

Curricular Structure From Educational Policy in Colombia: The Case of the Doctorate in Administration at the University of Cartagena

Maria Eugenia Navas Rios, University of Cartagena, Colombia
Emperatriz Londoño Aldana, University of Cartagena, Colombia
Daniel Ruiz Navas, Institución Universitaria Mayor de Bolívar, Colombia

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Abstract

Educational policy in Colombia has undergone a significant transformation since the 1991 Constitution, granting universities autonomy to design, implement, and evaluate their programs, while the State maintains its role in supervision and quality control. At the doctoral level, this oversight is exercised through the National Intersectoral Commission for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CONACES), which grants the "Qualified Registration", based on Decree 1330 of 2019. This decree establishes nine quality conditions for programs: Denomination, Program Justification, Curricular Aspects, Organization of Academic Activities and Formative Process, Research, Innovation and/or Artistic and Cultural Creation, Relationship with the External Sector, Faculty, Educational Resources, and Physical and Technological Infrastructure. This study analyzes the curricular design of doctoral programs in Colombia, drawing on the experience of the Doctorate in Administration at the University of Cartagena. It examines each of the aforementioned conditions, which methodologically guided a documentary analysis of regulations, institutional guidelines, and accreditation processes. This was complemented by interviews with key stakeholders involved in curricular design. Findings indicate that curricular design is based on learning outcomes and necessitates the integration of pedagogical, disciplinary, and contextual research at local, national, and international levels. Furthermore, challenges were identified in aligning programs with environmental demands and curricular flexibility, emphasizing the importance of a research-based design and academic and social relevance.

Keywords: higher education, public policies, doctorate, curriculum design

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Introduction

The quality of higher education has been a growing concern in Colombia, especially at advanced training levels such as doctoral programs. The Political Constitution of 1991 consolidated university autonomy, delegating to institutions the responsibility for designing their academic programs. However, it also strengthened the State's role as a guarantor of quality through the Higher Education Quality Assurance System (SACES).

This study aims to analyze the curricular structure of a doctoral program within the framework of current public policy, taking the Doctorate in Administration at the University of Cartagena as a case study. The research is based on an analysis of applicable regulations and is developed from a critical and contextualized perspective of doctoral-level curricular design.

Initially, a country contextualization is presented, highlighting its different regions and the high concentration of doctoral programs in the central region, known as the Andean Region. Subsequently, the functioning of the Colombian education system and the higher education quality assurance system are explained.

The second section is dedicated to analyzing the case of the Doctorate in Administration, designed under the guidelines established by the State through Decree 1330 of 2019, which regulates the qualified registration of higher education programs. Finally, the study's findings, discussion, expected impacts, and conclusions are presented.

Literature Review

SACES is the body created by the Ministry of National Education (MEN) to guarantee the quality of Higher Education. This was a response to the need to regulate the expansion of higher education, following Law 30 of 1992, which granted autonomy and self-regulation to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), giving them responsibility for the offerings and relevance of their programs, but without including effective control mechanisms.

Consequently, the State issued regulations to control the quality of programs and institutions, such as: Decree 2904 of 1994, related to the voluntary accreditation of programs and institutions and the process to acquire it; Law 1188 of 2008, which regulates and makes mandatory the obtaining of the "Qualified Registration" for higher education programs; and Decree 1295 of 2010, which regulates and explicitly states the quality conditions for obtaining it and its temporary validity.

The effectiveness of compliance with the issued regulations, and subsequent ones, regarding this topic as improvement processes, based on experience (such as Decree 1330 of 2019, currently in force), is overseen by SACES, which is structured as follows:

- Information: Systems such as the National Higher Education Information System (SNIES), the System for the Prevention of Higher Education Desertion (SPADIES), and the Labor Observatory for Education support informed decision-making.
- Evaluation: This includes processes for verifying minimum conditions (qualified registration overseen by the National Intersectoral Commission for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – CONACES) and excellence (accreditation overseen by the National Accreditation Council – CNA).

- Promotion: Strategies for institutional strengthening and support for continuous improvement.

This system allows the State to maintain active supervision without encroaching on institutional autonomy, promoting quality from a perspective of shared responsibility. Regarding this assertion, which is the system's *raison d'être*, there have been academic discussions from its inception about regulation versus autonomy. For instance, Forero et al. (2004) referred to State interference through the creation of various governmental councils to supervise and control quality and the constitutional principle of university autonomy. Along similar lines, Ordóñez and Salazar (2013); Gil et al. (2017); and Fontalvo et al. (2021) refer to centralized processes and homogenized and standardized institutional inputs for verifying and evaluating results, which, according to Velásquez et al. (2022) and Matos et al. (2022), are requirements for both the mandatory Qualified Registration and the voluntary high-quality accreditation of programs and institutions.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive, and critical approach based on the documentary analysis of laws, decrees, resolutions, institutional policies of the University of Cartagena, and relevant Colombian scientific literature. This followed the methodological steps recommended by Quintana and Montgomery (2006), which include stages of tracing, inventorying, classifying by relevance, in-depth reading, and cross-reading of findings. This was complemented by semi-structured interviews with members of the program's design committee and the curricular expert who led the process. Content analysis, following the approach of Arbeláez and Onrubia (2014), was applied to both documents and interviews. Validity and reliability were ensured through the triangulation of data sources.

Case Study: Doctorate in Administration – University of Cartagena

Doctoral programs in Colombia are relatively recent due to their slow development. The first doctoral program was created in 1978 by the National University of Colombia, with a pedagogical and research focus (Agreement 46 of May 9) (Arenis & Pinilla, 2016). Between 1986 and 1987, this same university offered four additional programs, and by the early 1990s, according to Soto (2009), 31 new programs were offered by universities such as Antioquia, Andes, Industrial de Santander, and Valle. By 2020, the number of doctoral programs had risen to 394, of which 60 had high-quality accreditation.

Since their inception, the offering of doctoral programs in Colombia has been concentrated in the country's main cities, especially in the Andean region. Bogotá leads with 106 programs, followed by Medellín (76), Cali (33), Manizales (26), and Pereira (9). The remaining programs are distributed among the Caribbean, Pacific, Orinoquía, and Amazonian regions. Specifically, in the Caribbean region, the Doctorate in Administration at the University of Cartagena is the only one offered by a public institution. There are three other programs in this area, all located in Barranquilla and offered by private institutions.

The design, construction, dissemination, and approval of the Doctorate in Administration at the University of Cartagena emerged from various academic activities. The first was an internship undertaken by Dr. María Eugenia Navas Ríos at the Complutense University of Madrid, Spain, in November 2018, funded by the University of Cartagena. During this stay, the first draft of the program was developed, and letters of commitment were obtained from

Spanish faculty members, who expressed their willingness to support the program through course development, internships, advisory roles, thesis co-authorship, participation as jurors, joint scientific publications, and the possibility of double degrees.

In the same year, during the Educa AL 2018 Congress held in Cartagena and led by the Business Administration program's Trade and Consumer Behavior Group, South American doctors—mostly Argentinians from the marketing area—were gathered and also signed similar letters of commitment.

Internally, meetings were held with full-time faculty and research group leaders from the Faculty of Economic Sciences with doctoral degrees, during which a more advanced version of the program was presented. In these sessions, recommendations for improvement were received, the research emphases for the specific training component were defined, and advanced courses were proposed based on the research strengths of the academic groups.

To ensure the program's relevance, business guilds such as ACOPI, FENALCO, and the Cartagena Chamber of Commerce were involved. These organizations actively participated in curriculum construction, made suggestions on topics to include, and expressed their support for the program through institutional commitment letters.

The final document complies with the requirements established by Decree 1330 of 2019 and other national and institutional regulations. In addition to the support from guilds and faculty members of the Faculty of Economic Sciences, the program has a large group of national and international collaborators from countries such as Spain, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Japan, Peru, and the United States, as well as the support of various academic networks.

Decree 1330 of 2019 establishes nine quality conditions for academic programs, which are particularly rigorous for doctorates due to their investigative nature and their impact on knowledge production:

- Program Denomination
- Program Justification
- Curricular Aspects
- Organization of Academic Activities and Formative Process
- Research, Innovation, and/or Artistic and Cultural Creation
- Relationship with the External Sector
- Faculty
- Educational Resources
- Physical and Technological Infrastructure

The conditions of denomination and justification ensure the program's coherence with local, regional, and international demands, highlighting its curricular relevance and the expected social, economic, and environmental impact. These conditions correspond to the contextualization stage within curricular design.

Conditions 3 to 6 (curricular aspects, organization of academic activities, research and innovation, and relationship with the external sector) belong to the structure and organization stage of the curriculum, aimed at achieving the proposed learning outcomes.

Table 1
Curriculum Correspondence Matrix

GRADUATE PROFILE	GRADUATE COMPETENCIES	PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES	COURSES
Upon graduation and obtaining the PhD in Administration, with the corresponding certification of emphasis from the University of Cartagena, the candidate's training will be evidenced by the following abilities: 1. Design, develop, and undertake novel and innovative projects in the business, academic, private, and public sectors, civil organizations, and/or specific to the chosen emphasis. 2. Integrate knowledge to address the complexity of business and/or institutional problems or situations and formulate judgments based on available information that enables the solution or improvement of the situation under study, from the implementation itself, or through advisory and	C1. Appropriate theoretical developments, methodologies, methods, procedures, techniques and qualitative-quantitative tools to carry out scientific research.	RAP1: Prepare article(s) to communicate advances in knowledge and the state of the art in the topic selected for the thesis, from any of the chosen emphases, gathering information regarding the results obtained, methods, methodologies, procedures, and tools used in its development.	Economic Globalization and Regional Development Theories Trends in Knowledge Management, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship Strategic Marketing
	C2. Understand and implement public, economic, business, and educational policy, as well as management-related aspects of each of the aforementioned areas.	RAP2: Develop models, prototypes, and procedures, from the management and transfer of knowledge in the administrative field, that can be intellectually protected, supporting business start-ups and/or improvements and growth in existing ones.	Strategic Management Project Formulation and Evaluation
	C3. Design and develop applied scientific research in the field of administrative sciences that impact the improvement and transformation of the business community, contributing to the economic development of the Department, the Region, and, consequently, the Country.	RAP3: Solve real-life cases and problems within the business and/or educational institution, based on professional ethics, social responsibility, and the country's public, economic, business, and educational policies.	Public Management and Governance Educational Policy and Management
	C4: Argue based on scientific evidence and communicate, in national and international contexts,	RAP4: Design, plan, implement, and evaluate research projects in the field of administrative sciences, both	

consulting services to those seeking it. 3. Communicate orally and in writing the results of novel and innovative scientific research specific to the administrative sciences to the scientific, academic, business, and institutional communities in their native language and a second language, using the various existing media approved for this purpose by the academic community of the discipline.	their position on business events and situations that require solutions.	individually and in collaboration with other individuals or organizations.	
	C5. Argue based on scientific evidence and communicate, in national and international contexts, their position on business events and situations that require solutions. Act with intellectual autonomy and social sensitivity in the design and development of investigative processes, demonstrating their knowledge and moral and ethical commitment as a person and as a professional for the benefit of companies and improving the quality of life of the community.	RAP5: Apply advances in knowledge to local businesses (context), concretized through models, strategies, procedures, tools, and the results of research processes that transform their actions in favor of continuous improvement.	Deepening I Deepening II Deepening III Deepening IV
	C6. Promote and propose the articulation of scientific and technical aspects with moral, ethical, and political aspects, contributing to nation-building through coexistence, pluralism, and recognition of others with a clear sense of democracy.	RAP6: Prepare and approve your final project, your doctoral thesis, in accordance with the requirements stipulated in the program.	Degree Seminar I Degree Seminar I Thesis
		RAP7: To proceed in all individual, collective, and collaborative actions with ethics and social responsibility, assuming the consequences of their	Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility

actions within a
framework of respect
for differences, dissent,
and human dignity,
contributing from a
reflective critical
position to the
construction of a nation
that coexists in peace,
with justice, and equity

Source: Educational Project Doctorate in Administration.

Finally, conditions 7 to 9 (faculty, educational resources, and infrastructure) guarantee the availability of essential human, technological, and physical resources for high-quality doctoral training, focused on the generation of frontier knowledge.

These conditions seek not only to ensure compliance with minimum standards but also to ensure comprehensive and contextualized quality, aligned with environmental needs.

Results and Discussion

The main results obtained are as follows:

- The curricular design of the Doctorate in Administration is based on learning outcomes, ensuring coherence among the graduate profile, content, evaluation methods, and research processes.
- There is evidence of an effective integration of pedagogical, disciplinary, and contextual research approaches, articulated with local, national, and international realities.
- Significant challenges persist in aligning the curriculum with environmental demands, particularly concerning flexibility, social relevance, and internationalization.
- The articulation of research projects with institutional guidelines and recognized research groups, both nationally and internationally, constitutes a program strength. However, this articulation requires continuous consolidation through the strengthening of the academic communities formed within the doctoral framework.

Regarding the discussion, it's highlighted that Colombian quality assurance policy has established clear regulatory conditions for the design and implementation of doctoral programs. Nevertheless, true academic quality transcends regulatory compliance; it lies in the institutions' capacity to integrate research, contextual relevance, and innovative pedagogical approaches.

Tensions persist between state regulations and university autonomy, a situation addressed by academics such as Ordóñez and Salazar (2013), who state that “university autonomy has been restricted by the Ministry of Education, the creation of CESU, SUE, the National Accreditation Council (CONACES), and other governmental agencies”. Along the same lines, Forero et al. (2004) argue that “various efforts have been made to reduce this inherent quality of the university and disturb the necessary balance between the constitutional principle of university autonomy and the State's inspection and oversight function” (p. 295), especially concerning curricular innovation and adaptability.

Decree 1330 of 2019 represents both an opportunity and a challenge: while it introduces mechanisms for flexibility in curricular design, it also demands that institutions rigorously demonstrate the relevance and effectiveness of their programs. In this sense, the Doctorate in Administration contributes significantly to the Higher Education Quality Assurance System (SACES) in Colombia by articulating learning outcomes with pedagogical strategies, curricular structure, and concrete research products, with a particular focus on internationalization.

This alignment enhances key competencies in doctoral students, such as research capacity, critical thinking, and ethical commitment in the field of Administration. As Padrón (2014) points out, research is a systematic and ethical process aimed at generating new knowledge. The coherence between the graduate profile and expected outcomes demonstrates the program's intention to train researchers capable of critically analyzing organizational phenomena and generating contextualized knowledge.

The curriculum prioritizes research from the initial stages of the formative process, integrating solid theoretical, methodological, and ethical foundations. It includes modules on contemporary administrative theory, training for the execution of high-impact projects, and active participation in national and international academic networks. These components ensure compliance with the standards established by the Ministry of National Education and by peer academic evaluators.

Additionally, the program acts as a catalyst for the development of institutional research through the strengthening of research groups and the promotion of academic networks. Its objective is to form a critical mass of doctors capable of leading innovation processes, organizational transformation, and public policy formulation. This approach aligns with García-Peñalvo's (2017) stance, who argues that research must be articulated through lines, groups, and networks to promote knowledge production and dissemination.

Graduates of the program are expected to have a positive impact on the quality of higher education, both in research and teaching, by serving as trainers in undergraduate and postgraduate programs. In this regard, their work contributes to fulfilling the country's academic, institutional, and socioeconomic objectives.

Strategically, the doctoral program responds to the specific needs of the University of Cartagena and the Colombian Caribbean region. It is the first—and to date, only—Doctorate in Administration offered by a public university with national and international accreditation in that region. Its purposes include closing research gaps, promoting a strong scientific culture, and generating solutions to complex regional and national challenges from both local and global perspectives.

Conclusions

The curricular design of postgraduate programs, particularly doctoral programs in Colombia, must adhere to a robust regulatory framework that, simultaneously, upholds and respects university autonomy.

The Doctorate in Administration at the University of Cartagena demonstrates that it is possible to build a coherent, research-oriented curriculum based on learning outcomes. It

addresses both local and global administrative and organizational challenges, ultimately benefiting the community at large and national development.

Moving forward, it is essential to strengthen the dialogue among public policies, the institutional context, and societal needs to consolidate relevant, sustainable, and high-quality academic doctoral programs.

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