

Beyond compliance: accreditation as a driver of institutional improvement

Abstract

In 2017, Law degrees in Argentina were incorporated into the national accreditation regime established under Article 43 of the Higher Education Law. This article examines the accreditation process experienced by the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences of Universidad del Este (UDE) between 2017 and 2022. Rather than presenting the process as an institutional chronicle, the study approaches it as an instrumental case through which to analyze how an externally required accreditation process can become an opportunity for institutional learning and improvement. The analysis is based primarily on documentary evidence generated during the process, including the institutional self-assessment, peer-review observations, the institutional response, improvement plans, reconsideration documentation, and institutional resolutions. The case is interpreted through a higher-education quality perspective and Burton R. Clark's (1991) analysis of the differentiated and loosely articulated organization of academic work. The findings suggest that accreditation functioned not only as an external verification mechanism but also as a device for identifying organizational weaknesses, coordinating dispersed academic actors, formalizing practices, allocating resources, and strengthening links among teaching, research, outreach, student support, and institutional management. The study does not claim a measurable causal effect on student achievement or graduate quality, since the institutional record available for the case does not contain longitudinal outcome data sufficient for such a conclusion. Instead, its contribution lies in identifying institutional learning and organizational change as relevant analytical dimensions of accreditation. The case also supports a distinction between minimum quality assurance and institutional uniformity: common standards can establish a quality floor while leaving room for institutional missions, trajectories, and organizational identities.

Keywords: accreditation, higher education quality, institutional evaluation, institutional learning, academic organization, Law education, Argentina

Volume 09 Issue 1 - 2026

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Received: May 21, 2026 | **Published:** September 11, 2026

Introduction

Accreditation has become an important component of higher education quality assurance. In Argentina, its relevance acquired a specific regulatory dimension through the Higher Education Law No. 24.521, particularly Article 43, which establishes additional requirements for degrees corresponding to professions regulated by the State whose practice may affect the public interest. Law was incorporated into this regime in 2017, making the first accreditation process of Law degrees a particularly significant institutional event for the Argentine university system.

The original version of this article described the UDE process mainly through its chronology: self-assessment, peer visit, institutional response, and reconsideration appeal. That description remains valuable because it documents a process that was new for Law degrees and provides evidence of the practical demands associated with accreditation. However, a chronological account alone does not explain what the process means from the perspective of higher education organization and quality improvement. The present version therefore reframes the institutional experience as a case study.

The central question is: how can an accreditation process be transformed from an externally imposed control procedure into an instrument of institutional improvement and learning? Two subsidiary questions guide the analysis: what organizational conditions facilitate such a transformation, and what forms of institutional learning can be identified in the UDE case?

The argument developed here is that accreditation can acquire a developmental function when institutional leadership treats external requirements not merely as items to be answered but as opportunities to examine existing practices, coordinate dispersed academic actors, formalize institutional decisions, and implement improvement plans. This does not mean that accreditation automatically produces improvement. Rather, the case suggests that its effects depend partly on how the institution interprets and organizes its response.

The article also addresses an important conceptual distinction. Quality assurance should not be equated with institutional homogenization. A system of common standards may establish a minimum threshold below which a professional degree should not operate, while institutions retain distinctive missions, organizational cultures, pedagogical choices, and relationships with their environments.

Regulatory and conceptual framework

Accreditation, quality and minimum standards

Article 43 of Law No. 24.521¹ establishes that degrees corresponding to professions regulated by the State and potentially affecting the public interest must satisfy basic curricular requirements, criteria concerning practical training, and periodic accreditation. In this framework, accreditation is not simply an optional institutional exercise. It is connected to the State's responsibility to ensure that professional education meets conditions considered necessary for the protection of the public interest.

Academic organization and the problem of coordination

This perspective is particularly relevant to accreditation. A requirement that appears simple at the institutional level may involve different academic units, chairs, teachers, students, graduates, administrative areas, research groups, outreach structures, and governing bodies. Consequently, institutional improvement cannot be understood as a purely vertical process in which a central authority issues instructions and the organization simply complies.

In this study, academic leadership is consequently understood less as unilateral command than as a coordinating function. The relevant question is not whether the dean personally produced improvement, but whether the leadership structure was able to mobilize dispersed actors and connect their work to a common institutional response.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, documentary case-study design. The case is the accreditation process of the Law Degree at the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences of Universidad del Este between 2017 and 2022. The case is instrumental: the purpose is not to claim that UDE represents all Argentine universities, but to use the case to illuminate the broader phenomenon of how an accreditation process may generate institutional learning and organizational change.

The documentary corpus comprises the institutional material generated during the accreditation process as reflected in the original manuscript and its supporting documentation: the self-assessment submitted through the CONEAU system; information concerning the peer visit; the institutional response to the peer observations; improvement plans; the reconsideration appeal; institutional resolutions supporting the proposed measures; and the final accreditation outcome. The documentary record also includes operational information concerning academic staff development, research, outreach, library improvement, graduate follow-up, articulation among chairs, and links with the surrounding environment.

The analysis was conducted through thematic organization of the documentary evidence rather than through statistical measurement. Four analytical dimensions were used: (1) identification of institutional weaknesses; (2) coordination and formalization of organizational responses; (3) allocation of institutional resources to improvement; and (4) evidence of institutional learning or change in practices.

The author occupied a dual position in the case. He served as Dean of the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences during the central period of the accreditation process (2019–2022). This position provided direct knowledge of institutional decisions and access to the documentation produced during the process, but it also creates a risk of excessive self-reference. To address this limitation, the analysis privileges documentary evidence over personal recollection and distinguishes between documented institutional actions and the author's interpretation of their significance. The article therefore does not present the author's experience as independent evidence of institutional effectiveness.

A further limitation is important in responding to the reviewer's observation concerning academic outcomes. The available case documentation does not provide longitudinal evidence allowing the effects of the improvement measures on student performance, retention, graduate trajectories, or graduate quality to be isolated. Accordingly, this article does not claim that accreditation caused measurable improvements in those outcomes. It analyzes organizational processes and documented institutional responses instead.

The accreditation process at Universidad del Este

Self-assessment: making the institution visible

The first stage required the institution to organize information concerning the university, the academic unit, and the Law Degree. The CONEAU system requested information on governance, curriculum, academic staff, students and graduates, infrastructure and equipment, and institutional self-assessment and improvement plans.

One of the most demanding aspects was the systematic incorporation of academic staff information. Teachers had to create and validate their curricula in the CONEAU-Global system, after which their qualifications, appointments, and activities were integrated into institutional reports. The process therefore did more than collect information: it required the institution to make previously dispersed information comparable, traceable, and administratively usable.

The self-assessment culminated in December 2018. It also produced an initial diagnosis of weaknesses and generated improvement plans. These plans subsequently became an important institutional resource when responding to the observations of the external reviewers.

Peer evaluation: external observation and organizational pressure

The peer visit took place in May 2019. The evaluators met with institutional and academic authorities, teachers, students, graduates, the Academic Council, the Student Support and Monitoring Program, and the ad hoc accreditation monitoring committee. The peer review examined curricular structure, practical training, research, outreach, institutional links, mobility, and other dimensions associated with the standards.

The external evaluation changed the institutional situation in two ways. First, it identified requirements that had to be addressed. Second, it gave institutional actors an external reference against which their own practices could be reconsidered. This dual function is consistent with the quality-assurance literature: external evaluation can verify internal self-assessment while simultaneously creating a basis for improvement.

Institutional response: converting observations into action

The institutional response, initially scheduled for March 2020 and extended because of the COVID-19 emergency, became an important turning point. The faculty used improvement plans developed during self-assessment as a basis for responding to the reviewers' observations.

Actions included strengthening research and outreach responsibilities, establishing an annual competition for legal research and outreach articles, developing relationships with academic, social, economic, and cultural organizations, establishing a Free Legal Clinic, promoting observatories and other institutional spaces, improving coordination with teaching teams, and adopting Moodle as an academic management tool within the university's SIED framework.

The pandemic altered the original implementation context. An initiative initially conceived as a limited experimental use of non-face-to-face teaching became a much broader technological and organizational undertaking. This episode illustrates that institutional responses are not implemented under stable laboratory conditions: external requirements interact with unforeseen contextual pressures.

Reconsideration appeal: from compliance to institutional reorganization

The negative evaluation issued in December 2020 made the reconsideration appeal decisive. A negative final outcome would have prevented the admission of new first-year students to the degree from 2022 and would have initiated a progressive closure process.

The response therefore required extensive collaborative work. Institutional actors had to interpret individual requirements, verify whether practices already existed, formalize practices through regulations, engage different sectors of the institution, and approve new improvement plans.

The on-campus Law Degree documentation was submitted on July 30, 2021, and the distance-learning documentation on September 29, 2021. The final outcome, received in March 2022, granted the on-campus Law Degree accreditation for three years, with two commitments. For the distance-learning modality, the documentation recorded a recommendation to the Ministry of Education concerning the corresponding authorization.

Rather than reproducing the annexes in full, the principal areas can be synthesized as follows:

Area	Main response	Documented resource / support	Analytical significance
Academic staff	Increase teaching/research/outreach dedication and promote postgraduate and pedagogical development	Financial commitments and institutional training mechanisms	Professionalization and redistribution of academic work
Research	Priority lines, researcher support, publication incentives and student participation	Improvement plans; institutional resolutions	Formalization of research as an institutional activity
Outreach/ environment	Legal Clinic, observatories, networks and priority outreach lines	Projects, institutional spaces and dedicated resources	Stronger relationship between academic work and social environment
Teaching/ technology	Moodle and SIED-supported practices; coordination with teaching teams	Existing SIED infrastructure and institutional resources	Organizational adaptation and continuity under pandemic conditions
Library/ resources	Relocation, digital resources, databases and collection development	Budgeted improvement program	Strengthening academic infrastructure
Graduates/ articulation	Graduate follow-up and horizontal/vertical articulation among chairs	Institutional projects and resolutions	Greater continuity across the academic trajectory

Formalization transformed individual initiatives into institutional practices

A recurring feature of the reconsideration process was the need to support actions through institutional regulations and resolutions. This matters analytically because accreditation exposed a distinction between practices that existed informally and practices that were sufficiently institutionalized to be demonstrated, sustained, and evaluated.

Leadership operated through coordination

The case does not support a simple interpretation in which the dean's office directly controlled all relevant academic activity. On the contrary, the process required coordination among the Board of Directors, Rectorate, Academic and Research and Outreach Secretariats, Academic Council, chairs, teachers, students, graduates, and administrative areas.

Discussion

The case helps reinterpret accreditation in three ways. First, it confirms the value of distinguishing accreditation as recognition from accreditation as process. The formal outcome—a three-year

Results: what changed beyond the accreditation decision?

The documentary evidence allows the process to be interpreted through four interconnected results.

Diagnosis became institutional knowledge

The self-assessment and external review converted dispersed institutional information into a structured diagnosis. The process made visible weaknesses that might otherwise have remained distributed among different offices and academic groups. This transformation from dispersed information to shared diagnosis is an important form of institutional learning.

Improvement plans became coordination devices

The improvement plans did not function only as responses to CONEAU. They specified activities, responsible areas, resources, and implementation periods. The original documentation included financial commitments for academic staff dedication, teacher development, research, library improvement, graduate follow-up, and outreach.

accreditation—was important, but the organizational work required to reach it generated a broader set of institutional effects.

Third, Clark's² organizational perspective helps explain why improvement was neither automatic nor linear. Because academic work is distributed among specialized groups and units, an external requirement becomes meaningful only when it is translated into operational practices. The accreditation process created a coordination problem as much as a compliance problem.

The case also contributes a more cautious interpretation of institutional learning. The evidence supports claims about diagnosis, formalization, coordination, planning, and resource allocation. It does not support a causal claim that these changes improved student achievement or graduate quality. That distinction is important because it prevents the article from replacing the original descriptive bias with an equally unsupported celebratory narrative.

The role of institutional leadership should therefore be understood as a mediating condition rather than as a single causal variable. Leadership can frame accreditation as a threat or as an opportunity; it can facilitate coordination, establish priorities, secure resources, and promote formalization. But implementation remains distributed across the academic organization.^{3–9}

Conclusion

This case study shows that an accreditation process can produce effects that exceed the formal act of accreditation. At UDE, the process generated a structured diagnosis, improvement plans, new forms of coordination, institutional formalization, resource commitments, and initiatives linking teaching, research, outreach, technology, student support, library resources, and graduate follow-up.

The principal lesson is not that accreditation automatically improves universities. Rather, its developmental potential depends on the institutional capacity to transform external requirements into internal learning processes. Accreditation becomes an opportunity when the institution uses the evaluation to ask not only whether a requirement is fulfilled, but what the requirement reveals about existing practices and what changes are necessary to make those practices sustainable.

The case also reinforces the distinction between quality assurance and uniformity. A public system may legitimately establish minimum conditions for professional degrees while preserving institutional diversity. The objective of accreditation, in this interpretation, is to establish a quality floor, not a single institutional model.

Three implications follow. First, accreditation systems should preserve sufficient space for institutions to demonstrate how common standards are implemented within their own missions and organizational contexts. Second, institutions should treat improvement plans as management and learning instruments rather than as documents prepared only for external evaluation. Third, leadership development should include capacities for coordination, evidence-based decision-making, and institutional learning, particularly because academic organizations are structurally differentiated.

Finally, the study has clear limitations. It examines one institution and relies principally on documentary evidence from a specific accreditation cycle. It does not provide longitudinal outcome data on students or graduates and therefore cannot establish the causal effects of the improvement measures. Future research could compare several Law programs that underwent the same national accreditation process and examine whether similar organizational patterns, leadership strategies, and forms of institutional learning emerged across different institutional settings.

Editorial revision note

This revised manuscript was reorganized in direct response to the editorial review. The principal changes are: (1) incorporation of an explicit methodology section; (2) reframing of the institutional

experience as an instrumental case study; (3) expansion of the theoretical discussion on quality, accreditation and academic organization; (4) explicit treatment of the author's positionality as former Dean; (5) synthesis of the extensive improvement-plan annexes; (6) strengthening of the discussion and conclusions; and (7) explicit limitation concerning the absence of longitudinal academic-outcome data. The revision preserves the empirical core of the original manuscript rather than replacing it with a new, unrelated study.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict interest.

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