



GUIDE TO THE PUERTO RICO EDUCATION SYSTEM AND ASPECTS TO BE CONSIDERED FOR THE RECOGNITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION TITLES IN COLOMBIA

INTRODUCTION

The Colombian Ministry of National Education (*Ministerio de Educación Nacional - MEN*) has been working on the creation of guides of educational systems from different countries. These instruments may make the where and what to study decision-making process easier, as well as illustrate the procedure and requirements for the recognition of higher education degrees in Colombia.

The Office of Higher Education Quality at MEN (*Dirección de Calidad de la Educación Superior del MEN*) examined the guides of foreign educational systems which are already published on this website. In the exercise, the need of bringing the technical language of education closer to the citizen was highlighted, as well as generating an interactive instrument. In this order of ideas, MEN, in agreement with the Colombian Association of Universities (*Asociación Colombiana de Universidades – ASCUN*), updated and redesigned these guides.

For the creation of this guide, information from various official sources was consolidated, originating a practical and relevant instrument for the citizen. Pertinent information on four central aspects is therefore included: (1) a description of the higher education system; (2) the quality assurance of institutions and higher education programs; (3) the legality of higher education programs and institutions; and, 4) steps for the recognition of higher education degrees from abroad.



All information here presented considers different accessibility requirements of tools and web products, facilitating the access for people in a condition of disability. This work was made possible by an invaluable teamwork with the National Institute for the Blind (*Instituto Nacional para Ciegos – INCI*).

1. PUERTO RICO HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Structure of the Puerto Rico Education System

- **Overview of the Basic Education System**

In Puerto Rico, secondary education, by its Constitution in section 20 and by June 30th 1999, 149 Government Law, is free and constitutionally organized. Supervision and control are exercised by the Puerto Rico Department of Education - DEPR. The Department is divided into educational regions, and then into school districts. Spanish is the language of instruction but English is a compulsory course at all academic levels. The Department operates most public schools in the country and recruits teachers, guaranteeing school coverage throughout the island (House of Representatives of the Government of Puerto Rico, 2018) (State Department, 2017) (Government of Puerto Rico - Legislative Assembly, 2018).

Educational levels in a basic education institution in Puerto Rico are structured as follows (The Statistics Institute of Puerto Rico, 2018):

- Pre-school (2 years of study).
- Elementary (6 years of study from grade 1° to 5°).
- Secondary (6 years of study from grade 6° to 12°):
 - Intermediate (4 years of study from grade 6° to 9°).
 - Higher (3 years of study from grade 10° to 12°).



Upon completion of basic education studies and gaining of the diploma that accredits this training, it is possible to have access to higher education studies in this country.

- Post-secondary, Higher and Technical Vocational Education System

The Puerto Rico Higher Education System is administered and supervised by the Board of Post-secondary Institutions (Junta de Instituciones Postsecundarias - JIP), attached to the State Department of Puerto Rico. It is also supported and monitored by the United States Department of Education (as this country is an associated state).

Thus, in Puerto Rico, a university is a higher education institution or educational institution, public or private, that offers training ranging from associate to advanced (master's and doctorate). Within its admission requirements is the certificate or high school diploma or its equivalent, as established by 2018 - 212 Law, definition post-secondary institution, 2018, Section 4, 212 Law, Sections L and M (Government of Puerto Rico - Legislative Assembly, 2018).

Areas of knowledge within the academic offer include the arts and sciences, aiming at the generation and promotion of practical and theoretical knowledge to transform the social, economic and political spheres of the country (House of Representatives of the Government of Puerto Rico, 2018).

The Board of Post-secondary Institutions (Junta de Instituciones Postsecundarias - JIP) has, as its essential purpose, to promote conditions that will ensure access to quality education for all citizens, at the level and modality that they require and at the place required (House of Representatives of the Government of Puerto Rico, 2018).

The structure of the academic levels is subdivided into three (3) categories: 1) General training diplomas, 2) Training diplomas in the area of health, and 3) Titles for artistic training.

1) Formal titles in general education

These titles are structured as follows:

- Associate Degree (two-year training).
- Bachelor / Undergraduate (between 4 and 5 years of studies).
- Master's degree (two-year training).
- PhD (between 4 and 5 years of training).

Associate Degree

These types of degrees usually take two (2) years full time and provide for an average of 60 to 80 academic credits. They offer occupational skills and are considered technical-vocational training, allowing access to employment in the area of interest. They also enable access to undergraduate studies.

Bachelor / Undergraduate

El pregrado es un grado profesional otorgado por una universidad, con una duración aproximada de cuatro a seis años a tiempo completo, y requiere un mínimo de 120 créditos. Con este título se puede optar por realizar estudios de posgrado.

Esta formación pretende desarrollar las competencias y habilidades para el análisis, toma de decisiones, pensamiento crítico, comunicación, trabajo en equipo, manejo del tiempo y conocimiento del área donde se encuentra profundizando el estudiante.

Adicionalmente, este nivel de estudios contempla áreas de conocimiento tales como ciencias exactas, técnicas y ciencias sociales. En algunos casos, dependiendo del área, puede contemplar la duración máxima de seis (6) años (se debe consultar directamente con las instituciones de educación superior las condiciones de estos títulos).

Master's degree

These options of advanced training allow broadening horizons in the professional field, developing specialized skills in different areas of knowledge and, above all, deepening in a specific area of knowledge. In most cases, it is the way to continue doctoral studies (given its investigative approach).

In general, the training period for these degrees corresponds to two (2) years, and the average number of credits ranges between 30 and 60. It can be mentioned, for the proximity with the American educational system that, in Puerto Rico, it is common to express a differentiation in the naming of master's degrees: Master of Arts - M.A, Master of Science - M.Sc., Master of Engineering - M.En, among other.

PhD / Doctorado

These degrees aim to granting research tools and skills, and developing advanced and specialized knowledge. All this is generated by the scientific community through an academic dialogue, critical thinking and research. The training period ranges from four (4) to five (5) years.

Officially, the information of these levels of study can be found in the different web sites of universities in Puerto Rico.

1) Formal qualifications in the area of health

In Puerto Rico, as being an Associated State of the United States, its educational system is based on the United States system and, for the case of the different qualifications in the areas of health (such as medicine, dentistry, nursing), its organization is similar:

- Medical Doctor

Studies in medical schools take about four (4) years. Students then graduate with the title of Doctor of Medicine (M.D.). One of the options for admission to this program is to have a bachelor's/undergraduate degree issued by an institution accredited by the US Secretary of Education (in any discipline it is acceptable, provided that it has included the minimum required of the subjects identified as

prerequisites in the biological sciences, chemistry, mathematics, social and behavioral sciences, and humanities). Another requirement is to obtain a satisfactory result at the Medical College Admission Test - MCAT (Admission Test to Medical College), a test provided by the Association of American Medical Colleges, AAMC. (U.S. Association of Medical Colleges) (U.S. Embassy in Colombia, 2020).

In the case of postgraduate studies in this branch of knowledge, many foreigners, choosing to continue their education in the United States (after having obtained their first degree in medicine [M.D]), seek to acquire the right to practice medicine in that country, and must do the following (in fact, all doctors, whether from the United States or from another country) (U.S. Embassy in Colombia, 2020):

- Receiving the first professional degree in medicine at a medical school accredited by the Medical Education Liaison Committee;
- Complete a period of residence or postgraduate medical education;
- Successfully take the state undergraduate exams.

- **Dentistry**

For studies in dentistry, the first-year degrees may be Doctor of Dental Surgery - DDS (DDS) or Doctor of Dental Medicine (D.M.D), which requires four (4) years of training (two, general medical training, and two, clinical orientation in this area) (U.S. Embassy in Colombia, 2020).

The general admission requirements are:

- A good undergraduate academic record.
- Proficiency in English and Spanish.
- Passing the Dental Admission Test (DAT) with the score required by the School.

DAT is administered by the "Council of Dental Education of the American Dental

Association". This test examines knowledge in areas such as mathematics, biology, organic chemistry, reading, and perceptual motor skills (University of Puerto Rico - Medical Sciences Campus, 2012).

For postgraduate studies, dentists may apply for postgraduate training in hospitals or dental schools. Some programmes allow for a master's degree and, sometimes, a doctorate is also available. These degree programs usually prepare students for careers in teaching or research (U.S. Embassy in Colombia, 2020).

- **Nursing**

On the other hand, for nursing, there are offers of studying a type Associate Degree / Associate Degree and of Bachelor / Baccalaureate in different higher education institutions.

The nursing profession is regulated by Law 254-2015. It is required to have a license issued by the Board of Examiner of Nursing, attached to the Department of Health, and to have the membership issued by the College of Nursing Professionals of Puerto Rico. Anyone interested in practicing nursing in Puerto Rico must take and pass the exam offered by the Board of Examiners or the National Council of State Boards of Nursing - NCSBN (Consejo Nacional de Juntas Estatales de Enfermería), which is responsible for conducting nursing licensing and certification exams in the United States.

On average, associate degrees take one (1) year and a half full-time with 20 to 30 credits. Undergraduate degrees take three (3) years with 120 credits, on average (depending on the higher education institutions, according to their offer).

- **Veterinary medicine**

Finally, the Bachelor / undergraduate in veterinary medicine is not available in Puerto Rico but there is a technical title (pre-veterinary). Pre-veterinary education can take about four (4) years to be completed.

1) **Titles for artistic training**



From the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (1971), programs for the teaching of artistic techniques (at the School of Plastic Arts of Puerto Rico) have been organized and established to then grant, to anyone who approves the academic requirements, an accrediting certificate with the same value of an undergraduate degree issued by other institutions of higher education, private or public on the island, and even by institutions abroad (Government of Puerto Rico, 1990).

The School of Plastic Arts and Design of Puerto Rico is the only higher education institution with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA), accredited by The Middle States Commission on Higher Education MSCHE (accrediting entity of higher education institutions in Puerto Rico) and the National Association of Schools of Art and Design - NASAD (for its acronym in English, agency in charge of establishing national standards for undergraduate and graduate degrees and other credentials for art, design and related disciplines) (School of Plastic Arts and Graphic Design (Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Diseño - EAPD, 2020).

For the educational offer of the School of Plastic Arts and Design - EAPD, please check here: <https://www.eap.edu/bachilleratos/>

Undergraduate programs take four (4) years, with 129 academic credits for each of the academic programs (School of Plastic Arts and Graphic Design - EAPD, 2020).

- Registration as a foreign student

Generally speaking, in the universities of Puerto Rico, once secondary education courses completed abroad, the following documents must be submitted (additional to those regularly required by each institution):

- Diplomas or titles with an official certificate indicating that the institution is officially recognized by the Government of the country of origin.



- Grade equivalence must be managed by the Puerto Rico Department of Education. This department will provide the applicant with a signed and stamped official certification of the academic records.
- Request from the school/college of origin, an official explanatory report on the grading system, the content and level of the courses, and the number of hours of each course taken.
- Demonstrate proficiency in Spanish and English.
- Take the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) or SAT II (SAT Subject Tests) exam in English.

What is CEEB?

CEEB stands for College Entrance Examination Board - College Entrance Examination Board. CEEB codes are issued by Educational Testing Service (ETS). These four- to six-digit codes are mainly used in university entrance exams, such as the SAT and the ACT (College Board, 2008).

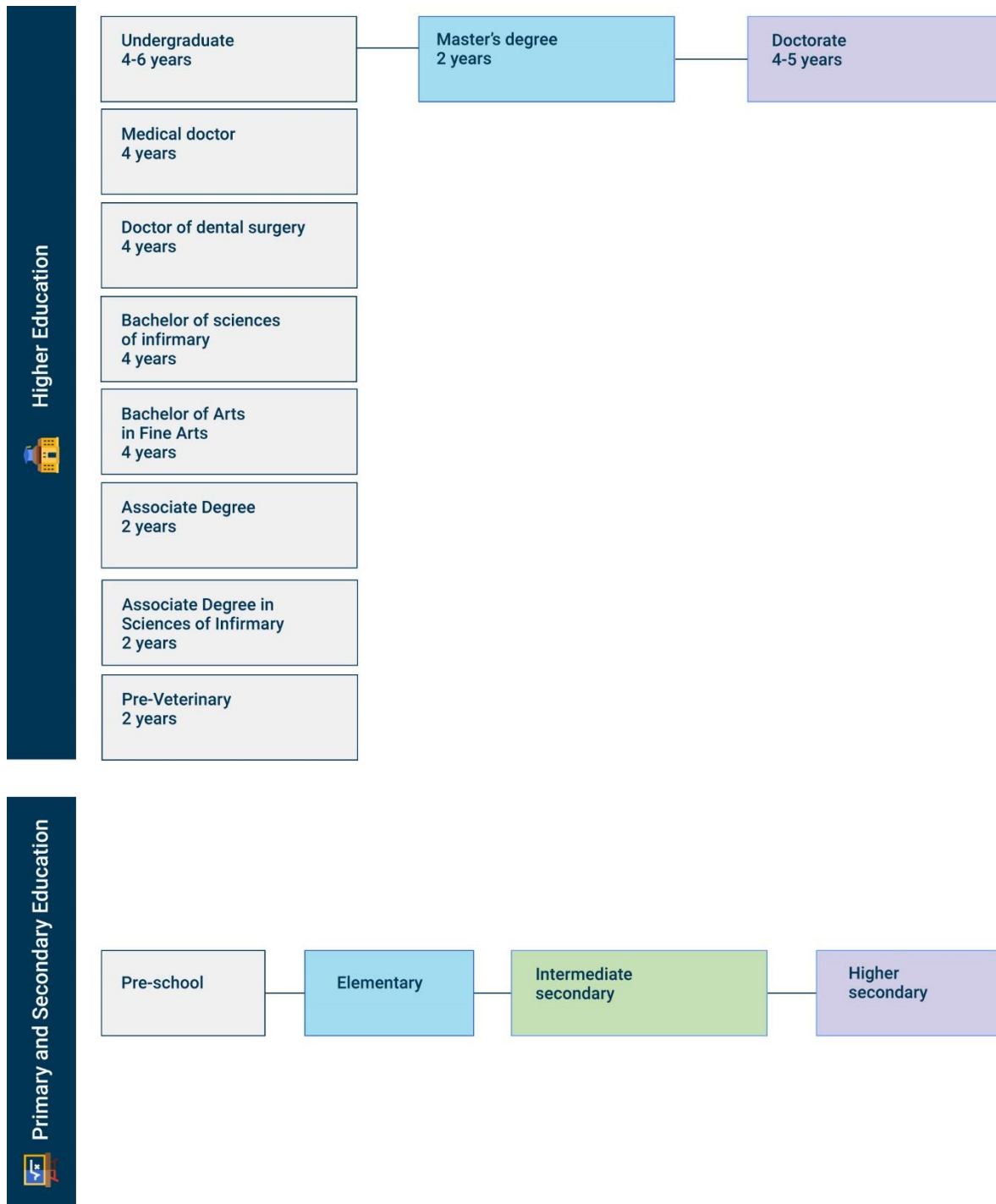
What are SAT Subject Tests?

SAT - Subject Tests means Standard Area Admission Test, also known as SAT II. It is an entrance examination to the university on subjects that the interested party chooses to demonstrate strengths and interests. General thematic areas include: English, history, languages, mathematics and science (Study in the USA, 2020).

Requirements were consulted in various higher education institutions in Puerto Rico, as they were not available on the country's official websites.



Structure of the Education System in Puerto Rico



Source: based on the Puerto Rico Education System

1.1 Comparative table of educational levels in Puerto Rico and Colombia

It is important to know the particularities of each level of education, both in Puerto Rico and Colombia. Therefore, the following table presents a comparative analysis of both systems. In this comparison, reference is made to higher education levels:

- Level 8: doctoral level or equivalent.
- Level 7: master's level, specialization or equivalent.
- Level 6: tertiary education degree or equivalent.
- Level 5: short-cycle tertiary education.

It is important to highlight the measurement of time corresponding to educational levels and its comparison with international standards:

- a) **Academic credits:** in Colombia and Puerto Rico, the estimated time of academic activity of the student, according to academic competencies the program is expected to develop, is expressed in units called academic credits.

Academic credit in Colombia:

it is a unit of measurement of the student's academic work, indicating the effort to be made to achieve the results of previous learning. It is equivalent to forty-eight (48) hours for an academic period. Institutions should determine the ratio between the direct relationship with the teacher and the independent practice of the student, justified according to the learning process and the learning outcomes expected for the programme.

Institutions must express in academic credits all training activities that are part of the curriculum (Decree 1330 of 2019, article 2.5.3.2.4.1).

Academic Credit in Puerto Rico:



An academic credit equals the value assigned to each course, reflecting the number of face-to-face hours. This value is equivalent to one (1) hour of classroom instruction or direct instruction plus two (2) hours of independent work by the student (American Bar Association, 2016).

Based on the above, the comparison is presented as an approximation of the level of study in each educational system and, similarly, of the duration in years. Therefore, the comparison is presented as an approximation of the level of study in each educational system and, similarly, of the duration in years.

- a) **CINE-UNESCO LEVELS:** The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), proposed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is a reference framework for collecting, compiling and internationally analyzing comparable statistics in the field of education.

Comparative table: Educational Levels in Puerto Rico and Colombia

CINE – UNESCO LEVELS	LEVELS IN PUERTO RICO	YEARS	LEVELS IN COLOMBIA	YEARS
8	PhD / Doctorate	4 - 5	Doctorate	4-5
7	N/A	-	Specialization in medical surgery	1-5
7	N/A	-	Medical specialization	2
7	Master's / Maestría	2	Master's degree	2
6	N/A	-	University specialization	1
6	Bachelor / pregrado	4-6	University professional degree	4-5
6	Doctor in Medicine / Doctor en Medicina	4		
6	Doctor Dentistry Surgery / Doctor en Cirugía Dental	4		
6	Bachelor of Science in Nursing / Licenciatura en Ciencias de Enfermería	4		
6	Bachelor in Fine Arts (BFA) / Licenciado en Bellas Artes	4		

CINE – UNESCO LEVELS	LEVELS IN PUERTO RICO	YEARS	LEVELS IN COLOMBIA	YEARS
5	N/A	-	Technological specialization	<1
5	N/A	-	Technical specialization	1
5	N/A	-	Technologist	3
5	Associate Degree / Grado Asociado	2	Professional technician	2
5	Associate Degree of Science in Nursing / Grado Asociado en Ciencias de Enfermería	2		
5	Pre-veterinary	2		

Source: based on UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2013) and the link
<http://www.agencias.pr.gov/agencias/cepr/inicio/publications/Documents/Presentations%20CEPR/Trends%20educacion%20superior%20en%20PR%20Nov%202015.pdf>.

LEGALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES AND INSTITUTIONS

In Puerto Rico, the Board of Post-Secondary Institutions is responsible for implementing the governmental structure of this educational level. Its functions include authorizing the establishment and operation of post-secondary education institutions and the provision of academic programs that meet the requirements established by Law 212-2018 and the regulations that are approved for such purpose (House of Representatives of the Government of Puerto Rico, 2018).

To know the higher education institutions recognized and endorsed by the Government of Puerto Rico, the directory published by the State Department through its Office of Registration and Licensing of Higher Education Institutions must be consulted (Directory of Higher Education Institutions) (State Department, 2020).

QUALITY ASSURANCE

According to 2018 Law 212, issued by the House of Representatives of the Government of Puerto Rico, the accreditation of educational institutions is

established as follows: *"the accreditation process promotes the continuous development of the institution, evaluating its philosophy, mission and goals, governing body and organizational structure, economic viability and available resources, fulfillment of educational purposes, academic program, curriculum, assessment and level of student achievement. It also evaluates the credentials of teachers/professors, teaching methods and available technology, services and activities to enrich student life"* (House of Representatives of the Government of Puerto Rico, 2018).

"The accreditation of an educational institution recognizes the level of academic and institutional quality that exceeds the standards required to hold a license or authorization to operate. With the exception of fast-track basic education institutions, accreditation will not be a requirement for the operation of an educational institution, but will be a voluntary process carried out by qualified and recognized entities." (House of Representatives of the Government of Puerto Rico, 2018).

However, for institutional quality processes, one of the main entities that is commissioned and endorsed by the United States Secretary of Education (since Puerto Rico is part of as an Associated State of the United States) is the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). This Commission may perform accreditation and pre-credit (candidacy status) activities for higher education institutions in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and U.S. Virgin Islands. Similarly, MSCHE is also recognized by the Higher Education Accreditation Council (CHEA) to accredit institutions that award degrees offering one or more post-secondary education programs of at least one academic year in the same sites (The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), 2020).

For a list of accredited institutions in Puerto Rico, see the Institution Directory of The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) or DAPIP - Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs (US search engine that also

includes some Puerto Rico Higher Education institutions, as it is an Associated State).

ASPECTS TO BE CONSIDERED TO INITIATE THE PROCESS OF RECOGNITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION DEGREES OBTAINED IN PUERTO RICO

Resolution 10687 of 2019 of the Ministry of National Education regulates the validation of higher education diplomas awarded abroad, recognizing the quality assurance systems of the countries where the diplomas were obtained.

The process of validation of higher education diplomas in Colombia is part of the Quality Assurance System for Higher Education, which allows society to guarantee that, as well as the national offer, from other countries is officially recognized by the States where the certificates were issued.

IMPORTANT: if an undergraduate degree is in law, accounting, education, or part of the health sciences, additional requirements must be verified, stipulated in chapters one and two of Resolution 10687 of 2019 of the Ministry of National Education, available at the following link:
https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1759/articles-401316_archivo_pdf.pdf.

It is worth recalling that it is not obligatory to advance the process of validation of higher education diplomas obtained in other countries. Recognition is required in the following cases:

1. For regulated professions where recognition is required by professional bodies.
2. For persons wishing to work in the public sector as contractors or civil officers.
3. For participating in public tenders where specifications indicate it as necessary.
4. For teachers in public education institutions to be properly graded.

To study in Puerto Rico and subsequently validate the degree in Colombia, the following must be considered:

1. Studies must be advanced in an institution of higher education recognized by the State of Puerto Rico.
2. Have the respective apostille or legalization chain in the documents.

In addition, the following relevant aspects should be considered:

1. Studies must be advanced at a legal Higher Education Institution in the country of origin.
2. Have the respective certification or apostille of documents.

Document Certification: Authentication of signatures by public officials on documents that will be used outside Puerto Rico. Among these documents are (State Department, 2017):

- Birth, marriage and death certificates
- Transport of corpses, birds, animals and medicines
- Transcription of credits
- Diplomas
- Criminal records agency certifications
- Powers
- Public deeds.

Apostille is a certification that legalizes the authenticity of the signature and stamps on a public document so that it can be recognized in foreign countries that are members of the Hague Convention. In the case of Puerto Rico, being a state associated with the United States, it has the process and is carried out by the State Department. To know the competent authorities for this process, you can consult:



Competent Authority - United States of America (in the section of Other Subdivisions) and, for the service offered in Puerto Rico, you can consult in: Apostille Passport Office.

How is apostille obtained in Puerto Rico? (State Department, 2017).

- Purchase the Internal Revenue Stamp for each document to be certified.
- Go to the Division of Certifications and Regulations, first floor Royal Intendency Building to settle the certification.

1. The different recognition criteria must be considered, according to the programme and the higher education institution that grants it.
2. For the recognition of Puerto Rican degrees and, in the case that they are issued in a language other than Spanish, an official translation of the qualifications and the title is required.

If a degree issued by a higher education institution in Puerto Rico requires recognition in Colombia, the following questions and answers can help understand the process:

- When is it necessary to recognize a foreign higher education degree? The answer to this question can be found at the following link:
<https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/convalidaciones/Convalidaciones-Educacion-Superior/350670:Know-the-process>
- What is the difference between homologation and recognition? The answer to this question can be found at the following link:
<https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/convalidaciones/Convalidaciones-Educacion-Superior/355353:Preguntas-Frecuentes>
- In case of doubt, who can help? The answer to this question can be found at the following link:



<https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/convalidaciones/Convalidaciones-Educacion-Superior/355353:Preguntas-Frecuentes>

- What are the steps for the recognition of higher education diplomas? The answer to this question can be found at the following link:
<https://www.gov.co/ficha-tramites-y-servicios/T366>
- What are the costs of the process of validation of higher education diplomas? The answer to this question can be found at the following link:
<https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/convalidaciones/Convalidaciones-Educacion-Superior/350995:Cost-and-duration>

In case of more questions regarding the process, the following link might help:
<https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/convalidaciones/Convalidaciones-Educacion-Superior/355353>: FAQ

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