the INQAAHE panel of experts refers particularly in its November 7, 2019 note to the seven opportunities for improvement addressed in the preceding pages, SINAES has made progress on other important aspects that were indicated by the external peer reviewers in their November 2019 report. To this respect, below is a description of the progress SINAES considers worth reporting since it also corresponds to a line of work for the next INQAAHE recognition process.

5.1 Accreditation of Institutions

INQAAHE Indication: If SINAES continues with institutional accreditation, it should develop the criteria and guidelines for its implementation and put them into operation in the Annual Operating Plan.

In their external review report, the INQAAHE reviewer team noted as an opportunity for improvement that “if SINAES continues with institutional accreditation, it should develop the criteria and guidelines for its implementation and put them into operation in the Annual Operating Plan.” This is in the context defined by Law 8798 enabling SINAES to accredit higher education institutions. In its 2018-2022 strategic plan (project 7), SINAES defined the “preparation of an institutional accreditation model and measurement instruments, up-to-date and in operation” as one of its key tasks.

In February 2019, the study “Analysis of the Institutional Accreditation Model of the Haut Conseil de l’évaluation de la recherche et de l’enseignement supérieur¹ (Hcéres) and Opportunities for SINAES” (Rodríguez-García, 2019a, [Annex 72](#)) was prepared for SINAES. SINAES used this instrument to do an overall assessment of the opportunities provided by the agreement signed between SINAES-CONARE and Hcéres in 2016 to further the development or adoption of institutional accreditation models. The background for this was that in 2017 Hcéres participated in the first institutional accreditation in Costa Rica, that of the Costa Rica Institute of Technology (ITC), in which SINAES also participated by accompanying the external review visit. The instrument reviews the key features of the Hcéres model, its structure, stages, self-evaluation reporting, limitations, and aspects to revise if it is adapted to the SINAES model.

The analysis presents the following preliminary conclusions:

- The Hcéres model is being positioned in Central America and Costa Rica as an alternative for institutional accreditation. Its current acceptance will likely spread in upcoming years.
- The Hcéres evaluation model is in line with European university quality standards, so it is an appropriate tool for accreditation and has external academic legitimacy.

- SINAES has an agreement in force with Hcéres and a positive collaborative environment with the other stakeholder organizations such as the Institut Français. Achieving the SINAES strategic plan goal regarding institutional accreditation through an agreement with Hcéres is an academically safe alternative that would produce very short-term results at an extremely low cost.
- In a scenario in which SINAES adopts the Hcéres institutional accreditation model, consideration should be given to the following needs:
 - Adjustments to the nomenclature and definition of concepts so that they fit the Costa Rican context;
 - Design of guidelines that assess the outreach or social action efforts in Costa Rican universities; and
 - Definition of aspects for management of the process by two agencies, such as the agencies’ costs, decision-making, and level of participation.

The CNA discussed the proposal set forth in this analysis and gave its approval for continuing along this vein ([Annex 73](#)).

SINAES then defined the “Work Path and Proposed Adjustment of the Hcéres Institutional Accreditation Model to the Reality of SINAES” ([Annex 74](#)) to advance towards the adoption of an institutional accreditation model, taking advantage of the SINAES-Hcéres agreement to achieve its goal of having an institutional accreditation model in place.

This second contribution defines the work path and milestones and proposes the steps for moving ahead on some of these. It also contains a structural proposal for the institutional accreditation model that gives continuity to the comments made in the [Annex 72](#) document, in that it proposes the Hcéres model guidelines to be adjusted and a restructuring of the Hcéres model to make it similar to SINAES’s current models. It also indicates the adjustments that would be needed in the Hcéres procedure to bring it closer to the SINAES mechanism. Finally, it proposes the ideal conditions that should be considered when defining an agreement between Hcéres and SINAES.

This technical input concludes that the proposed milestones and modifications of the Hcéres model are sufficient material for further talks with Hcéres on the adjustments needed for agreeing on the necessary conditions for going ahead with the proposal.

A technical input was prepared in September 2019, “Comparison of the Hcéres and ECA Institutional Evaluation Models” ([Annex 75](#)), containing a review of the reference documents for the institutional accreditation program of the European University Association (ECA), the agency with which the UCR carried out its self-evaluation and institutional accreditation process. The idea was to compare the contents of the ECA



model with those of the Hcéres model, for which a review and proposed adaptations have already been carried out by SINAES.

This instrument reviewed the dissimilar aspects of the two models and indicated the Hcéres guidelines that were lacking in the ECA model.

The final considerations, which are justified in the document, are as follows:

“After a review of these two models, keeping in mind the national context and that of SINAES, some final considerations were reached that could contribute to the National Accreditation Council’s discussion of these evaluation models:

1. The Hcéres model is broader in scope and type of elements considered in the evaluation of institutions than the ECA model. The topics addressed in the ECA model can be considered subsumed in the Hcéres model.
2. The design of the ECA evaluation model differs in form from the design of evaluation models in SINAES. The Hcéres model, for its part, is in line with the SINAES tradition of evaluation model preparation, so its implementation should be easier both within SINAES and in its application in Costa Rican universities, which are more used to this type of evaluation model.
3. There is a formal tie between SINAES and Hcéres through an agreement that already provides a legal and academic platform for establishing a cooperative relationship between Hcéres and SINAES. This would facilitate advisory, training, and legitimation for use of the model in Costa Rica. At the moment, SINAES has no formal or informal ties with ECA.
4. Hcéres has also forged ties in Central America, which facilitates the harmonizing of quality aspirations for institutions throughout the region. The Hcéres model has already been adopted in Central America by the Central American Higher University Council (CSUCA) and its use as the region’s evaluation tool is already being consolidated, several Central American institutions having achieved accreditation with this procedure. To this respect, it is strategic to adopt an evaluation model that synchronizes with the type of model SINAES has been using and with the regional institutional quality aspirations of universities.”

An input has also been prepared for the junior college case: “Approach to Some Supporting Elements for Construction of the Junior College Accreditation Model: International State of the Art” ([Annex 76](#)). The purpose of this document is to explore and present international findings on two basic aspects that could help in the national construction of a junior college accreditation model, one being the quality criteria (or standards) used by agencies for accrediting technical education institutions, and the other being certain distinctive elements that could be analyzed for the national construction of an accreditation model.

5.2 Contributions to the Debate on the Voluntary Nature of Accreditation

INQAAHE Indication: Because the debate continues on the conditions imposed on the accreditation process due to its voluntary nature, SINAES needs to weigh in from its position within the system.

5.2.1 Analysis of Draft Law 21.578: Reform of the Law for the National Council for Private University Higher Education (CONESUP)

Since September 2019, when the Legislative Assembly started ongoing consultations on bill 21.578 (a bill that impacts SINAES’s essential tasks), SINAES has cooperated by providing information and attending meetings and hearings.

The correspondence issued on the bill has led to a significant collection of institutional data, an effort on which staff have collaborated.

In addition, SINAES has attended two hearings requested by the Social Affairs Committee in addition to participating in many meetings with the legislators responsible for this bill. These meetings were held both face-to-face and virtually. The last report sent at the request of the Legislative Assembly can be found in [Annex 77](#). The plenary discussion on it is still pending. The report on results was finally sent to the Legislative Assembly ([Annex 77](#)).

5.2.2 Purpose and Provisions of the Bill

The purpose of the bill under study is to amend various aspects of the CONESUP Law and add new articles and temporary provisions. In addition, it adds a temporary provision to the Law for the National Accreditation System of Higher Education (SINAES), Law 8256. It should be added that Law 8256 is one of the two laws that create the SINAES’s legal status; the other is Law 8798.

SINAES has only referred to those parts of the bill that specifically concern it from the perspective of its purpose and responsibilities. This being said, the goal of this bill, as we understand it, is to amend the legal status of both CONESUP and the private university regime.

It should be noted that the bill refers to the CONESUP Law, but most of the core issues concern SINAES. Attention needs to be paid to this because of the implications it may have for SINAES and its affiliated higher education institutions.



It is extremely important to keep in mind throughout this analysis what Law 8256 establishes regarding the concept of accreditation:

“Article 2. For the purposes hereof, the purpose of accreditation shall be to officially identify the university degree and study programs that meet the quality criteria established by SINAES, thereby improving the quality of the degree and study programs offered by public and private universities and publicly guaranteeing the quality of said programs.”

If the law is passed as it stands, SINAES understands it would have to take several actions that are needed for private universities and CONESUP to comply with this law. This is because at this time accreditation is voluntary on the part of the degree programs, but with the new law there would be selective cases of mandatory accreditation. SINAES would thus require information from CONESUP on the degree programs wishing to undertake accreditation, since they would be subject to selective mandatory accreditation pursuant to the law.

For its part, SINAES shall promote and support the degree programs mentioned in the law and keep CONESUP informed as to whether or not accreditation has been obtained within the established timeframe. The universities must comply with all points of the law. It is also understood that the mandatory nature of accreditation requires the definition of sanctions.

Lastly, it is worth remembering that CONESUP authorizes and oversees private universities and their degree programs and study plans. SINAES accredits degree program quality. It is essential to emphasize that the purposes and responsibilities of each agency are completely different. CONESUP authorizes operation and ensures operating requirements; SINAES accredits degree program quality, which entails other elements of analysis.

The study of the bill found provisions that specifically concern SINAES, and it is these over which SINAES is issuing its opinion in this report.

In September 2021 we learned that there is a substitute text which SINAES has not seen.

5.3 Human Talent Management

INQAAHE Indication: Study the workloads of staff members in order to better adjust task assignments and avoid work overload. The panel recommends developing a procedure to regulate and define staff training with regard to their tasks, allowing for objective criteria in order to obtain results for future reviews of available types of training and the people who have benefitted from them.

The INQAAHE panel of experts referred to the need for a workload study to better adjust task assignments and avoid overloading.

Given the importance of optimizing SINAES division processes by evaluating and measuring the workloads of all the jobs, to achieve its strategic objectives SINAES needs to technically determine the volume of work involved in the different processes and procedures of the divisions in its organizational structure and facilitate efficient decision-making on the tasks arising from the responsibilities assigned to each job.

This being said, in May 2020 approval was requested of the CNA to carry out an agency-wide workload measurement study to ensure organizational strengthening and effectiveness and staff distribution according to the criteria of equity, efficiency, and quality.

The terms of reference for the project can be seen in [Annex 78](#).

Due to the country’s fiscal situation, which affects the budgets of public agencies, this project was not included for 2021.

5.4 Accreditation Processing Time

INQAAHE Indication: Follow-up mechanisms should be implemented to ensure quality is not affected by reducing the time for the accreditation procedure.

5.4.1 Recording, Control, and Reporting of Accreditation Processing Times

As a measure for monitoring accreditation processing times, the DE set for the information director the task of building a database for collecting and reporting accreditation processing times. This data has been used to develop inputs on accreditation processes, which are listed in this section.

To implement mechanisms that ensure accreditation processes are followed without affecting their quality, SINAES has conducted studies to learn accreditation process status and times. In the CNA’s June 2, 2020 meeting ([Annex 79](#)), the SINAES technical department informed it of the average times for several accreditation processes in specific stages such as reconsideration and deferred decisions. With the processing of requests for reconsideration of decisions made by the CNA, it was found that the accreditation



process takes an average of seven months from the decision giving rise to the request. In the case of deferred decisions, this stage takes two years, on average, consisting of 18 months for preparing and implementing a special improvement plan that SINAES later evaluates.

The accreditation processing time analysis has also been an excellent input for evaluating project 5 of the SINAES PEI strategic objective consisting of the “reduction of the maximum time for processing accreditation to eight months by 2018 (the accreditation process starts with receipt of the IA and ends with the accreditation decision...)” Table 11 gives the average time in months for processing the applications for accreditation received from 2018 to 2020. Although the average processing time fell in 2019, it rose again in 2020, though not to the 2018 level.

Table 11. SINAES: Average Processing Time for Received Applications, in Months, by Year

Application Year	2018	2019	2020
Average processing time for received applications in months, by year*	9.95	7.94	8.43

*Note: Processing time is the time from delivery of the IA to SINAES (application) to the accreditation decision by the CNA. It should be noted that since some processes are received in the final months of the calendar year, they are necessarily processed the following year.
Source: Cascante-Pérez, S. (June 2021).

Table 12 shows the time the accreditation process takes by stage. The first stage runs from application for accreditation to the first day of the external review visit, and the second stage runs from the last day of the visit to the accreditation decision.

The average time from the last day of the external review visit to the CNA decision has fallen, but the average time in months from application for accreditation to the first day of the external review visit has increased from 2018 (Annex 80).

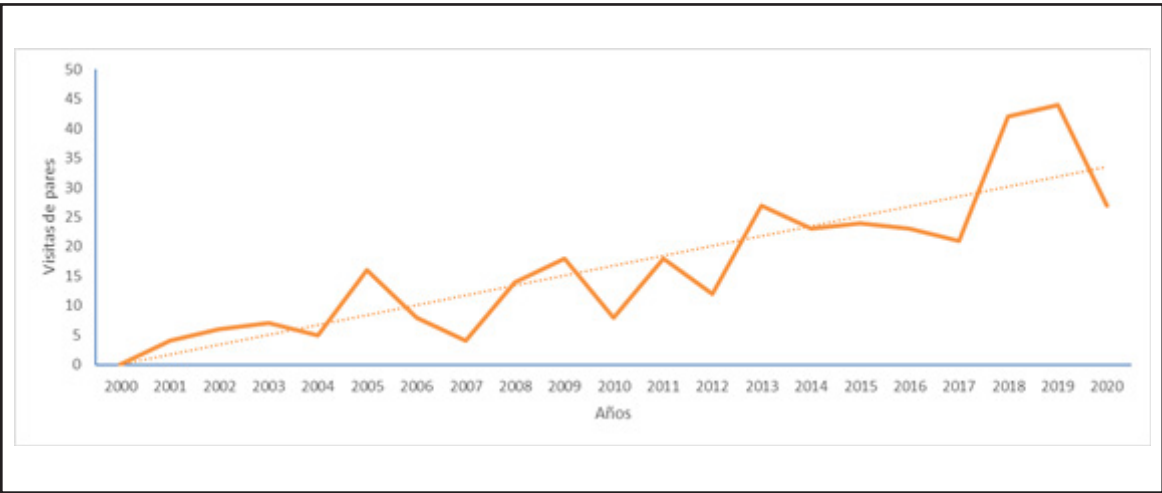
Table 12. SINAES: Average Accreditation Processing Time by Stages and Application Year for Processes with an Accreditation Decision

Accreditation Application Year	Average Time in Months	
	From Accreditation Application to the First Day of the External Review Visit	From the Last Day of the Visit to the Decision
2018	5.1	5.3
2019	6.3	1.5
2020	6.2	1.1

Note: 2021 considers accreditation decisions reached at June 7, 2021.
Source: Cascante-Pérez, S. (June 2021).

During 2020, as one of the contingency measures adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic the CNA agreed to carry out external review visits virtually. However, due to the pandemic SINAES did not make external review visits from March to June of this same year, and the visits scheduled for these months had to be rescheduled, given the adjustment period caused by the pandemic and the creation of the necessary guidelines for virtuality. As a result, the number of review visits fell and the average time for the visits rose (see Table 12) in the indicated months, as seen in Figure 8.

Figure 8. SINAES: Evolution of External Review Visits (2000-2020)



Source: Cascante-Pérez, S. (June 2021).



5.4.2 Modification of the Improvement Commitment (CM) Stage

In addition, in Minute number 1293 ([Annex 81](#)) of its February 8, 2019 meeting, the CNA decided to modify the CM review stage. [Annex 82](#) gives the “Proposed Modification of the Improvement Commitment Review Stage of the SINAES Accreditation Process”, which compiles recommendations as well as giving a proposed modification of this stage. Among the considerations in this proposal were the following:

- Reduced accreditation processing time;
- Elimination of payment for the external review of the final CM;
- Volume of hours put in by SINAES internal staff; and
- Review of the CM document by the peer team in the external review stage.

Additionally, in CNA’s April 20, 2021 meeting, Minute number 1489 ([Annex 83](#)), an analysis was presented on management and review of the final Improvement Commitment ([Annex 84](#)). The document gathers facts on the CM and reviews the earlier procedure for the CM review. It also makes improvements to the instrument based on a CNA request to ensure that the final CM includes both peer review team and CNA recommendations. Table 13 shows a comparison of the previous and current CM review procedures.

Table 13. SINAES: Comparison of the Previous and Current CM Review Procedures

Procedure Prior to the CM Review Modification Decision, Recap from the Castro-Tato, J. (2021) Document	Procedure Agreed by the CNA for the CM Review, Minute 1293-2019 (Annex 81)
<p>The degree program prepares the Final Improvement Commitment (CMF) based on the Preliminary Improvement Commitment (CMP) and the peer report.</p> <p>SINAES finalizes hiring of the CMF external reviewer.</p> <p>The external reviewer prepares their report.</p> <p>The SINAES technical team prepares the input regarding the accreditation decision.</p> <p>The CNA puts the accreditation decision on its agenda.</p> <p>The SINAES secretary notifies the degree program of the CNA’s decision.</p>	<p>Approve the following steps for the application stage and review of the Improvement Commitment during the evaluation process with a view to accreditation:</p> <p>a. The concept of preliminary and final CMs is eliminated and replaced by a single CM.</p> <p>b. The peer team reviews the CM submitted by the degree program during the document review and during the external review visit in a specific meeting for this purpose.</p> <p>c. The concept of exit report is eliminated. The external evaluator team presents the final oral and written external review report to the CNA at the end of the visit.</p> <p>d. The oral exit report to the degree program is eliminated.</p> <p>e. In its final report the peer team issues an opinion on the CM’s relevance to the degree program’s situation.</p> <p>f. Once the CNA accepts receipt of the final external review report, the document is sent to the degree program for comments.</p> <p>g. Once the degree program sends in its comments, the researcher prepares an executive report on the process (according to the previously approved format) and the CNA decides whether or not to accredit the degree program.</p> <p>h. If the degree program is accredited, after two years a CM reviewer will assess its compliance.</p>



The accreditation decision for the last process that had an external CM review after the external evaluation stage took 18 months, on average. Some 57% of the time was taken from the end of the visit to the accreditation decision, the stage that includes the CM review, among other technical aspects. If the times of this last review are compared to those of later decisions where a CM review is not included, the average time has been a month and a few days (data for 29 decisions that were provided after the last process that had an Improvement Commitment review).

Another improvement that impacts this stage was the incorporation of a standard time for submitting the final CM to SINAES, as shown in Table 14.

Table 14. SINAES: Improvements to the Accreditation Decision Format and Connection to the Final CM Review

Extract of the Accreditation Decision Agreement prior to December 2020	Extract of the Accreditation Decision Agreement after December 2020
Solicit the Final Improvement Commitment from the degree program and add it to the degree program’s file for mid-term monitoring.	Solicit presentation of the Final Improvement Commitment from the degree program within one month at the latest and add it to the degree program’s file for mid-term monitoring.

5.4.3 Software for the Registration of Professionals in the Expert Registry

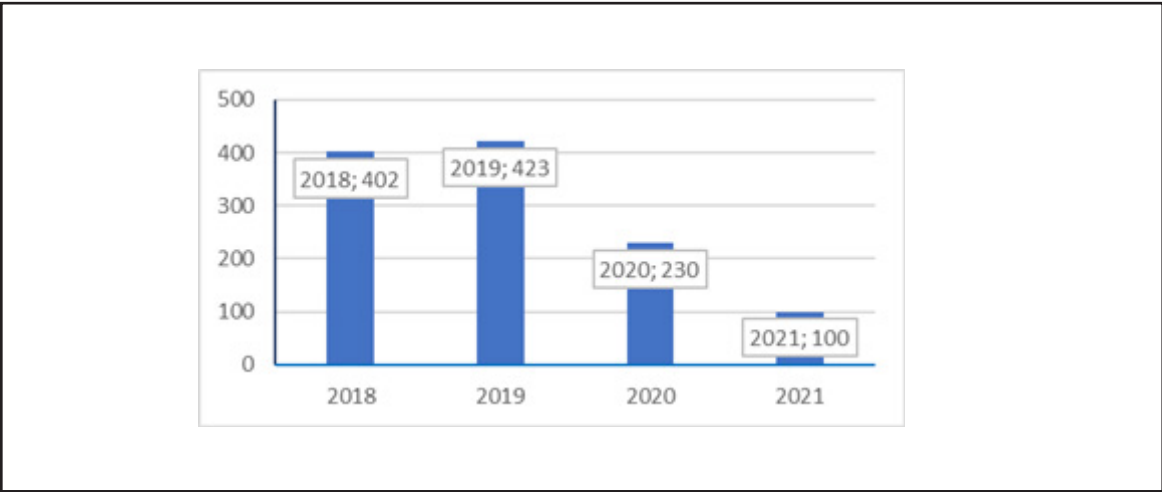
To help reduce accreditation processing times, particularly with regard to the search for and selection of external peer reviewers, SINAES developed software for an expert registry.

The external review stage is one of the most important stages in the accreditation process; this is the stage in which the quality of the degree or study program is assessed. This assessment is done by a team of “external academic peers.” However, prior to this assessment, the DEA has created and keeps updated a bank of academic experts by discipline who meet the requirements for acting as external peer reviewers according to the specific characteristics and regulations established by the CNA.

On August 4, 2017, the CNA approved the recommendations of an external consultant (Annex 85). Among the points that were approved was that of “contracting the development of software for professional or peer selection to eliminate the bottleneck in this activity.”

The computer program module, entitled “Expert Registry,” became operational on October 6, 2017 (Annex 86). Three and a half years after the software’s implementation, the system has a total of 1,155 registered professionals (Figure 9). It should be mentioned that the data on 800 of these professionals was obtained under the previous registration method, through service offers.

Figure 9. SINAES: Professionals Registered in the Expert Registry, Annual Data, 2018-May 2021



Source: Expert Registry. May 2021. Registry of registered professionals.

5.5. External Communication

INQAAHE Indication: Develop a plan of measures for reinforcing external communication of all SINAES activities, including the advantages for students of enrolling in accredited programs.

Between 2019 and 2021, SINAES has implemented a plan with measures aimed at secondary school students, some involving direct contact and others through guidance counselors. SINAES has also produced videos and improved its web presence (site redesign, continuous attention to Facebook, constant updating of the YouTube channel, and a digital media campaign).



Direct Contact

SINAES also participates in vocational fairs aimed at high school students. Before the health crisis, all these activities were in-person events; starting in 2020 they started to be organized virtually.

These vocational fairs are organized by different institutions, especially the MEP Regional Advisories, member institutions (primarily the UCR), and private companies (such as Expo U and universidades.cr).

Table 15 summarizes what was done from 2019 to the first semester of 2021.

Table 15. SINAES: Number of Fairs and Students Attended, by Year

Year	Number of Fairs	Estimated Number of Students Attended
2019	2	10,000
2020	2	5,000
2021	1	3,000

Source: Communication, 2021.

Contact through Guidance Counselors

One of SINAES’s main target publics is that of guidance counselors, who perform an essential task by providing information to students in their last year of high school.

From 2019 to the first semester of 2021, SINAES organized four activities aimed at guidance counselors.

Each of these activities had the participation of 250 guidance counselors, on average, and each of these professionals are responsible for 200-300 high school students.

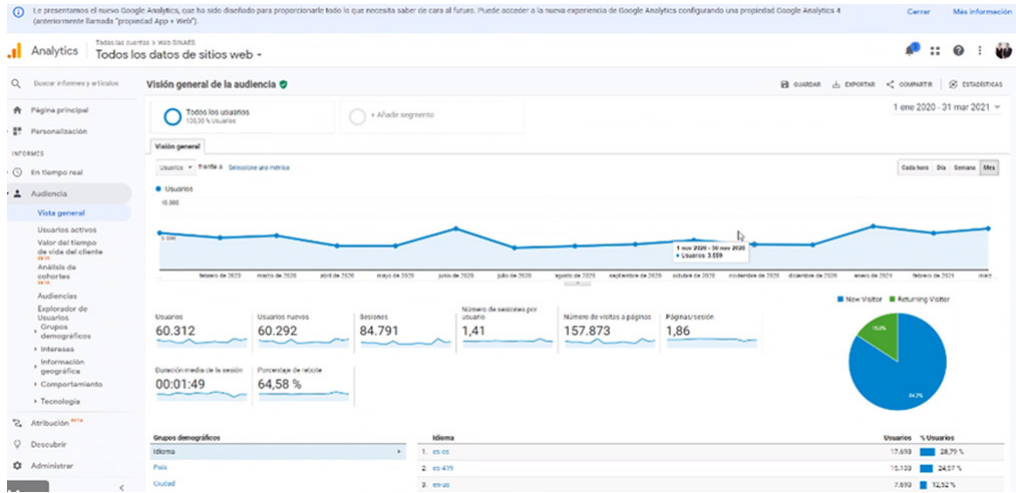
Videos

In this period (2019-2021), SINAES contracted the production of five videos that explain in simple terms the various aspects involved in the accreditation evaluation process.

Internet Reinforcement

SINAES has several virtual channels for providing information.

- Website: Between 2020 and the first three months of 2021 the SINAES website had more than 60,000 visits:



- Queries: The Communication department handles approximately 500 queries per year (some 10 queries weekly). Most of them are by email to info@sinaes.ac.cr.
- Facebook: SINAES has 78,328 followers on Facebook and shares information regularly by this means.
- Mailchimp: SINAES uses Mailchimp to send information to its contacts (primarily in universities and junior colleges, in addition to academia). The database exceeds 2,500 contacts.

To inform the external public of its achievements, in July 2020 SINAES started issuing a weekly bulletin entitled “SINAES en Acción” (SINAES in Action), which covers its progress in all areas. The bulletin is sent out through Mailchimp to more than 5,000 contacts and also posted on its Facebook page, which has more than 76,000 followers. Three editions of “SINAES en Acción” have been prepared up to September 2021. It is important to mention that this bulletin also helps SINAES discharge its accountability obligation, so it is posted on the SINAES website in the transparency network section, specifically in institutional reports: <https://www.sinaes.ac.cr/index.php/home/red-de-transparencia>



5.6. Strategies for Communication Beyond the Costa Rican Central Region

INQAAHE Indication: Take the initiative to organize more fairs and informative events in places other than the capital city of San Jose or the greater metropolitan area in order to spread knowledge and information opportunities to youth in other parts of the country.

In 2019, SINAES participated in onsite regional fairs organized by the Ministry of Education in places outside the capital (Table 16).

Table 16. SINAES: Number of Students Informed by SINAES, by Zone

Zone Visited	Number of Students*
Limón	700
Guanacaste	1,000
Golfito and Coto Brus (Southern Zone)	1,500

Source: Communication, 2021.
*Approximate number of students provided with SINAES information.

SINAES also participated in 2019 in national fairs (UCR and Expo U) attended by youth from all over the country. All told, more than 20,000 high school students were attended.

In other youth-oriented actions carried out that same year, SINAES participated in informative spaces specifically aimed at that target public.

On June 11, SINAES advertised in the La Nación magazine En el Break (In the Break) aimed at high school students. Twelve thousand copies were distributed (half to public high schools and half to private high schools). SINAES participated with an advertorial, an ad, and web presence.

PONGÁMONOS SERIOS

¿QUÉ ES SINAES Y EN QUÉ CONSISTE LA ACREDITACIÓN?

Probablemente ya has escuchado sobre este tema, pero no estás muy seguro de qué trata y por qué es importante. Te contamos: Sinaes significa Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior y, como su nombre lo indica, se encarga de certificar que las carreras universitarias y parauniversitarias cumplan con criterios de calidad internacionalmente aceptados. Básicamente, al escoger una carrera con esta acreditación, te aseguras de que vas a tener una formación con la mejor calidad y al día con las tendencias mundiales.

¿TODAS LAS CARRERAS TIENEN ESTE SELLO DE CALIDAD?

No, no todas. De hecho, este es un proceso voluntario que solicitan las universidades y parauniversidades afiliadas al Sinaes. El país cuenta con 186 carreras y programas acreditados: 98 en universidades públicas, 68 en universidades privadas, 17 en universidades internacionales y 3 en las parauniversitarias.

¿CÓMO CAMBIA UNA CARRERA QUE ES ACREDITADA?

Es importante mencionar que Sinaes evalúa y acredita la carrera en general, no solo el plan de estudios. En el proceso también se toman en cuenta aspectos como la infraestructura de la universidad, la formación del docente, el proceso educativo y la investigación.

¿CUÁLES SON LOS BENEFICIOS?

Si sos un estudiante de primer ingreso, la acreditación va a ser el principal indicador de que escogiste una opción de calidad. Si la carrera que te gusta recibe la acreditación, vas a notar los cambios y mejoras en los planes de estudio, recursos, infraestructura y muchos otros aspectos. Una vez que obtengas el título con la acreditación, podrías ser prioridad en los concursos de contratación, sobre todo por parte del gobierno, así lo establece el artículo 4 de la Ley 8798, vigente desde el año 2010.

En el país hay más de mil carreras universitarias, pero no todas cuentan con el sello oficial de calidad

Si querés conocer más sobre Sinaes y tener acceso a la lista de carreras acreditadas, podés ingresar a la página www.sinaes.ac.cr



Vida U circulated on November 16 in El Financiero and November 18 in La Nación. This special was primarily aimed at youth aged 17 to 24 in the middle-middle and upper-middle income bracket, but it also appealed to parents, teachers, and guidance counselors. It is estimated to have reached 400,000 readers. SINAES posted an ad in the printed special, an advertorial, and a digital banner on the home page of nacion.com (which carried the advertorial).



SINAES also had a presence in spaces aimed at parents.

Parents' Guide: This supplement, aimed at parents, was published on August 5 in La Nación and El Financiero. La Nación estimates that it was read by 400,000 people. SINAES participated with an ad, an advertorial, and a web presence.



Padres de familia, hablen con sus hijos sobre la importancia de elegir carreras universitarias con acreditación oficial de calidad

Su hijo (a) concluirá pronto la secundaria y se enfrentará a una de las decisiones más importantes de su vida: elegir una carrera universitaria.

En Costa Rica, someter las carreras a los procesos de evaluación, con fines de acreditación de calidad, es una decisión voluntaria. Son las universidades y parauniversidades las que deciden si desean que sus carreras pasen por el riguroso proceso de evaluación del Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior (SINAES).

Las carreras que se someten a la evaluación del SINAES y demuestran que cumplen los estándares de calidad establecidos, obtienen lo que se conoce como "acreditación oficial". Al acreditar una carrera, SINAES da fe pública de su calidad.

Son múltiples los ventajas de que su hijo elija una carrera acreditada por el SINAES:

1. Las carreras que se someten a los procesos de evaluación, con fines de acreditación, están en un proceso permanente de mejora. Esto es así porque, para mantener el sello de calidad del SINAES, las carreras deben probar que están superando las debilidades detectadas y reforzando las fortalezas.
2. Los estudiantes que cursan carreras con acreditación oficial tienen una participación activa en los procesos de evaluación que conduce SINAES. Esto significa que la opinión de los estudiantes es tomada en cuenta y se traduce en acciones de mejora.
3. La acreditación que otorga el SINAES es temporal; esto significa que, para revalidar su condición de carrera oficialmente acreditada, las carreras deben periódicamente someterse a la evaluación de expertos nacionales e internacionales.
4. El artículo 4 de la Ley 8798 establece que los graduados de carreras con acreditación oficial pueden recibir un trato preferente de contratación por parte del Estado y sus instituciones.
5. En un mercado laboral cada vez más competitivo, es fundamental que los graduados puedan demostrar ante los empleadores que recibieron una formación basada en estándares de calidad.

La lista de carreras con acreditación oficial está disponible, permanentemente, en el sitio web del SINAES: www.sinaes.ac.cr

GUÍA PADRES

Suplemento

In 2020, SINAES participated in two virtual fairs (Universidad Nacional and Universidades.cr) to which more than 10,000 youth all around the country connected.

5.5. External Communication

INQAAHE Indication: Improve the communication of SINAES activities and set up mechanisms for interacting with the general public, not only sectors associated with higher education.

The media can be used to inform such a broad, diverse group as the “general public” about what SINAES is and does, either with advertising or with achieving a presence in the media agenda (media management).

In 2019, SINAES invested in advertising on “Panorama”, a radio program aimed at the adult public throughout the country.



- 412,000 people listen daily to Panorama.
- If the range is broadened to those who do not listen daily but do listen sometimes during a single month, the number of listeners practically doubles (809,000).
- The radio program is national; the province in which it is listened to the most is San José with 31% and the one in which it is listened to the least is Guanacaste with 20%.
- As for ages, 35- to 54-year-olds listen to it the most.
- Socioeconomically, most of the listeners fall in the middle-middle, upper-middle, and upper income bracket.

In 2020 and 2021, given the budgetary restrictions, SINAES did not invest in advertising. What it did do was achieve a greater presence in the media agenda through what is known as “media management.”

In September 2020, after the respective process it hired the firm Prensa Ejecutiva to develop different actions aimed at increasing the size and quality of its presence in the news.

These actions included the following:

- Definition and training of institutional spokespersons;
- Preparation and sending of press releases;
- Identification of situations that might affect the institutional image; and
- Preparation of the Manual for Image Crisis Management.



5.8. Information Via the Website

INQAAHE Indication: Increase the information available to the public on the SINAES website to reach potential future students and families.

In 2020, SINAES opened bidding for a specialized firm to redesign the website and awarded the contract to Pixel.

The redesign began in 2020, and the following are some of the new features that parents and future students will find when visiting the new website:

- Restructured content: people will be able to find the information they are looking for faster and more easily;
- Degree and post-graduate program search tool: at present the list is in Excel but on the new site people will be able to use a search tool to cross-reference data;
- A “responsive” site: something essential since most people access through a cell phone;
- An overhauled question and answer section: people will be able to find a list of the most frequently-asked questions with their respective answers;
- Contacting SINAES: people will always have a form visible for sending questions or comments;
- Social media links: people will be able to access SINAES’s Facebook page or YouTube channel from the website; and
- More updated information: the website will be easier to update and internal resources (the communication and IT departments) will be able to do it, thus reducing times because a third party will not be needed.

5.9. Response to Demands for Information

INQAAHE Indication: Precise and feasible response times need to be defined for the requests for information and clarification made by the programs participating in the accreditation process, and they should be shared and agreed upon by both parties.

With regard to institutional response times, SINAES must address each incoming query within ten business days as provided in Article 6 of Law 9097, Regulation of the Right to Petition. At the same time, the DE issued CIRCULAR-SINAES-DE-003-2021 ([Annex 87](#)) on May 12, 2021, urging staff to implement the response times established for correspondence.

As a control mechanism, the CNA secretary requests acknowledgement of receipt when sending CNA decisions on accreditation or administrative processes.

Reports are remitted monthly to the DE and department heads on the status of the decisions, and each consulted head remits the status of decisions as being either carried out or in process.

Procedure-wise, a guideline for decision management (L-Actas 01), prepared with the help of the quality management department, is now in place ([Annex 88](#)).

With the awarding of the document manager project, the records clerk and the firm Consulting Group are currently working on flow systemization and automation of decision monitoring using this tool.

5.10. Handling of Complaints

INQAAHE Indication: A detailed complaint and appeal procedure needs to be formalized and programs need to be informed of how to apply for the procedure and what their rights are.

5.10.1 Internal Complaint Procedure

The SINAES Internal Auditing has its own organization and operating regulation, endorsed by the Office of the Comptroller General of Costa Rica and approved by the CNA.

Chapter VI of that regulation, published in the official journal La Gaceta No. 208 of August 20, 2020, deals specifically with investigation into irregular events reported to Internal Auditing. These complaints may be lodged by any staff member or citizen.



5.10.2 External Complaint Procedure

On its website, SINAES has a form for people to use for queries, dissatisfactions, or complaints. When the form is sent, the SINAES communication department receives a specific email (info@sinaes.ac.cr).

The communication department studies and classifies the email. Most queries are handled directly by the communication department, but in specific cases it requests the help of other departments. In the case of a dissatisfaction, SINAES tries to become a bridge between the person who wrote it and the quality unit of the educational institution where the dissatisfaction exists. The results of this practice have been highly positive. Requirements have been established for the receipt of complaints, including the following: the complaint must concern a degree program that has been accredited or is in the process of accreditation (SINAES can only receive complaints that are within its field of competency), and the person making the complaint must first exhaust internal channels before recurring to SINAES. Once SINAES receives a complaint, an internal procedure is activated as described in document PRCAG-11, “Handling of Complaints Concerning Commitments Acquired by Accredited Degree Programs.”

5.10.3 Procedure for Appeals for Reconsideration

The basis for SINAES as Costa Rica’s national accreditation agency is in Laws 8256 and 8798. These laws establish its scope of action both technically and legally. In addition, being a member of regional and international networks such as RIACES and INQAAHE, SINAES is committed to the principles of best practices. To this regard, SINAES seeks to open and expand the necessary opportunities for HEIs that feel the CNA’s decisions do not faithfully represent their quality to access mechanisms for appeal. Thus, SINAES has an approved regulation for reconsideration of decisions taken by the CNA in accreditation processes (Annex 89). The INQAAHE team of evaluators reviewed this regulation and made the following recommendations to SINAES:

- Formalize and specify the procedure in more detail;
- Establish information mechanisms for the degree and study programs such that they know how to apply and exert their rights;
- Define a precise timeline and feasible response times for demands for information and requests for clarification. The timeline and response times should be constructed and agreed on with the degree and study programs;

- The appeal decision should not revert to the CNA but should instead go to another committee or panel, which should report the final outcome; and
- Establish an updated, explicit internal quality guarantee policy through adequate, appropriate, and systematic procedures. This should also be monitored and reviewed by a department dedicated to such tasks with regard to appeals.

Due to the foregoing, in 2019 SINAES started improving its process for reconsideration of CNA accreditation decisions. To date, progress has been made on two aspects of this.

Revision of the Reconsideration Regulation

The task of revising the current regulation for reconsideration of decisions made by the CNA (Annex 90) has been assigned to SINAES’s Legal Advisory and quality department. At present a document exists with proposed changes to the redaction of several articles in order to improve the clarity of the regulation. Annex 91 compares the current regulation with its proposed modification.

Parallel to the changes noted in Annex 91, the forms were prepared for the instruments for operationalizing the applicability of this process (Annex 92).

An important supplement to this was the redesign of the PR DEA RD reconsideration procedure (Annex 93), the goal of which is to “describe and document the procedure for resolution of appeals for reconsideration lodged against the decisions of the CNA under the Regulation of Appeals for Reconsideration of National Accreditation Council Decisions (hereinafter referred to as “Regulation”).” All of these documents have yet to be submitted to the CNA for review and approval, since it was deemed necessary to first have the results of the study of the second aspect, the progress on which is described below.

5.11. Handling of Appeals for Reconsideration

INQAAHE Indication: Establish the necessary measures to ensure that decisions on appeals are not handled by the Council but are instead submitted to another committee or panel that should be responsible for reporting on the outcome.



In order to propose potential changes to the handling of reconsiderations, the DEA is currently conducting a study entitled “Principle of Good Practice. Reconsideration of Accreditation Decisions. A Proposal for SINAES.”

This study consists of the following basic aspects:

- Document review of how agencies have set up an accreditation decision appeal process. Most of the agencies selected were internationally recognized, although agencies with which SINAES has cooperation agreements were also included. Progress on this first item is at 70% with regard to information from the agencies. Once the information search is concluded, their good practices in this matter will be written up;
- The CNA’s vision regarding reconsiderations. CNA minutes have been checked for all discussions on reconsideration of accreditation decisions that have taken place in CNA meetings throughout the 21 years of SINAES’s existence;
- Analysis of the reasons the degree and study programs have asked for reconsiderations and the outcome of these appeals. There is currently a database with all the accreditation processes that have appealed to SINAES for reconsideration along with the final decisions reached by the CNA. This information will be used to construct a database with variables for determining commonalities among the appeals for reconsideration and CNA decisions; and
- Design of a proposal for the CNA. A new proposal for handling SINAES reconsiderations is expected to be designed in light of the four preceding items.

When this proposal is presented, the SINAES Legal Advisory is expected to analyze it to help the CNA in its final decision.

5.12. SINAES’s Capacities as a Regional Leader in Central America

INQAAHE Indication: Develop SINAES’s capacities as a regional leader in Central America.

In 2021, SINAES prepared an internationalization policy ([Annex 94](#)) that is currently under discussion in the CNA for approval and implementation. With this it seeks to foster cooperation and integration in the field of accreditation and quality with key regional and global stakeholders to achieve greater presence, learning, and international visibility

for Costa Rican higher education in an increasingly globalized environment through the implementation of strategic actions during the 2022-2027 period. (International Policy, 2021)

This policy expressly states two values for the Central American region, namely:

- Deploy an active policy in Central and Ibero-America through official, formal institutions, promoting initiatives that encourage the international dimension of Costa Rican higher education and thereby strengthening ties with competent organizations; and
- Lead reflection in Central America and the Caribbean on the quality assurance model and accreditation of higher education.

These values are materialized in turn in the specific objective: Foster closer cooperation and collaboration in Central America on evaluation and accreditation to further consolidate the culture of quality in higher education. This objective is operationalized in the following goals:

- Receive at least one visit per year from other Central American, Caribbean, and Ibero-American national agencies interested in learning from SINAES’s experience; and
- Share with Central American agencies and organizations to move forward on quality in Central American higher education.

It should be noted that although the internationalization policy has not been formally approved, SINAES has always tried to work with the Central American region. Thus, it has continued the work it started in 2009 with the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala (USAC) for the accreditation processes shown in Table 17 below.

Table 17. SINAES: First-time USAC Degree Program Accreditation Applicants, by Year. June 2021

Application Year	First-time Degree Program Accreditation Applicants
2010	3
2017	1
2018	3
Total	7

Source: Cascante-Pérez, S. (June 2021).



Along this same line, in 2020 SINAES provided technical support to the Nicaraguan National Council for Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEA) ([Annex 95](#)). The advisory was listed as part of the project “Accreditation of the Agroforestry Engineering Degree Program with the Incorporation of Comprehensive Risk Management and Climate Resilience from an Intercultural Gender Perspective: The Experience of CNEA and URACCAN1.” This project has a dual purpose: on the one hand, to establish a degree program accreditation model for Nicaragua, since at this time the CNEA’s evaluation process is for institutions; and on the other, to make sure the design of this degree program accreditation model incorporates indicators for comprehensive risk management and climate resilience and considers an intercultural gender perspective. The project includes not only design of the model through a participatory mechanism, where personnel from different universities in the Nicaraguan university system have been brought in, but also practical application of the model to a specific degree program.

5.13. International Development

INQAAHE Indication: In accordance with its 20 years of history and experience, SINAES should take a more prominent role in the international networks in which it participates as well as in the new initiatives in which national accreditation systems converge.

The CNA is currently analyzing the aforementioned internationalization policy that was prepared in 2021. The objective of this policy is to foster cooperation and integration in the field of accreditation and quality with key regional and global stakeholders to achieve greater presence, learning, and international visibility for Costa Rican higher education in an increasingly globalized environment through the implementation of strategic actions during the 2022-2027 period. (International Policy, 2021)

On the basis of this policy, SINAES proposes the following value:

Reinforce SINAES’s role in quality assurance in Costa Rica, as well as in different international structures with competencies in higher education quality, to broaden the scope of SINAES’s accreditations. This is done through academic diplomacy on quality assurance matters with other international agencies of interest, reinforcing the agency’s cooperation and collaboration and driving joint initiatives with other agencies.

This value is expressed in the following strategic objectives:

- Support the work being done in Latin American and the Caribbean towards building an Ibero-American knowledge space;
- Participate in international integration processes that strengthen higher education: and
- Expand the agency’s international presence by cooperating and collaborating through quality assurance services associated with its domestic lines of action.

To operationalize these objectives, SINAES proposes the following goals:

- Renew the INQAAHE international certification of good practices;
- Starting in 2023, participate in at least one regional accreditation project per year, whether within the framework of networks or within the framework of bilateral agreements;
- Renew the Multilateral Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Results Regarding Joint Programmes (MULTRA) for SINAES;
- Join the Ibero-American System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (SIACES) and undergo validation of good practices in 2022;
- Establish the protocol for mutual recognition of accreditations with Spain through the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA);
- Participate in at least one joint project per year with Ibero-American agencies;
- Subscribe mutual recognition processes with internationally prestigious accrediting agencies;
- Carry out joint projects with internationally recognized agencies; and

Increase SINAES’s active presence in the international organizations of which it is a member.

It should be noted that although the internationalization policy is still under analysis and awaiting approval, SINAES has eight agreements in effect with Latin American and European agencies. To revitalize them, in 2020 it prepared a document formulating general aspects and methodologies for merging potential areas of connection between priorities

already defined by SINAES and the current agreements, along with initial development proposals that link the agreements to SINAES activities of a more general nature ([Annex 96](#)).

In addition, to improve performance of the agreements, the SINAES CNA approved in May 2021 the regulation to Article 21 of Law 8256, the purpose of which is to define “...general and specific provisions for the management and signing of cooperation or remunerated technical-academic service agreements entered into by the National Accreditation System of Higher Education (SINAES) with other national or international public or private agencies and entities.”

Along this same line, SINAES prepared the document “Analysis of Recognition with ANECA,” given the interest in moving ahead on this process ([Annex 97](#)), as well as a proposal to join SIACES ([Annex 98](#)). Both documents are awaiting analysis by the CNA within the framework of SINAES’s internationalization policy since they are part of this policy.

Lastly, internationalization has been a work theme throughout SINAES’s 20 years of existence, and in this vocation SINAES will analyze the topic “Evaluation and Internationalization of Higher Education” in its 2021 master conference, during which Dr. Hans de Witt is expected to speak.

VI. Summary



A few short months after receiving the decision note from the INQAAHE panel of expert reviewers, SINAES, like everyone else, was forced to deal with the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both SINAES and the HEIs had to migrate the management and operation of their essential processes to virtuality. SINAES moved all its staff to working from home and dedicated a substantial part of its efforts to defining the guidelines and procedures needed to keep accreditation processes flowing. In addition, an analysis of SINAES's strengths and weakness led to the definition of a set of short-, medium- and long-term measures to undertake. At the time this report was completed, SINAES was still handling its essential tasks remotely.

Simultaneous to the situation caused by the pandemic, SINAES successfully concluded the process of its administrative independence from CONARE, restructuring its administrative management processes and hiring the staff needed to cope efficiently with its administrative independence. In addition, the situation of public finances created a new scenario for SINAES's public funding, restricting internal spending on staff hiring and other major items.

The implementation of virtuality in accreditation processing and staff management tasks entailed an intense ICT reinforcement effort in SINAES with respect to provision of both equipment and associated tools, especially the development of systems for consolidation of technological autonomy, in addition to capacity-building of the entire SINAES team. The CNA also adopted this modality and to this day is still working from home. This should be noted as a transformation and innovation in SINAES. At the same time, the HT department stepped up its activities to ensure comprehensive staff health with the work contributed by the internal committees created to this end. Other internal task teams were also created to support a variety of institutional activities.

In addition to the consolidation of the DSAG and ITCs, during this reporting period the INDEIN was strengthened for the work of research, training, and knowledge transfer. Furthermore, a DEA director was hired to take on the task of coordinating accreditation processes.

Notable among the essential tasks in the recent period is SINAES's continued work on generating a new accreditation model for degree programs and the presentation of specific criteria for virtuality. Although the new model is still being defined, substantial progress has been made on both the model itself and the parallel instruments for implementing it, such as guidelines for induction of external peer reviewers and for external review visits.

In addition, online evaluator team training on the Moodle platform was included in the 2022 PAO. This was developed simultaneously with improvements to the forms for the external reviewers' reports. Also, in response to the SINAES external review recommendations, a study was done for proposing to the CNA a modification of the current accreditation decision-making mechanism for the new model, changing it to a weighting system in combination with the qualitative analysis by the CNA members. This proposal is aimed at improving transparency in the decision-making process for all participants as well as consistent decision-making over time. A 360 review of external evaluators is also being contracted and is expected to start near the end of 2021.

During this same time, the SINAES quality department worked intensively to create an extensive set of procedures for all of the agency's activities, particularly those related to accreditation processing. Also of note were the proposed improvements to the SINAES Affiliation Regulation to give HEIs a clearer, more relevant instrument regarding affiliation requirements.

It is important to highlight that INQAAHE recommendations were followed to create a project for revamping the SINAES evaluator selection process. The project started with an analysis of SINAES's process from different approaches and backgrounds to identify aspects for improvement. The lessons learned from this study led to the formulation of a general proposal to overhaul SINAES's evaluator selection process. The general proposal contains sub-proposals with regard to the following:

- Formulation of a general evaluator selection policy with conditions for the individual peer profile as well as the evaluator group profile;
- Formulation of a draft project to incorporate student peer evaluators into the SINAES external evaluator team; and
- A proposed performance evaluation of the stakeholders in the accreditation process.

Considerable progress has been made with regard to SINAES resources, such as consolidation of SINAES's administrative autonomy, as mentioned earlier, which also entailed definition of work areas such as the auditing department and strengthening of the IT and technological support department. Notable in this last case was SINAES's technological transformation, which entailed significant investment in technology and staff as well as the contracting of a document management system that is currently 60% complete. At the same time, a huge effort was invested in preparing guidelines, procedures, and regulations to support SINAES's new organizational structure, in accordance with public administration laws.

Thus, even with limited public funding SINAES has been able to define and fund the organizational framework needed for carrying out its core processes.

Although SINAES had started taking all the administrative steps to acquire its own building, however, given the national economic situation and after more than one year of employees working from home, the CNA decided in July 2021 to suspend this effort until it can determine the financial viability of buying and maintaining a building according to budget provisions and the situation of the country's finances, as well as the agency's own situation.

The INQAAHE panel of experts indicated a concern regarding the systematic opportunities SINAES provides for the professional development of its staff. To address this, SINAES has taken major steps to develop all the regulatory framework and guidelines needed for regulating its labor relations. Among these are a Job Manual and a strategic human talent plan that includes a performance evaluation, which implies the design of



training plans in line with strategies and needs. In addition, different actions are included for strengthening the capacities, skills, attitudes, and aptitudes of SINAES staff as well as for recognizing excellence. The main instruments used for developing this subsystem are the annual training plans, which are prepared from a training needs assessment.

The 2021 HT plan includes training and benefits. In addition, the HT department developed an organizational climate study, the second stage of which began in May 2021. In this stage, workshops were given to train employees on developing effectiveness and positive coexistence habits for achieving personal and institutional goals, identifying the need for change, and implementing specific actions to improve the organizational climate and achieve the objectives, considering institutional improvement. In the last stage, the HT department will receive training on implementation of the improvement plan activities in order to monitor the plan and measure medium- and long-term results.

With regards to staff training, an instrument was created to detect training needs. Within this framework, staff members received 2,215 hours of training on different topics in 2019 and 2020 and 1,117 hours so far in 2021. No more training will be given during the remainder of 2021 due to SINAES's limited funds.

SINAES has also been developing a variety of comprehensive staff care programs, such as workplace safety, occupational medicine, psychosocial factors, ergonomics, and occupational health.

In conclusion, in the recent period SINAES has defined the regulatory instruments for HT management, including efforts in the areas of training, benefits, and comprehensive staff care.

The report by the INQAAHE panel of experts also indicated that SINAES should urgently design and implement a formal internal quality assurance policy. The tasks of the quality unit are well-defined in this area. A diagram of SINAES's macroprocesses was prepared that led to the formulation of its procedures and guidelines. This, in turn, has generated an extensive compendium of instruments that standardize the agency's different processes.

Of particular importance in the quality area has been the creation of a self-evaluation, control, monitoring, and external review procedure for internal improvement, which establishes the guidelines for self-improvement, monitoring, and internal improvement plans as well as external party evaluation and feedback. In addition, a quality policy was defined and an internal control policy was approved by the CNA in April 2021.

Also with regard to quality, an operational audit was performed of the quality department at the beginning of 2021 and an assessment was made of the most significant compliance risks associated with the Institutional Strategic Plan (PEI).

It can therefore be concluded that during the period under study major efforts have been made to revise the tasks of the quality department and create the instruments for risk assessment and institutional self-evaluation within the framework of the quality and internal control policies.

As mentioned earlier, SINAES has recently focused intensively on defining a new university degree accreditation model, the preparation of which is now in its final stages. Definition of this model requires definition of not only the guidelines for assessing degree program quality but also the procedural framework for putting them into operation. Progress has been made to this respect on defining the mechanism and assessment weighting for decision-making and on preparing the Guide for Quality Accreditation of Higher Education and the information source surveys required by the model.

Various groups were consulted for preparing the new degree model, and the results of these consultations have been duly systematized. Following up on a recommendation by the INQAAHE panel of experts, as part of the validation process SINAES also consulted with the professional associations with which it has a cooperation agreement on its degree program accreditation model innovations in order to obtain their contributions and comments. It also consulted on adaptation of the proposed model to the UNED's onsite degree programs.

Stakeholders have thus been consulted on the university degree program model, which is currently being re-worked. Once the model and its associated instruments are definitive, SINAES will, as usual, organize extensive training for all stakeholders.

The INQAAHE panel of experts also indicated the importance of reinforcing periodic and systematic training of the representatives of all affiliated HEIs. Up until the first quarter of 2020, training courses were onsite. With the arrival of the pandemic, this strategy was suspended. To meet the needs of the evaluators and degree and study programs, evaluators and degree program service was intensified through the use of ICTs. Guidance, induction, and advisory activities were carried out by the staff working in accreditation. No mass accreditation training activities were thus reported. Instead, specific activities were carried out for each degree or study program seeking accreditation.

As mentioned, this kind of emergency service is not considered a permanent way to meet training needs, so the revamped SINAES evaluator selection process proposes the training of evaluators through a massive open online course (MOOC) on the Moodle platform immediately after they register as providers.

The strategy of training through the use of ICTs is also being considered for serving the HEI population, with solutions such as the ones underway for external evaluators.

As support for the task of training on quality in higher education, between 2020 and 2021 there have been 28 virtual academic meetings on different topics related to the quality of higher education.

It can thus be concluded that SINAES made progress on the training of stakeholders within the framework of the conditions imposed by the pandemic, but although the proposals have been made the design of the training courses for expert evaluators and a general training proposal for the university community are still underway.



In their external review report, the INQAAHE reviewer team indicated an opportunity for improvement for SINAES as being the development of the criteria and guidelines for implementation of institutional accreditation. Notable progress has been made on this. The task was included in the PEI and the accreditation model of the High Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (Hcéres) was reviewed to assess the opportunities presented by the agreement signed between SINAES-CONARE and Hcéres in 2016 for developing or adopting institutional accreditation models. The conclusions reached in this review showed that the Hcéres model had potential for being adapted to the SINAES context. A work path was defined along this line that includes the guidelines and procedures to be adjusted in the Hcéres model.

It should be noted that SINAES has examined other alternatives as well, such as the ECA institutional accreditation program and various international institutional accreditation initiatives for technical degree programs similar to those of Costa Rican junior colleges.

Therefore, although SINAES has still not defined a model for institutional accreditation, it has marked the route to follow, having concluded that a plausible alternative would be to adapt the Hcéres model to SINAES's reality.

The INQAAHE panel recommended a study of the workloads of staff members in order to better adjust task assignments and avoid work overload. Thus, in May 2020, approval was requested of the CNA to carry out an agency-wide workload measurement study to ensure organizational strengthening and effectiveness and staff distribution according to the criteria of equity, efficiency, and quality. Unfortunately, the country's fiscal situation, which affects the budgets of public institutions, kept this project from being completed, so it will have to be resumed.

The INQAAHE panel of experts called SINAES's attention to the need to have mechanisms in place for ensuring reduced accreditation processing times without affecting quality. A monitoring instrument was thus developed that, by systematizing the processing data, can show the time each accreditation process takes. To reduce this time, SINAES has taken measures that have been effective in reducing the times for each process, especially in the CM review process.

With regard to communication, from 2019 to 2021 SINAES has implemented a plan aimed at high school students through both direct contact and reinforcement of its website. Regionally, communication activities were carried out in various regions, but in 2020 SINAES's presence there was virtual due to the pandemic. To improve SINAES's communication spaces, an advertising strategy was implemented in one media, but it was suspended in 2020 and 2021 due to budget restrictions, so SINAES shifted to a strategy of media management with the hiring of a specialized firm. With regard to the redesign of SINAES's website, in 2020 SINAES hired a web design firm that proposed major innovations in available information for parents and future students.

SINAES has thus maintained a communication workspace by investing resources in this area. As soon as health conditions permit, the agency will resume a strategy of more onsite presence throughout the country.

Related to the topic of communication, the processing of internal complaints is fully established in the mechanisms of SINAES's Internal Auditing, while for the processing of external complaints its website has an instrument whereby people can channel their complaints, queries, or dissatisfactions. The response mechanisms, requirements, and respective procedure are established for these cases, and a regulation for reconsideration of CNA decisions has been approved. The INQAAHE panel recommended improvements to this regulation, so in 2019 SINAES started an improvement process in which major progress has been made.

In connection with decision reconsideration and to make sure the final decision does not revert to the CNA, the DEA is conducting a study that covers several stages and will result in the design of a new proposal for managing reconsiderations.

Finally, with regard to the capacity-building of SINAES as a leading regional agency in Central America, in 2021 SINAES prepared an internationalization policy that is currently under discussion in the CNA. This policy expressly contains values and specific objectives related to the Central American region, though it also pursues objectives with work areas that go beyond this region. It should also be stressed that SINAES has been working on a strategy that takes more advantage of its current agreements with different agencies. Within this framework, the CNA has also approved general and specific provisions for managing and signing cooperation agreements.

Along this same line, SINAES prepared the document "Analysis of Recognition with ANECA," given the interest in moving ahead on this process, as well as a proposal to join SIACES. The two documents are awaiting analysis by the CNA within the framework of the internationalization policy since they are both part of this policy.

In general, it can be concluded that over these two years of work in the context of an unprecedented situation, SINAES has made headway on key items indicated by the INQAAHE panel of experts. Despite this progress, however, SINAES needs to focus on moving from already prepared proposals to actions that can be carried out upon their approval by the CNA. The emphasis is on the need to finalize preparation of the new degree program accreditation model and put it into operation and to approve the guidelines for the institutional assessment and the internationalization policy.

October 19, 2021

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November 2021