

Education system

# Colombia

described and compared with  
the Dutch system

This document contains information on the education system of Colombia. We explain the Dutch equivalent of the most common qualifications from Colombia for the purpose of admission to Dutch higher education.

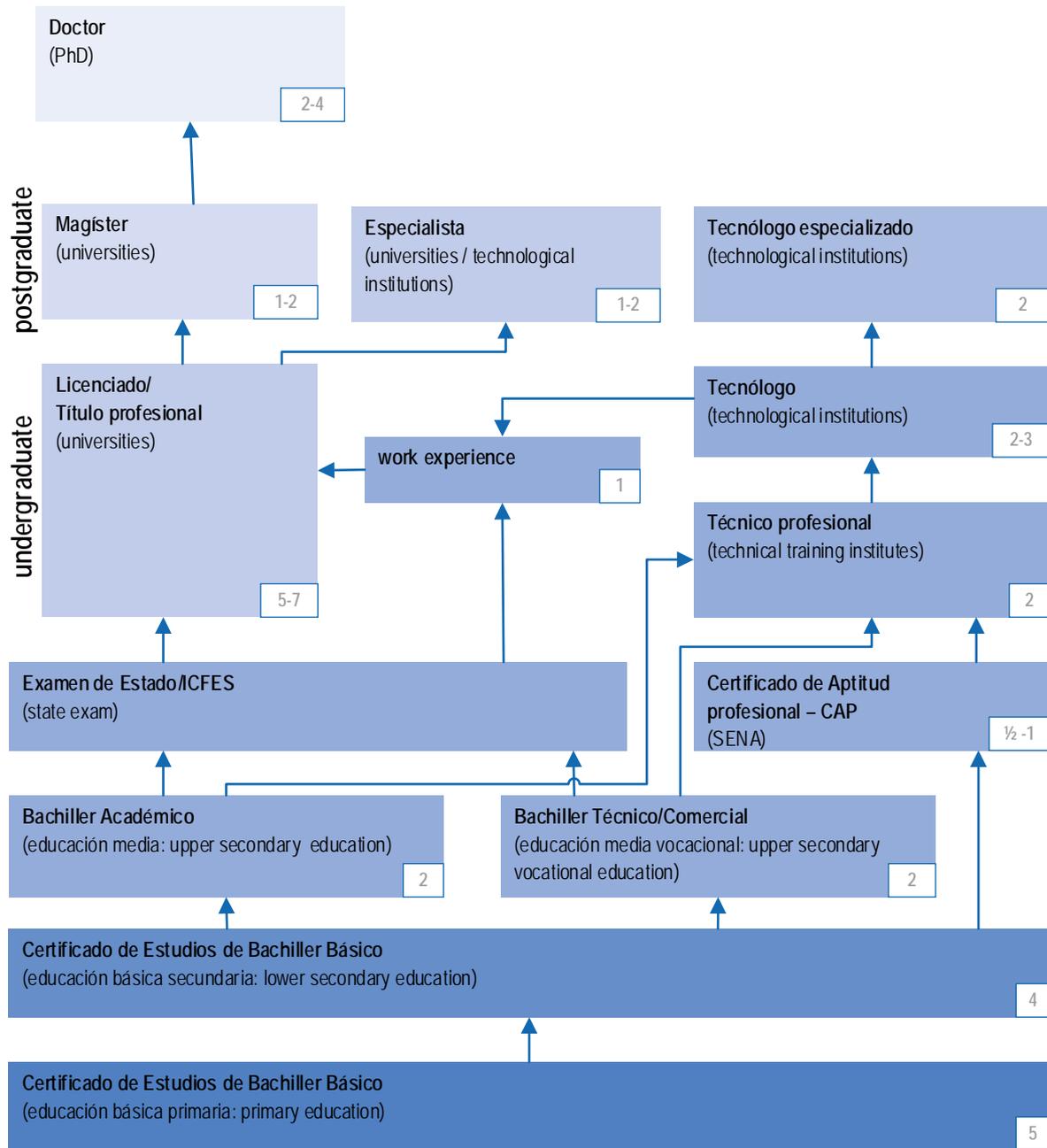
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We assemble the information for these descriptions of education systems with the greatest care. However, we cannot be held responsible for the consequences of errors or incomplete information in this document.



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## Education system Colombia



0 Duration of education

## Evaluation chart

The left-hand column in the table below lists the most common foreign qualifications applicable to admission to higher education. The other columns show the Dutch equivalent along with the comparable levels in the Dutch and European qualifications frameworks.

Degree or qualification	Dutch equivalent and NLQF level	EQF level
<i>Técnico Profesional</i>	MBO diploma (qualification levels 2, 3 or 4)	2-4
<i>Bachiller Académico</i>	Approximately HAVO diploma	4
<i>Tecnólogo</i>	At least MBO diploma (qualification level 4)	4
<i>Tecnólogo Especializado</i>	At most 2 years of HBO	5
<i>Licenciado/Título profesional</i>	HBO or WO bachelor's degree	6
<i>Especialista</i>	At least HBO or WO bachelor's degree	6
<i>Magister</i>	HBO or WO master's degree	7

### NB

- The information provided in the table is a general recommendation from which no rights may be derived.
- NLQF = Dutch Qualifications Framework; EQF = European Qualifications Framework
- The EQF/[NLQF level](#) is not so much a reflection of study load or content; rather, it is an indication of a person's knowledge and skills after having completed a certain programme of study.
- Information about Dutch equivalent qualifications can be found on our website: [the Dutch education system](#).
- [The Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market \(SBB\)](#), evaluates statements on foreign qualifications and training at VMBO and MBO level. The evaluation may vary if SBB evaluates the diploma for admission to VET schools or the labour market in the Netherlands.

## ■ Introduction

**Colombia is a presidential republic consisting of 32 *departamentos* (departments) subdivided into 1,070 *municipios* (municipalities). The current president is Juan Manuel Santos.**

The population is represented by two Houses: Parliament (with 165 members) and Congress (with 102 members). Colombia has a population of over 45 million, 49 per cent of whom live in the urban regions of Bogotá, Cali and Medellin. The capital is Bogotá D.C., and the majority of the population is Spanish-speaking.

The *Ministerio de Educación Nacional* (the Ministry of Education, MEN) is the body responsible for education. Almost every department also has its own *Secretaria de Educación* (education secretariat) that is charged with managing education in accordance with the ministry's regulations. The *Consejo Nacional de Educación Superior* (CESU), the National Council of Higher Education advises the ministry on policy definition.

The legal framework for the Colombian education system consists of the 1991 revised constitution and the various education acts, such as the 1994 General Education Act (*Ley General de la Educación*), the 1992 Higher Education Act (*Ley de Educación Superior*) and the 2002 Higher Education Act applicable to *Instituciones Técnicas Profesionales* and *Instituciones Tecnológicas* (*Ley 749 de Julio 19 de 2002*).

Colombia has a unitary higher education system, with no clear distinction between academic education and higher professional education. Some programmes contain elements of both higher professional education and university education.

Education is compulsory for children aged between 6-14. The language of education is Spanish.

The academic year consists of 2 semesters, and runs from February until November in most departments. In some regions, the academic year runs from August/September until June.

## ■ Primary and secondary education

### **Primary education - *Educación básica***

*Educación básica* (primary education) is compulsory for children aged 6-14, and is provided by both public and private schools.

At public schools, this form of education is free. The programme has a nominal duration of 9 years, and is usually taken at a *colegio* or at a *liceo* or *instituto*. An overview of all *colegios* is available on the Ministry of Education [website](#).

The programme is subdivided into an initial phase (*educación básica primaria*, grades 1-5) with a nominal duration of 5 years and intended for children aged 6-10, and a second phase (*educación básica secundaria*, grades 6-9) with a nominal duration of 4 years for pupils aged 11-14.

The curriculum is set by law and comprises nine educational areas that must constitute at least 80 per cent of the total programme:

- *ciencias naturales y educación ambiental* (natural sciences and environmental education);
- *ciencias sociales, historia, geografía, constitución política y democracia* (social sciences, history, geography, political constitution and democracy);
- *educación artística* (art education);
- *educación ética y en valores humanos* (ethics and human values);
- *educación física, recreación y deportes* (physical education, recreation and sport);
- *educación religiosa* (religious education);
- *humanidades, lengua castellana e idiomas extranjeros* (humanities, Spanish and foreign languages);
- *matemáticas* (mathematics); and
- *tecnología e informática* (technology and information technology).

During the initial phase, education includes amongst others mathematics, Spanish, natural sciences, social sciences, physical education and art education. During the second phase, the curriculum continues with all subjects from the initial phase, with additional technical subjects and a foreign language.

Upon completion, pupils receive a *Certificado de Estudios de Bachiller Básico*, and can then choose between various types of secondary education.

### **Secondary education - *Educación media***

Secondary education (*educación media/secundaria*, also known as *educación media vocacional*) can also be taken at a *colegio* (nowadays *gimnasio*), *liceo* or *instituto*. This type of education lasts 2 years, covers classes 10 and 11 (*grados: decimo* and *undecimo*) and is intended for pupils aged 15-16.

Students may choose between two streams: general education (*bachillerato académico*) or vocational (*bachillerato en tecnología o aplicado*). The general stream gives pupils a thorough grounding in the areas of *ciencias* (sciences), *artes* (arts) or *humanidades* (humanities).

Upon completion, pupils receive the *Bachiller Académico* certificate, which grants access to higher education via a state exam (*Examen de Estado*) administered by the *Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación* (ICFES). More information on the state exam is available at the ICFES [website](#).

In terms of level, the *Bachiller Académico* is approximately comparable to a HAVO diploma.

The vocational stream primarily prepares students for entry into the labour market, but also grants access to higher education in Colombia after completion of the state exam. Pupils can specialize in areas such as *agropecuaria* (agriculture and livestock farming), *comercio* (commerce), *finanzas* (finance) and *industria* (industry). The curriculum consists of general subjects and a small number of vocational subjects. Certificates awarded upon completion of these programmes include the *Bachiller Comercial* and *Bachiller Técnico*.

Pupils who do not complete the *bachillerato* can choose from a number of special programmes provided by the *Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje* (SENA), the Colombian organisation responsible for vocational education and training. Certificates awarded upon completion of the SENA programme include the *Certificado de Aptitud Profesional* (CAP).

### **Postsecondary education**

Postsecondary education is provided by *instituciones tecnológicas* (technological institutions) and *instituciones técnicas profesionales* (technical training institutes). In Colombia, these institutions are part of the higher education system. Admission to this type of education usually requires at least 11 years of primary and secondary education. Pupils older than 16 who have obtained their *Certificado de Estudios de Bachiller Básico* or *Certificado de Aptitud Profesional* (CAP) may also be admitted to these programmes. These programmes have a maximum nominal duration of 2 years (4 semesters). Upon completion, students are awarded the *Técnico Profesional*.

In terms of level, the *Técnico Profesional* is comparable to an MBO diploma at qualification level 2, 3 or 4, depending on the duration and specialization of the programme.

*Instituciones tecnológicas* also offer programmes culminating in the *Tecnólogo* and *Tecnólogo Especializado* degrees. See under [Higher professional education](#).

## ■ Admission to higher education

Admission to university higher education requires a *Bachiller Académico/Comercial/Técnico* certificate obtained by passing the state exam (*Examen de Estado*) administered by the *Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación* (ICFES). This examination is administered twice a year, in April and September. The results required for admission to higher education vary from institution to institution, and depend on the chosen programme of study. More information on the state exam is available from the ICFES [website](#).

Admission to short higher professional programmes requires a *Bachillerato* or *Técnico Profesional*.

## ■ Higher education

Higher education is available from both private and public institutions.

Unlike the Netherlands, Colombia does not have a binary system of higher education. Institutions come in four different types: *universidades* (universities), *instituciones universitarias* or *escuelas tecnológicas* (university institutes or technological institutes), *instituciones tecnológicas* (technological institutions) and *instituciones técnicas profesionales* (technical training institutes). In 2010, Colombia had 79 *universidades* (32 of which were state-run), 107 *instituciones universitarias*, 51 *instituciones tecnológicas* and 43 *instituciones técnicas profesionales*.

Universities are allowed to offer programmes at any level, up to and including PhDs. *Instituciones universitarias* or *escuelas tecnológicas* offer mainly *pregrado* (i.e. undergraduate) programmes, and under certain conditions also have the right to offer *posgrado* (postgraduate) programmes. *Instituciones tecnológicas* offer both upper secondary vocational education and higher professional education programmes. *Instituciones técnicas profesionales* primarily offer upper secondary vocational education. See also the information under Postsecondary education.

## ■ University education

The *universidades* offer academic and technological research programmes up to doctorate level, as well as higher professional and liberal arts programmes. In the Netherlands, these programmes fall under either academic education or higher professional education, depending on the type of study.

There are also *instituciones universitarias* or *escuelas tecnológicas*, which provide programmes with a focus on practicing certain professions. These institutions also offer academic programmes in a number of specializations.

The programmes are divided into two levels: *pregrado* and *posgrado*.

### **Pregrado programmes**

Admission to *pregrado* programmes requires both a secondary school diploma and the ICFES state exam. These programmes have a nominal duration of 4 to 7 years and have been using a credits system since 2002, with each credit being worth 48 study hours. After writing a graduation thesis, the degree of *Licenciado* is usually awarded. Qualifications awarded other than the *Licenciado* include professional qualifications (*Título profesional*) such as *Economista*, *Ingeniero químico*, *Administrador de empresas* or *Contador público*. Programmes leading to a professional qualification usually conclude with a final project.

Students who have completed all of the classwork but no thesis or work placement are eligible for the *Egresado* (graduation) certificate. However, this certificate does not bestow the same rights as a professional qualification or *Licenciado* degree.

In terms of level, the *Licenciado/Título profesional* is comparable to an HBO or WO bachelor's degree, depending on the type of study and duration of the programme.

### **Posgrado programmes**

*Posgrado* programmes include the *especialización*, *maestría* and *doctorado* programmes.

#### **Especialización**

Admission to these postgraduate programmes requires a completed *pregrado* programme in a similar specialization, and sometimes an entrance examination. The programmes have a nominal duration of 1 to 2 years, and their purpose is to offer further specialization in a certain profession or subject area. Programmes do not generally conclude with a thesis. At the end of the programme, the *Especialista* certificate is awarded. These certificates do not offer direct access to PhD programmes; as of 2003, these require a completed *Magister* degree.

In terms of level, the *Especialista* is comparable to at least an HBO or WO bachelor's degree, depending on the type of study and duration of the programme.

**Maestría**

Admission to these programmes requires an entrance examination and a *Licenciado* degree or professional qualification. The programmes have a nominal duration of 1 to 2 years and conclude with a thesis. The degree of *Magister* is awarded upon completion, which offers direct access to PhD programmes.

In terms of level, the *Magister* is comparable to an HBO or WO master's degree, depending on the type of study and duration of the programme.

**Doctorado**

Admission to these programmes used to require a professional qualification or a degree in an academic discipline. As of 2003, admission to PhD programmes is only possible with a *Magister* degree. PhD programmes take an average of 4 years and a minimum of 2 years to complete. Programmes conclude with a doctoral thesis. After successful defence of the doctoral thesis, the degree of *Doctor* is awarded.

**Higher professional education**

This type of education is offered by both *instituciones tecnológicas* and universities, has a nominal duration of 2 to 3 years and consists of both theoretical and practical subjects. Upon completion, graduates are awarded a *Tecnólogo* degree, which provides direct access to the labour market. After this programme, a 2-year advanced programme may be taken which leads to the degree of *Tecnólogo Especializado*. Under certain conditions (1 year's work experience) the *Tecnólogo* certificate also grants access to undergraduate university programmes in a similar specialization, which lead to the degree of *Licenciado*.

In terms of level, the *Tecnólogo* degree is comparable to at least an MBO diploma at qualification level 4.

In terms of level, the *Tecnólogo Especializado* degree is comparable to at most 2 years of higher professional education (HBO) in a similar specialization.

## ■ Assessment systems

### Secondary education

Various grading systems are used in secondary (*bachillerato*) education. From 2002 until now, the most common assessment systems have used either a scale of 0-100 in percentages (with 60% or higher as the passing grade) or based on a numbered system of 0.0-10.0 (with 6 as the minimum satisfactory grade).

Numerical grade	In percentages	Description	Definition
9.0-10.0	90-100	<i>Excelente (E)</i>	Excellent
8.0-8.9	80-89	<i>Sobresaliente (S)</i>	Outstanding
7.0-7.9	70-79	<i>Aceptable (A)</i>	Satisfactory
6.0-6.9	60-69	<i>Aceptable (A)</i>	Satisfactory
4.0-5.9	40-59	<i>Insuficiente (I)</i>	Unsatisfactory
0.0-3.9	0-39	<i>Deficiente (D)</i>	Fail

### Higher education

The higher education grading system has reached a reasonable degree of standardisation. Most higher education institutions use a scale from 0-5, with a passing grade of 3 or higher.

Numerical grade	Description	Definition
4.60-5.00	<i>Excelente</i>	Excellent
4.00-4.59	<i>Sobresaliente</i>	Outstanding
3.50-3.99	<i>Bien</i>	Good
3.00-3.49	<i>Suficiente</i>	Sufficient/Pass
0.00-2.99	<i>Deficiente</i>	Fail

From 1980 until 2002, study loads were expressed in *Unidades de Labor Académica* (ULA). In 2002 a new credits system was introduced, in which 1 credit represents 48 hours of student study.

## ■ Quality assurance and accreditation

The *Consejo Nacional de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior* (CONACES), National Council for the Quality Assurance of Higher Education, is responsible for the inspection and monitoring of higher education institutions. Institutions may only issue degrees if they have been accredited by the Colombian Ministry of Education.

Eligibility for the status of *Registro Calificado* requires fulfilment of a number of basic quality criteria; only after this point is an institution qualified to offer study programmes.

The *Consejo Nacional de Acreditación* (CNA), National Council of Accreditation, is the body in Colombia responsible for quality assurance in higher education. Institutions may apply to the CNA for *Acreditación de Alta Calidad* (High Quality Accreditation). This accreditation procedure is not compulsory. Eligibility for *Acreditación de Alta Calidad* requires high quality standards to be met.

The Ministry of Education manages the [SNIES register](#), the *Sistema Nacional de Información de Educación Superior*, which includes an overview of accredited institutions and accredited undergraduate programmes. Collaboration is now also underway with other Latin American countries, Europe and the United States to create a register of accredited postgraduate programmes (*Maestría* and *Doctorado*).

## ■ International treaties

Colombia ratified the 1977 treaty on the recognition of higher education programmes, diplomas and degrees among countries in Latin America, including the Caribbean.

## ■ Composition of file

A complete file in secondary and in higher education requires both a diploma and the corresponding grade list.

### **Authenticity**

Given that the grade lists are often issued along with diplomas, diploma holders are usually able to present them.

Colombian diplomas are often legalised with an apostille stamp, issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is possible to verify the apostille on the ministry [website](#).

## ■ Overview of higher education institutions

[Website](#) of the Ministry of Education, including an overview of all recognized higher education institutions and accredited undergraduate programmes (only in Spanish). Search by either institution (*Instituciones de Educación Superior*) or by programme (*Programas académicos*).

## ■ Useful websites

- [Website](#) of the *Ministerio de Educación Nacional* (MEN), the Colombian Ministry of Education.
- [Website](#) of the Ministry of Education, including an overview of all *colegios* (secondary schools) in Colombia (only in Spanish).
- [Website](#) of the *Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación* (ICFES), the institution for the evaluation of education, offering more information on the state exam for admission to higher education (only in Spanish).
- [Website](#) of the *Consejo Nacional de Acreditación*, National Council of Accreditation (only in Spanish).
- [Website](#) of the *Asociación Colombiana de Universidades* (ASCUN), the Colombian university association (only in Spanish).
- [Website](#) of the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, offering online verification of apostille stamps.