

## Chapter 8. Information and transparency in Colombia's tertiary education system

*This chapter provides an overview of the information available on Colombia's tertiary education sector, analysing its reliability, completeness, relevance, usefulness and ease of access. The transparency of processes and decisions in the tertiary education system are also discussed.*

*The chapter closes with the review team's recommendations, including the need to (i) make information systems more user-friendly for the general public; (ii) systematically check data with alternative sources of information; (iii) commission an external review of admissions processes and criteria at public and private universities and university institutions; (iv) ensure that all TEIs that receive any public funds, directly or indirectly, make detailed financial information public in a standardised, systematic manner.*

### Introduction

Information is a key aspect of any education system. Knowledge about educational institutions, students and graduates provides a basis on which to evaluate and make informed decisions regarding access, equity, relevance, quality, financing and governance, all aspects that have been covered in this report. Potential students need information in order to make decisions on if, what and where to study, and how to finance their course of study. Tertiary education institution (TEI) administrators also require information in order to design, plan, manage, and evaluate their programmes and institutions. And information on the characteristics of students, TEIs and programmes is crucial for guiding, monitoring, and evaluating the decisions of policy makers charged with ensuring that the country has a labour force with the skills commensurate with an open, modern economy.

The scope and quality of information that is publicly available to students, TEIs and policy makers is linked to the concepts of transparency and accountability. Educational institutions and public agencies should always aim for transparency, and do their best to make clear, reliable, complete, and relevant information available to the public and interested parties in user-friendly ways. Transparency of information is not only

important for the decision-making process, it also makes it possible for stakeholders to hold each other accountable. Accountability and transparency are two sides of the same coin and are of vital importance for good governance and a well-functioning democracy.

This chapter provides a brief overview of the information available on tertiary education in Colombia, focussing on the Ministry of National Education's information systems. Then it considers issues related to the transparency of information, including its relevance, clarity and ease of access and use. Then it discusses the transparency of the system itself, including processes such as admissions and financing decisions. Finally, it summarises main findings and the review team's recommendations.

### **Information available in the tertiary education system**

A vast amount of information about Colombia's tertiary education system is publicly available, ranging from sophisticated information systems run by government agencies to individual institutions' websites, brochures and advertising material. What follows is a brief description of the main information sources available to citizens, TEIs and policy makers.

The main source of information on the tertiary education system as a whole is the Ministry of National Education (MEN). Starting in 2002, the Ministry has been systematically gathering information from TEIs and government agencies, and consolidating it into four main information systems that are continually updated: (i) the National System of Higher Education Information (SNIES, *Sistema Nacional de Información de la Educación Superior*); (ii) the Higher Education Institutions Dropout Prevention and Analysis System (SPADIES, *Sistema de Prevención y Análisis de la Deserción en las Instituciones de Educación Superior*); (iii) the Labour Market Observatory for Education (OLE, *Observatorio Laboral para la Educación*); and (iv) the Higher Education Quality Assurance Information System (SACES, *Sistema de Aseguramiento de la Calidad en la Educación Superior*). Individuals and TEIs can access all these information systems through the Ministry's website.

SNIES, regulated by Decree 1767 of 2006, is a comprehensive system including data on all programmes and TEIs on Colombia's Register of Qualified Programmes. The system collects and organises information about institutions, programmes, faculty and staff, students (including applicants and admitted and enrolled students), graduates, research, internationalisation, infrastructure, student well-being, finances, standardised test scores (SABER 11 and SABER PRO), tuition and fees, and financial aid and loans. For the most part, data are collected from TEI administrators entering information online at specified dates throughout the academic year. The

MEN considers the TEIs themselves, current and potential TE students and their parents, career counsellors, employers, researchers, and governmental and non-governmental organisations as the target audience for this system.

SPADIES is a tool for monitoring and analysing dropout from tertiary education institutions; information on total enrolment, graduation and dropout, including student characteristics, from SNIES, ICFES, ICETEX and TEIs themselves is included in this system. The data, available by semester starting in 1998, can be disaggregated by sex, socio-economic variables, SABER 11 test scores, access to financial and academic assistance and type of institution and programme. The intended audience includes students and career counsellors, TEIs, researchers and governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Labour market information for tertiary education graduates is provided by OLE. This database contains salary information for individuals who gained a tertiary degree from 2001 onwards, provided they are working and contributing to the social security system. Average earnings and the percentage of degree holders currently contributing to the social security system can be tracked by type of degree, discipline, institution and geographic location. OLE has also at times carried out employer and graduate surveys to obtain labour market information covering both the supply and demand sides.

SACES is an information system for TEIs to monitor their registered qualified programmes and accreditations. The system was created to enable TEIs to perform automatically the steps associated with the registration and accreditation processes, as well as other institutional procedures to do with the institution's legal status, approval of feasibility studies for public TEIs, changes of character, recognition as a university, and permissions to offering propaedeutic cycles, etc. The system is used exclusively by TEI administrators and those involved in the registration and accreditation processes, that is, the MEN, CONACES, and the CNA.

In addition to these information systems, the Ministry has a web portal called Colombia Learns (*Colombia Aprende*) that serves as a virtual meeting point for the educational community in Colombia. Here, users can interact with each other and retrieve a variety of information related to the education sector. Teachers and administrators of primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions can access resources and services. Potential tertiary education students can be directed to the appropriate information systems for choosing a TEI and a particular programme, as well as information about student loans and ICFES tests. Researchers in education can contact their counterparts throughout the world and exchange documents of interest. At the same time, all these educational community members are invited to share

their experiences and become part of networks and virtual communities offered by the portal. Colombia Learns was the primary source of information and discussion on the recently withdrawn proposals to reform Law 30.

Aside from information compiled by government entities, there is a vast amount of information on tertiary education available to potential students via the internet, and advertising venues such as billboards and newspaper advertisements. For instance, *universidadescolombia.com* is a directory of tertiary education institutions with a search tool for over 6 000 undergraduate programmes. The Colombian University Observatory (*Observatorio de la Universidad Colombiana*, [www.universidad.edu.co](http://www.universidad.edu.co)) is a private initiative of the *Instituto Latinoamericano de Liderazgo*. The Observatory disseminates information about universities in Colombia. On its website, potential students can retrieve useful data (university rankings, tuition fees, etc.), while researchers and other stakeholders can download legislation, research documents and opinion pieces.

Overall, the amount and scope of information on tertiary education available in Colombia is indisputably impressive. It is worth mentioning that the strides in collecting and consolidating a series of information systems made by the Ministry rival those of any developed country. The review team was very impressed by the range of information available in Colombia, as well as by its level of detail.

## **Transparency of information**

Information is transparent if it is reliable, complete, clear, accessible and useful.

### ***Reliability and completeness***

Reliability relates to whether information is accurate and trustworthy, whereas completeness relates to whether all relevant information is made public. Taking completeness first, the team found that although the MEN's information systems are generally very comprehensive, information about SENA is not always included, as is the case, for instance, in OLE. Given that SENA accounted for 55% of total enrolment in T&T programmes in 2010, SENA's absence represents a significant information gap. And it is not always clear to users of MEN's information systems that SENA is excluded (or included), meaning that users may well misinterpret data. This represents a lack of transparency, and hinders data comparability.

SENA runs the Colombian Labour and Occupational Observatory (OLO, *Observatorio Laboral y Ocupacional Colombiano*). This observatory tracks demand for job placements using data from SENA's National Public Employment Service, as well as private and public investment and expansion projects at a departmental and national level. This information

would undoubtedly be more useful if integrated with data from the OLE. Additionally, SENA graduates should be included in OLE, so as to allow for the monitoring of their employment and earnings. Chapter 2 has already recommended that increased efforts be made to integrate SENA into the Colombian tertiary education system. SENA's inclusion in data collection, reporting, and analysis systems should be a crucial part of that integration – which should be possible without great effort, given the data collection and information system mechanisms already in place.

One way of checking the reliability of information is against alternative data sources. Not only can these serve as alternative measures for different indicators, they can also complement information that the Ministry does not gather directly from TEIs. Data from household surveys such as those administered by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística*) can be particularly useful. The review team was surprised to find that the MEN does not regularly or consistently exchange information with DANE, particularly as the information collected by the two agencies is clearly complementary. For example, the information on the socio-economic makeup of the student population on SPADIES comes from a survey questionnaire students fill out when sitting the SABER 11 test. It serves its primary purpose of helping SPADIES identify causes of dropout, but information is only available on the limited number of students who actually answer the survey questions. The data is thus not the best tool for analysing access and equity in the system – DANE surveys yield more reliable and comprehensive socio-economic data, which would undoubtedly be useful for education policy makers. Ways should be found of maximising the incorporation in MEN information systems of useful data from DANE and other official sources.

As well as providing the aggregated data on standardised test scores available on SNIES, ICFES makes microdata available to researchers. This includes individual socio-economic characteristics gathered from a survey students fill out when sitting the test. Individual student identification numbers for both SABER 11 (taken at the end of secondary education) and SABER PRO (taken at the end of tertiary education) test scores make it possible to link an individual student's results in both tests and determine the “added value” of tertiary programmes. Many countries are struggling to develop a SABER PRO type of tertiary level exit exam, in order to use its results to improve teaching and learning. However, when the review team asked campus stakeholders if they used SABER tests to learn about and improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning, the answer was generally that this had not been considered. The review team noted two contradictory perceptions with regard to the SABER tests. The first and most widespread was a belief in the total reliability of SABER 11 to measure individual students' academic potential.

This, as Chapter 5 has shown, is erroneous – the reliability levels of the subject tests can be quite low, particularly at the lower end of the ability range, which is why ICFES is redesigning SABER 11 to test more generic competencies and thereby increase reliability across the range. The second was the perception that test results were not comparable across years, so it would be difficult for TEIs to gauge student abilities from cohort to cohort; though ICFES assured the review team that the results of its standardised tests are indeed comparable. Nonetheless, as already mentioned in Chapter 3, one significant drawback of SABER 11 test results is that only students who intend to attend tertiary education sit the test. Requiring all grade 11 students to sit the SABER 11 test would provide better information on the overall quality of secondary school provision in Colombia, including information on the competencies or knowledge that students have upon leaving secondary school, or how well secondary school prepares students in general for tertiary education. It would also help policy makers to address equity issues in access to tertiary education.

For information to be useful, it must be not only reliable but also trusted. Unfortunately, the review team found, levels of trust in government data in general are extremely low. The review team could not find a rational basis for this perception, but noted that it was quite widespread. Data from MEN, as well as from DANE, and the National Planning Department (DNP, *Departamento Nacional de Planeación*), often lacks the credibility that its technical level of quality merits. This may be partly due to current issues with some MEN information systems, which depend on TEIs themselves to provide reliable and complete information. There is scope for MEN to do more to check the information it is given, to ensure that it makes sense and is accurate and up-to-date.

### ***Relevance, usefulness and ease of access***

There is without a doubt a great deal of data available, for which Colombia should be commended. The main challenge is to improve the quality of the data and in general to make information systems more user-friendly. For instance, the information on SNIES is relevant for planning, evaluation, assessment and monitoring of the sector, but more needs to be done to organise and present the information in ways that will enable users to take full advantage of it. Continued improvement of data quality, along with improvements to the technical notes and the presentation formats, will help stakeholders, particularly institutions and individuals, to make better-informed decisions.

The review team identified a number of cases where users cannot find the complete answer to a simple question in one place, because the information required for the answer is split between different databases which are not

linked, or not easily linked. For instance, research institutions looking for potential sources of funding have to go to the websites of several different organisations, which do not offer information on what is available from the others. “Choose your programme” (*Escoge tu carrera*) in Colombia Aprende is an excellent step in the right direction, as it directs students aspiring to tertiary education to the information systems holding the information they seek (e.g. OLE and SNIES), but students must still access each source separately to get the full picture. For instance, potential students can find information on SNIES on all registered higher education institutions and the programmes they offer (names of programmes and institutions, type of degrees offered, number of faculty and qualifications, fees charged, number of applicants, admitted and enrolled students), but information on the earnings of recent alumni by type of institution, specific institution, specific programme, geographical location and gender must still be accessed through OLE, while information on each institution’s dropout rate can only be found on SPADIES. Also, information platforms are different for each system, and often the information is not consolidated and organised so as to be easy to access.

It would be much more helpful to students if they could enter the criteria important to their choice of institution (e.g. geographical location, student body size, percentage of full-time faculty) and have the system rank universities according to these criteria. As of now, the information is available, but users must extract, consolidate, and analyse it on their own. With close to 300 TEIs and over 11 000 programmes, researching the tertiary education system without a ranking tool can prove a daunting task. The “last mile” of the information systems is missing.

As far as content is concerned, the labour market information in OLE could be improved by strengthening the feedback loop between employers and education providers, through a standard periodic survey. This would help to identify the reasons behind certain labour market outcomes; for instance, whether low wages in a particular sector indicate low demand or (in employers’ view) low tertiary programme quality. Although employers have been surveyed in the past, this is not a systematic practice. This type of information is important not only for potential students but also for TEIs, so that they can receive feedback on the competencies and skills of their graduates and how these educational outcomes are actually applied on the job. The data could also point to new markets for education, by identifying potential career and degree ladders.

Moreover OLE, as mentioned before, has information on all individuals who have graduated from a TEI in Colombia since 2001. This information, currently used only to track labour market employability and wages, has tremendous potential for allowing employers to verify that the degrees presented by job-seekers are genuine. Fake diplomas have been a growing

problem in Colombia; a recent study found more than one out of 10 diplomas submitted in job applications to be fake (Portafolio, 2011). An employer can already verify whether the institution and programme mentioned on the diploma actually exist, by looking up SNIES lists of TEIs and programmes on the Register of Qualified Programmes. However, employers may also need to verify that a diploma purporting to come from a *bona fide* TEI really did so. Publishing the lists of all graduates from secondary and tertiary education institutions would make it harder to falsify diplomas. Chile provides an example here, having recently submitted a bill to Congress<sup>1</sup> proposing a National Registry of Titles and Degrees, to make public the lists of individuals holding tertiary titles and degrees.

### **Transparency of processes and decisions**

The Ministry of National Education has made great strides in making processes and decisions transparent. Under decrees to protect consumers, establishments whose publicity is misleading or false can be closed. The portal Colombia Learns strives to keep stakeholders up-to-date on all matters related to education policy, and provides venues for stakeholder participation. However, the review team found that there is room for improvement in the transparency of the decisions of TEIs, SENA and ICETEX on admissions and financing, because students and the general public have little understanding of how these decisions are made.

The financial information available on both public and private TEIs could be improved because, although institutions send financial information to SNIES and public institutions are audited by the national audit agency (*Contraloría General de la República*), few TEIs make such information publicly available in a comprehensive, standardised manner. Entities that are financed by public funds – directly as public institutions and/or indirectly through student fees paid with, in many cases, ICETEX support and perhaps also research funding – should make available to the public more and better information on what they do with the money. This accountability is essential in a democratic society. If the public do not know and cannot find out, they may well suspect waste in public institutions and profiteering in private institutions. In an attempt to counter such perceptions, other countries have taken specific action. For instance, Chile recently drafted two bills intended to make their tertiary institutions more transparent, not only about their finances but also about their organisational structure (see Box 8.1). The review team considers that a measure of this type, for all TEIs regardless of the origin of their funds, would help to promote greater transparency in Colombia – especially important given the perception that there may be private institutions functioning as *de facto* profit-making institutions.



### Box 8.1 Chilean State-Financed Education Institutions Transparency Bill

Two bills<sup>1</sup> calling for greater transparency of state-financed education institutions were recently submitted to the Chilean Congress. The bills build upon the Transparency Law, which came into effect in April 2009 and requires all public institutions to make relevant information regarding the use of public funds public. They propose that all educational establishments in Chile that receive state funds, either directly or indirectly through government guarantees, tax deductions, or student aid mechanisms, be required to exercise transparency. Violations of the law carry a maximum penalty of suspension of state funds.

Specifically, the bills state that all education institutions that receive state funds must make permanently available to the public the following information:

- Their organisational structure.
- The faculties, functions and powers of each one of their units or internal organs.
- Applicable normative frameworks.
- Staff directory, including contractors, with respective salaries.
- Contracts for the supply of real and personal property required for the provision of services, as well as study and consulting contracts related to investment projects, indicating contractors and main partners and shareholders of the societies or lending companies.
- Transfers of funds, including any and all expenditures, investments and withdrawal of earnings and profit sharing, according to established formats that clearly distinguish the resources devoted to educational activities, research and any other purpose.
- Transactions and requirements with which interested parties must comply in order to access services provided by the respective educational institutions.
- The origin and amount of all funds received during a calendar year, including state contributions, tuition, grants or other.
- Declarations of interest and equity of donors, directors and partners.
- Audited financial statements.

In this spirit, the 2012 Budget Act states that all educational establishments must submit to the Ministry of Education 2011 financial statements, providing all income and expenses of each in a disaggregated manner. They must also submit an updated list of all full partners or board member and directors. Universities must submit an updated financial report of the entities on whose property the university has a holding equal to or greater than 10%, and corporations or foundations under whose statutes the university can choose at least one member of the board or governing body.

*Note (1):* Chilean Congress Bulletins 7913-04 and 7929-04.

Greater transparency is also desirable in relation to admissions decisions, as Chapter 3 has already mentioned. The criteria TEIs use to decide which applicants are given places are not usually shown in full on their websites. Though all institutions give out the dates by, on or from which applications should be submitted, and may indicate the minimum criteria applicants should satisfy – such as a minimum score in the SABER 11 tests – it is rarely, if ever, clear from institutional websites what criteria will be used to allocate places between applicants if there are more eligible applicants than places. As Chapter 3 also recorded, the review team was interested to hear from the Universidad del Atlántico, a public university on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, that some years ago the institution outsourced its admissions process to the Universidad Nacional in order to avoid the undue pressures previously exerted by local politicians. The Universidad Nacional now manages the entire admissions process, including administering the entrance exam, and sends the Universidad del Atlántico the list of admitted students. This effort to reduce inappropriate interference in internal institutional decision-making is commendable. It suggests, however, a real need to open to public gaze the admissions processes of all TEIs including SENA centres, the criteria they use to decide between candidates at all stages, and the results of applying these criteria in terms of the characteristics of students accepted and rejected (see recommendations in Chapter 3). The review team also suggests an external review of admissions processes and criteria at public and private universities and university institutions, which would also consider the possibility of establishing standardised processes and criteria, at least for all public universities.

## **Findings and conclusions**

The team was impressed by the amount and type of information that the Ministry of National Education gathers from institutions and makes available to the public through its various information systems. Colombia has built the foundations of a state-of-the-art information system that many developed countries would envy. The next step is greater consolidation and better presentation of information for the general public, education sector stakeholders and policy makers. Below are the review team's main recommendations. These are intended to improve transparency and establish a comprehensive, user-friendly suite of information systems that will enable students, TEIs and policy-makers to find all the information they seek about the tertiary education system and to make better-informed choices and decisions.

## Recommendations

The review team recommends that the Ministry of National Education's current information systems should be supplemented to include more analyses and indicators and, where possible, be made more user-friendly. This would include consolidating information into one place so that users need not access different systems to get the “big picture” and creating indicators useful to the public, such as admittance rates and returns to investment based on programme fees and expected salaries. Improved technical notes on how information should be interpreted, and tools such as rankings based on user preferences, would allow users to make more informed decisions. Finally, as the public is not well informed about the government's information systems, more promotion and marketing would be helpful to make the available information more widely known, particularly to secondary schools. Teachers, guidance counsellors and secondary students should all be made aware of the existence of these information systems, as well as how to use them.

Ministry data should be systematically cross-checked with other sources of information, such as DANE household surveys, and the alternative information should also be made available to the public. Household survey data can provide useful information on access and equity as well as labour market outcomes. This information serves not only to check the validity of the Ministry's information (which would improve their credibility), but also to shed light on areas not covered by Ministry information, such as tertiary coverage rates by income quintiles.

The review team recommends increased efforts to integrate SENA fully into the Colombian tertiary education system, and into tertiary data collection, reporting, and analysis systems.

The review team recommends a study to check for possible biases in SPADIES data and in the socio-economic data gathered by ICFES. The number of observations in SPADIES analyses varies significantly, depending on the variables examined. This may be because data come from different sources (mainly TEIs, ICFES and ICETEX) and merging databases is rarely problem-free, but, as already explained in Chapter 3, is also because the socio-economic data is gathered from a self-administered survey when students sit the SABER 11 test. If students with particular characteristics are either more likely, or less likely, than average to respond to certain questions about socio-economic status, the resulting sample is non-random and may produce biased estimates. It is worth examining whether that is the case.

The review team recommends an external review of admissions processes and criteria at public and private universities and university institutions. The review should also consider the possibility of standardising processes and criteria, at least for all public universities.

The review team recommends establishment of a legal framework to ensure that all TEIs that receive any public funds, directly or indirectly, make detailed financial information public in a standardised, systematic manner.

### *Note*

1. Chilean Congress Bulletin 7.880-04.

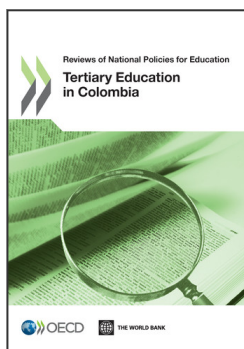
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