

Comparative analysis of higher education quality assurance policies in Chile and El Salvador

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Abstract: To analyze the quality assurance policies of higher education in Chile and El Salvador, a qualitative approach was used, with a comparative analysis based on a cross-sectional documentary study. The corpus comprised quality assurance policies and specific ordinary laws in both countries, as well as regulations from the National Accreditation Commission in Chile and the Quality Accreditation Commission in Higher Education in El Salvador. Both countries have achieved levels of autonomy and complexity in establishing a quality culture within higher education institutions, with Chile reaching higher levels of qualification. Although both countries, Chile and El Salvador, have implemented quality evaluation systems in higher education, the realities of each country highlight the need to strengthen regulation and the evolution of these processes. The comparative analysis reveals not only similarities and differences in quality assurance policies but also identifies opportunities for improvement based on regulations, implementation of measures, improvement plans, and best practices in quality assurance.

Keywords: Accreditation, Higher education, Public policy, Quality assurance, Universities.

1. Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education is a relevant and complex topic, and has been the subject of research in recent decades. In fact, the notion of quality has become controversial, as it is a complex process to understand, based on the interaction between educational outputs or inputs and their performance or outcomes [1].

At the beginning of the 1970s, the topic of quality was introduced in Latin America in higher education reforms [2]. However, the topic of evaluation only entered the agenda in the mid-1990s, as a result of complementary phenomena: the increase in demand for higher education and the development of a private business sector in education.

Social problems and student movements of the late 20th century led international organizations and regional governments to recognize the importance of higher education coverage and agree that it must be of high quality. Fernández [3] identifies the 1990s as the period when evaluation systems emerged as a result of several factors, including increased enrollment, student heterogeneity, and market demands.

In Chile, the Quality Assurance System has evolved, particularly with the establishment of the National Accreditation Commission (hereinafter referred to as CNA), a public and autonomous body responsible for verifying and promoting the quality of higher education institutions (hereinafter referred to as, HEIs) and the programs they offer. The National Accreditation Commission (CNA) [4] replaced the National Undergraduate Accreditation Commission (CNAP), which had been established in 1999. In National Accreditation Commission (CNA) [5] received international certification from the

International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) for complying with the proposed best practice guidelines for quality assurance.

In El Salvador, the Higher Education Law [6] established the Supervision and Improvement System for the Academic Quality of Higher Education. This system includes the certification process (annual), the evaluation process (biennial), and the accreditation process. By presidential decree, issued through the Ministry of Education on March 10, 2000, the integration and functions of the Higher Education Institutions' (HEIs) Academic Quality Accreditation Commission (CdA) were regulated [7]. In both cases, the evidence highlights the importance of quality evaluation processes in HEIs, fostering and facilitating continuous and sustained internal quality management actions to ensure they become an inherent part of institutional life.

Quality assurance policies in higher education are framed as state-led initiatives aimed at the continuous improvement of educational services [8–10]. National governments implement mechanisms to ensure quality by considering various factors that, depending on their nature and behavior, provide data reflecting the evolution of HEIs in shaping their educational offerings. Key aspects include the establishment of quality assurance processes for institutional management in undergraduate and graduate teaching, curriculum development and academic offerings, research, outreach and community engagement, administrative regulation, investments, institutional development priorities, and the social, political, and economic demands of the region, among the most significant.

Quality assurance policies can focus on quality control, quality assurance, quality improvement [11] or the establishment of a quality culture [12]. All these approaches are based on an organizational culture that defines quality assurance mechanisms as a cross-cutting focus in institutional operations. Evaluation reflects the institution's status regarding the actual implementation of quality assurance policies and must necessarily include improvement plans to address process weaknesses [8]. It should clearly outline how the institution commits to addressing the challenges identified through evaluation, ensuring that necessary interventions are implemented to enhance and progress toward a culture of quality [12].

This is a significant challenge for Latin America, as studies have identified quality assurance as one of the most pressing issues [National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation [13]]. It represents a major challenge in which the overall institutional project is put under pressure by the current and future social, political, and economic demands of the region [14]. Given this context, the interest in exploring the States' quality assurance policies is highly relevant. Specifically, this study focuses on a comparative analysis of higher education quality assurance policies in Chile and El Salvador.

2. Literature Review

Understanding education quality as a challenge, requires positioning this issue within the Latin American context—a region considered peripheral in relation to the so-called developed world [15]. Latin America faces concerning risk indicators in areas such as poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, access to education, inequality, social gaps, and inequity. However, these challenges can be addressed and improved through quality education [16].

Discussing education quality necessitates recognizing higher education as a cornerstone of national development. This concern is reflected in quality assurance policies, which, although initially shaped by international agreements and treaties, were established in Latin America in the second half of the 20th century—during a period marked by the deregulation, depoliticization, and privatization of higher education [1, 17]. The implementation of quality assurance processes seeks to address current local needs while also responding to the expansion of educational offerings [18]. This, in turn, helps bridge gaps and fosters conditions that contribute to rebalancing the previously mentioned social, cultural, political, and economic indicators [16].

Sancho and Crespo [19] analyzed various HEIs in Latin America. The countries considered in their study included Argentina, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil, Costa Rica, and Cuba. Their research

examined the respective evaluation models and dimensions, concluding that the implementation of higher education quality accreditation systems has led to substantial progress in the region, particularly in management and teaching (both undergraduate and graduate). However, the study also highlighted areas for improvement, such as innovation and cultural diversity.

Reyes, et al. [20] emphasize that national quality assurance systems appear to create gaps between countries in the region, since some systems are more robust than others. This, in turn, influences the development—or lack—of a quality culture. The concept of a quality culture is largely shaped by the frameworks established by the logics of international and multilateral organizations, which, in conjunction with national governments, hold the power to set the standards for quality assurance systems.

A study conducted by Acosta and Stefos [21] on quality assurance systems in higher education in Colombia and Ecuador highlights that quality assurance policies in both countries are strongly influenced by multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), among others. This implies that the policies implemented and decisions made at the national level are subject to external conditions. Despite this, in both Colombia and Ecuador, these policies have contributed to the improvement of national higher education systems.

García, et al. [18] present a comparative analysis of two accreditation models for quality assurance in Colombia. The models examined are those proposed by Silva, et al. [22] and De la Orden Hoz, et al. [23] both of which share certain aspects and indicators while differing in others. However, the key distinction lies in the mechanisms driving them. The model proposed by Silva, et al. [22] outlines a process with 40 indicators for evaluating higher education institutions (HEIs); however, it has been criticized for lacking consultation. According to García, et al. [18] “there have been various criticisms of this model, as it is considered to have been developed by some experts without the proper involvement of IES, which are ultimately responsible for carrying out the process” (p. 203). On the other hand, the model proposed by De la Orden Hoz, et al. [23] which has been used by the National System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, (Sistema Nacional de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior SINACES), promotes greater openness and participation from HEIs.

Ahumada [17] focused on quality assurance processes in Chile and Peru, particularly considering university licensing as a variable in policy development. It is noted that licensing processes in Chile are significantly longer than those in Peru; however, there is a call for greater qualification and transparency in these processes.

Comisión Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria [13] in collaboration with the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI), conducted a comparative study on quality assurance systems across Ibero-America. The study analysed the guidelines of the institutions and agencies leading these processes in each country and identified specific differences in evaluation dimensions. This study aligns with Pedró [24] assertion that the evaluation process is inherently complex due to the diverse types of higher education institutions (HEIs), national regulations, varying levels of autonomy or dependence on accrediting agencies, and other related factors.

In Chile, Rojas and Simicic [25] argue that accreditation processes are merely one component of the broader and more intricate quality assurance framework. They emphasize that achieving high quality standards is only possible when a culture of quality is deeply embedded in daily management practices.

This review allows us to draw several conclusions: the higher education quality accreditation system is a relevant but not decisive component; quality assurance processes in Latin America are regulated and have evolved over the past two decades; there are significantly larger gaps with the adoption of new criteria and the consolidation of stronger institutions; evaluation dimensions are similar across the region in different accreditation models and levels, yet internal and contextual factors in each country result in quality assurance systems being more or less developed in comparison to others in the region; there is diversity in the typology of higher education institutions (HEIs) and in the ways the

sector is regulated; and there is significant variation in the levels of autonomy or dependence of evaluation agencies on the state, which complicates processes and leads to either progress or delays in different countries and within each institution or agency responsible for overseeing quality assurance policies.

In other words, the focus of this study is on higher education quality assurance policies, with a comparative analysis of these policies in Chile and El Salvador.

2.1. Assumptions

It is assumed that the quality assurance policies for higher education in Chile and El Salvador exhibit a distinctive behaviour in alignment with each country's national education system. Moreover, these policies are emerging over time, evolving from one evaluation process to another, leaving little room for higher education institutions (HEIs) to adapt, as changes and modifications in quality assurance policies create gaps that need to be addressed between each transition. As a second assumption, it is believed that the constant modifications in quality assurance policies highlight their provisional nature and the inconsistency in the projections of the agencies that accredit HEIs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Approach, Type, and Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on comparative analysis through a multiple case study with a cross-sectional design. According to Goodrick [26] "Comparative case studies involve the analysis and synthesis of similarities, differences, and patterns across two or more cases that share a common focus or goal" (p. 1). Similarly, Escott [27] states that these studies aim to "gather observations from social entities or historical moments in society to examine similarities, divergences, and inquire into their causes" (p. 57).

3.2. Study Corpus

Analysis units form a corpus that includes quality assurance policies in both Chile and El Salvador, specific ordinary laws in each country, and the specific regulations set forth by the National Accreditation Commission (Chile) and the Higher Education Quality Accreditation Commission (El Salvador).

3.3. Ethical Procedure

This study has been approved by the Scientific Ethical Committee of the Universidad Adventista de Chile (Ruling No. 2023-124) and the Institutional Ethics Committee of the Universidad Evangélica de El Salvador (Record No. 099).

3.4. Findings

The findings focus on a comparative analysis of four fundamental axis: ordinary laws, quality assurance policies in education, specific regulations of accrediting agencies, and the stages of the overall evaluation process in both countries. To enhance the understanding of the results, the guidelines of Pérez-Liñán [28] have been followed, utilizing comparative tables that can be compiled in different formats.

Table 1.
Higher Education Laws.

Axis	Chile	El Salvador
Law	Law 21,091 on Higher Education. It establishes the existence of the National System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (SINACES). Title IV is exclusively dedicated to declaring the amendments to Law 20,129, which establishes a National System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.	The Higher Education Law and Decree 468, within the legal framework of the law, establish the need for quality evaluation in higher education. It creates the Commission for the Accreditation of Quality in Higher Education, the Quality System, sets deadlines for evaluation processes, and provides incentives for accredited higher education institutions (HEIs).
	SINACES is composed of the Ministry of Education, the National Education Council, the National Accreditation Commission (CNA), and the Superintendency of Higher Education. According to the law, "within the scope of their work, higher education institutions are also part of this system" (Article 1).	There is no specific law in this area in El Salvador, but it is supplemented by the development and implementation of the Ministry of Education El Salvador [29].

The comparison of the legal framework related to higher education in Chile and El Salvador highlights the existence of higher education laws in both countries, which guide the evaluation of quality in higher education. In Chile, due to legal requirements, a specific law was enacted to establish SINACES, whereas in El Salvador, this has been implemented through a decree and supplemented by the National Higher Education Policy of El Salvador. A key distinction is that Chilean legislation includes a dedicated law to regulate public policy related to quality assurance processes in higher education, precisely defining the conditions, requirements, deadlines, and mechanisms under which it operates. In contrast, El Salvador does not have a specific law for this purpose; instead, these elements are addressed through the National Higher Education Policy. While this policy provides guidelines for the structure and implementation of quality assurance processes, it is less detailed than Chilean legislation. One factor that may explain this regulatory difference is the mandatory accreditation requirement in Chile, whereas in El Salvador, accreditation remains an optional process.

Table 2.
Higher Education Quality Assurance Policy (PACES).

Axis	Chile	El Salvador
Paces	Law 20,129 guides the national policy, which, although not explicitly documented under that name, is expressed through its provisions. Institutional accreditation is mandatory. There is a management policy for the accreditation process, which is integrated through the CNA website: https://www.cnachile.cl . This website serves as a repository of regulations and documents related to various accreditation processes. It provides a platform for HEIs to upload documentation for self-evaluation processes, and offers audio visual resources, as well as search tools for session records and accreditation rulings.	The PACES of Ministry of Education El Salvador [29] establishes the guidelines that govern the evaluation process of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the country. It envisions the creation of the SINACES. The foundational PACES document designates the third pillar of the policy to guiding strategies that ensure the quality of higher education as a responsibility of the state. Institutional accreditation is voluntary and follows the criteria set by the national policy. There is a process management policy that is integrated through the website of the Cda: https://cda.edu.sv/index.html

Regarding PACES, both Chile and El Salvador have guidelines to regulate quality assurance processes, either through specific instruments or broader policy frameworks. In Chile, Law 20,129 defines the policy that establishes the system, regulates its mechanisms, and outlines the various processes for ensuring the quality of higher education. In El Salvador, the National Higher Education Policy serves as a macro-level document governing the higher education system, incorporating guidelines for quality evaluation within this subsystem. There is also similarity in the fact that, in both countries, various aspects are evaluated. In Chile, dimensions and criteria are used, whereas in the case

of El Salvador, categories of analysis are employed¹. Another relevant similarity lies in the process management platform, which in both cases is accessed through the official website of the corresponding agency, thereby reducing bureaucracy and making the process more transparent. Among the most notable differences expressed in the policy is that, in the Chilean case, the process is mandatory at the institutional level, as well as for doctoral programs and degree programs in education, medicine, dentistry, and medical specialties. When it comes to institutional accreditation, the mechanisms for selecting the programs to be evaluated (undergraduate and graduate) involve a purposeful sample. In the case of El Salvador, the process is voluntary at both the institutional and program levels.

Table 3.
Accrediting Agencies.

Eje	Chile	El Salvador
Regulation of agencies	The National Accreditation Commission (CNA) [4].	The Commission for the Accreditation of Quality in Higher Education is established [30].
	The CNA is a public and autonomous body, created by the National System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.	The CdA is a public body attached to the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology.
	Its function is to evaluate, accredit, and promote the quality of Universities, Professional Institutes, Technical Training Centres, Degree Programs, and Academic Programs.	Its function is to implement the accreditation system as a recognition of the academic quality of HEIs and their various degree programs, in compliance with the regulations governing the process.
	CAN is made up of 12 Commissioners. Its structure considers: a Presidency, 12 Commissioners including one student representative from the University System and one representative from the Technical-Professional System; an Executive Secretariat; Advisory Committees; and Area Committees.	The CdA is composed of 7 members. Its structure includes: a Presidency; 7 main members; an Executive Directorate; permanent technical support staff; and an honorary advisory group.

Regarding the agencies that regulate PACES in both countries, it is noteworthy that both in Chile and El Salvador, there is a legally mandated body responsible for safeguarding, executing, and monitoring the process. In Chile, this role is fulfilled by the CNA, while in El Salvador, it is carried out by the CdA. Both entities have distinct governance and executive structures, differing in their composition and constituents. The most significant difference lies in the fact that the CNA is an autonomous body with decision-making authority, independent from and uninfluenced by any other organization. In contrast, the CdA is a body attached to the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, implementing policy and developing the system as an extension of the ministry.

Presented and compared later in the text.¹

Table 4.
Self assessment Process.

Chile	El Salvador
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Submission to the CNA of the Letter Requesting Incorporation into the Process, signed by the legal representative of the institution, indicating: areas to be accredited; campuses and proposed dates for the external evaluation visit. 2. Uploading of Documentation to the Platform <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional Self-Evaluation Report, which includes: institutional reference framework; description and analysis of the self-evaluation process; critical analysis of the evaluation results; and Improvement Plans aimed at enhancing quality assurance policies and mechanisms. • Institutional Data Sheet • Mandatory Annexes 3. Request to the Super intendency of Higher Education. Preparation of a financial report to assess the economic sustainability of the educational project. 4. External Evaluation Visit 5. External Evaluation Report 6. Accreditation Statement 7. Appeals and Reconsideration Requests, if necessary 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Institutional Accreditation Request, submitted electronically and in three physical copies to the offices of the Accreditation Commission (CdA) during the period established by the Commission, signed by the applicant and accompanied by documentation that certifies the legal authority of the person acting on behalf of the Higher Education Institution (HEI). 2. Self-Evaluation Report conducted within the 12 months prior to the submission of the accreditation request. This self-evaluation must involve an objective and systematic analysis process carried out in accordance with the established categories of analysis and will be subject to verification by the CdA through a team of peer reviewers. The IES must verifiably explain how it aligns with the standards of good performance in each category and include annexes that provide evidence supporting its statements, as well as an improvement plan to address any identified weaknesses. 3. Additional Documents: development plan, financial statements, two self-evaluations previously conducted by the IES in compliance with DNES regulations, formal declaration stating that there are no falsehoods in the request or accompanying documentation. For IES offering programs related to the health field, a certification issued by the respective Oversight Board and the Higher Council of Public Health must be included upon request; Data required by the CdA concerning various areas of academic activity, teaching, research, community outreach, and administration.

Regarding the self-evaluation process, each agency has its own established mechanisms, procedures, requirements, deadlines, forms, and documents that each institution must submit through the process management system. Although there are differences in terms of the documents to be submitted, formats, deadlines, and the entities responsible for reviewing and certifying them, it is noteworthy that the process adheres to an international standard that includes self-evaluation processes, followed by the review of the report, the preparation and visit of peer reviewers, and the issuance of a statement. While the self-evaluation process has its particularities, it is important to highlight that the overall pattern does not differ significantly, given that the essential input is the self-evaluation report. The requirement in both agencies reports a critical, objective analysis aimed at a systematic exercise which, in itself, evidences a quality assurance mechanism within the respective institution.

Table 5.
Dimensions - Criteria and Categories of Evaluation.

Chile	El Salvador
<p>Criteria And Quality Standards for Institutional Accreditation In The University Subsystem Dimensions and Evaluation Criteria</p> <p>Dimensions 1, 2, and 3 are mandatory for accreditation from the date these criteria come into effect. Dimension 4 will be mandatory starting May 30, 2025, and Dimension 5 is voluntary for accreditation.</p> <p>1. <u>Teaching and Learning Outcomes</u></p> <p>Criterion 1. Educational model and curriculum design</p> <p>Criterion 2. Teaching and learning processes and outcomes</p> <p>Criterion 3. Academic staff</p> <p>Criterion 4. Research, teaching innovation, and improvement of the learning process</p> <p>2. <u>Strategic Management and Institutional Resources</u></p> <p>Criterion 5: Governance and organizational structure</p> <p>Criterion 6: Personnel management and development</p> <p>Criterion 7: Management of coexistence, gender equity, diversity, and inclusion</p> <p>Criterion 8: Resource management</p> <p>3. <u>Internal Quality Assurance</u></p> <p>Criterion 9: Management and outcomes of internal quality assurance</p> <p>Criterion 10: Quality assurance of academic programs.</p> <p>4. <u>Community Engagement</u></p> <p>Criterion 11: Community engagement policy and management</p> <p>Criterion 12: Outcomes and impact of community engagement</p> <p>5. <u>Research, Creation, and/or Innovation</u></p> <p>Criterion 13: Policy and management of research, creation, and/or innovation</p> <p>Criterion 14: Results of research, creation, and/or innovation.</p> <p>Each criterion includes three positioning standards that reflect progressive performance levels. These standards characterize stages of advancement in the continuous improvement cycles of the aspects addressed by each criterion.</p>	<p>Framework for the Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions</p> <p>Analysis Categories</p> <p><u>General Directorate</u></p> <p>1. Category of Analysis: Governance and Institutional Administration</p> <p>2. Category of Analysis: Institutional Integrity</p> <p>3. Category of Analysis: Community Outreach</p> <p><u>Academic Management</u></p> <p>4. Category of Analysis: Students</p> <p>5. Category of Analysis: Academic Staff</p> <p>6. Category of Analysis: Academic Programs and Other Courses</p> <p>Category of Analysis: Research</p> <p>8. Category of Analysis: Educational Resources</p> <p><u>Administrative Management</u></p> <p>9. Category of Analysis: Financial Administration</p> <p>10. Category of Analysis: Physical Infrastructure</p> <p>Each category of analysis includes specific criteria and indicators, which specify the information or evidence that may be submitted to support compliance with the criterion.</p>

The focus areas of accreditation evaluation report, in the case of Chile, assessment dimensions (broken down into criteria), and in the case of El Salvador, categories of analysis. In Chile, there are five dimensions comprising a total of 14 criteria, and each criterion includes three standards or levels of achievement, depending on the progress made by the institution or program being evaluated. In El Salvador, the evaluation focuses on three main areas, from which 10 categories of analysis are derived. Each category includes criteria and indicators to guide the evaluation process.

Currently in Chile, the application of the evaluation dimensions is progressive: Dimensions 1, 2, and 3 are mandatory. Dimension 4 will become mandatory starting in 2025. Dimension 5 is voluntary, except for IES seeking an excellence accreditation (6 to 7 years).

Table 6.
Peer Review Visits.

Chile	El Salvador
The peer review committee is composed of at least four members, as follows: a chairperson, responsible for leading and coordinating the committee; two (or more) evaluators who are experts in the areas in which the institution will be evaluated; and an international evaluator who is a specialist in the field. A representative from the CNA also participates, providing technical support and acting as an official witness. The visit lasts three to five days. Prior to the visit, the reviewers must familiarize themselves with the institutional context to ensure a respectful attitude toward the institution's specific dynamics. The information provided by the committee represents the external validation judgment regarding the institution's level of compliance with its self-regulation processes, and the implementation of its quality assurance policies and mechanisms, as demonstrated through results.	Peer review teams are composed of at least three members, with the maximum number depending on the size or complexity of the Higher Education Institution (IES). At least one of the team members may come from a foreign IES or accreditation body. In the case of focused visits, depending on the nature of the subject to be reviewed, the Accreditation Commission (CdA) may assign a smaller number of peers. The Commission will appoint the chairperson of each peer review team, who will lead the group and carry out their duties in accordance with the guidelines established by the CdA.

Regarding the composition of the peer review committee, each agency defines a team that visits the respective institution. The composition of each commission corresponds to the respective standards, highlighting the presence of an international peer observer in the case of institutional accreditations. The visit takes place after the evaluation of the self-assessment report, according to the timelines established by the agencies. The definitions presented in the composition of the teams acting as peer reviewers appear to be more concrete and specific in Chile than in El Salvador.

Table 7.
Closing Meeting.

Chile	El Salvador
Once the site visit is concluded, the peer reviewers are required to maintain the confidentiality of all reviewed documentation. Should there be a need for additional information, such requests must be channelled through the process coordinator. The peer review committee has a maximum period within which to submit its report, which must be consistent with the oral report delivered at the conclusion of the visit. The committee will issue a judgment on the institution's compliance with the established criteria, identifying strengths and weaknesses within each evaluation dimension, and providing an overall judgment for each area based on the previously defined cross-cutting criteria. The Executive Secretariat will review the report to ensure that it includes all essential elements. The National Accreditation Commission (CNA) will send the Peer Review Committee Report to the institution, which will have ten business days to submit any factual observations, in case there is a need to correct inaccurately reported information.	According to the Institutional Accreditation Regulations, once the accreditation decision has been made, the Executive Secretariat must notify the institution of the decision within 24 hours. Subsequently, within 30 business days following the adoption of the decision, the institution will be formally notified of the legal act containing the rationale behind the judgment rendered. In accordance with Law No. 19.880, the institution may file a Request for Reconsideration (Recurso de Reposición) regarding the accreditation decision within five business days from the date of notification of the resolution. The Commission will have a period of 30 business days to issue a ruling on the matter. This entire process is regulated by Circular No. 21 of the Accreditation Commission. If the institution's accreditation is denied, it may file an appeal before the National Education Council within 15 business days from the notification of the resolution being challenged.

The conclusion of the peer review visit represents a significant milestone, as it involves procedures that must align with the protocols established by the respective agencies. As presented in Table No. 7, in both countries, the accrediting agency issues a formal statement based on the reports submitted by the peer review committee. It is the agency that communicates the final verdict, which the evaluated institution may or may not appeal.

Table 8.
Pronunciamento de Acreditación.

Chile	El Salvador
The CNA may grant or deny accreditation to the institution, based on the level of development of its quality assurance policies and mechanisms in the various areas subject to evaluation. HEIs may undergo a new process once the accreditation period has expired. The accreditation decision rests with the CNA, not with the peer reviewers, who only issue a report in their capacity as external evaluators. Based on compliance with the established quality criteria and standards, institutional accreditation may be classified as Excellent (6–7 years), Advanced (4–5 years), or Basic (3 years), depending on the level of progressive development required and demonstrated by the institution. In order to qualify for the level of Excellence, all dimensions—both mandatory and voluntary—must be accredited.	For the CdA, accreditation represents an official recognition based on quality criteria and indicators, as well as a reflection of the institution's ongoing commitment to continuous improvement of its academic quality. The status of an accredited or candidate institution or program may be revoked prior to the expiration of the respective accreditation period under the following circumstances: In the event of dissolution, closure, or modification of the original institutional nature of the IES. If it is proven that the institution engages in illicit activities, direct profit-making, or actions contrary to morality, public safety, or public order. As a result of a legal, academic, or administrative incident that significantly undermines the quality that originally warranted the accreditation status. Due to the reduction or destruction of the assets designated for its operation. If a HEI loses its institutional accreditation status, it will automatically lose the accreditation of all its accredited programs. If the institutional accreditation period expires without renewal, the programs that remain accredited will retain their status only until the end of their respective accreditation periods and may not be renewed unless the institution regains its accredited status. The loss of accreditation of individual programs does not affect the institution's overall accreditation status. In the case of either an institution or program losing its accreditation, the withdrawal of this status will be duly published.

Each agency differs in terms of the deadlines for filing an appeal and the timeframes for issuing a response; however, the existence of an operational appeals mechanism is a common feature. The Chilean case differs slightly in procedural terms, as the institution has access to the peer review report before it is evaluated by the CNA. This allows the institution to provide a response consistent with the results and the visit. Although this is a procedural step, it offers the institution an opportunity to validate the findings before the higher authority. This is not the case in El Salvador.

Finally, regarding the agencies' pronouncements following the evaluation process, it is noteworthy that the verdict may or may not be appealed by the institution—an aspect that is consistent in both countries. In addition, the verdict entails a decision on the number of years for which the institution is, or is not, granted accreditation.

4. Discussion

The first point that stands out for discussion concerns the recognition of the need for the existence, development, regulation, and evolution of PACES in both Chile and El Salvador. In both countries, there is a well-established structure in place to support processes aimed at enhancing the quality of educational services. This includes national systems and evaluating bodies—CNA and CdA, respectively—as well as infrastructure, legislation, resources, funding, and relevant public information made available to higher education institutions (IES). This aligns with the perspectives presented by the Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Quality in Distance Higher Education & Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja [31] as well as by Martínez-Zarzuelo, et al. [32]; Medina-Orozco [33] and Cancino and Schmal [34]. In the Chilean context, it is particularly relevant that enrollment in an accredited university provides students with access to various benefits, including tuition-free education, scholarships, and others [35].

One notable difference that draws attention is the level of autonomy held by the accrediting agencies. In Chile, the CNA is an autonomous body, whereas in El Salvador, the CdA is an entity affiliated with an executive ministry. This distinction allows for several considerations. First, the Chilean case is notable for the CNA's independence from any ministerial body, which grants it a higher degree of autonomy and suggests a potential safeguard against influence during the evaluation process and decision-making, particularly in differentiating between public and private institutions. Although the International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean [36] warns that

legal autonomy does not necessarily equate to practical autonomy, it nevertheless highlights this as a significant step in the progressive development of such organizations. This evolution applies not only to public bodies but also to private ones, as was the case in Chile prior to the establishment of the CNA [20]. This is particularly relevant when considering the privatization of education in Chile [37] which is tied to a business-oriented logic that informs the practices, systems, and models used for quality assurance and accreditation [12].

One potential disadvantage could be the fact that both members of the CNA's internal structure and the peer reviewers themselves are affiliated with higher education institutions, which could lead to biases in the evaluation processes. This concern has been raised by Scharager and Díaz [38] as well as by Marquina [39] and Marquina [40]. In fact, changes have been introduced regarding the procedures for selecting and training peer reviewers—changes aimed at minimizing potential biases. The CNA has paid particular attention to the attitudinal dimension, recognizing its importance in shaping the role and training of peer reviewers [41]. In the case of El Salvador, the CdA is a body affiliated with executive governmental agencies. One possible advantage of this structure is the emphasis placed on ensuring adherence to established quality standards for higher education institutions. However, according to the International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean [36]:

The autonomy of quality assurance agencies (QAAs) in HE is essential to ensure that institutional and program evaluations are objective and free from undue external influence. Autonomy contributes to the transparency, relevance, and international credibility of both the QAAs and their evaluations" (p. 1).

Thus, what may very well represent an added value could also become a source of evaluative practices that compromise the integrity of the process, bias the outcomes, and affect not only the higher education institutions under review but also the legitimacy of the accrediting bodies and those who rely on their assessments.

Another key aspect to highlight is the existence of legislation in both Chile and El Salvador that establishes systems for quality assurance in higher education. These legal frameworks create institutions and structures, set guidelines, allocate budgets, and define timelines and conditions for the accreditation processes of HEIs. Within this context, both similarities and distinctive features emerge, particularly in the legal domain. In Chile, there is a specific and detailed regulatory framework, whereas in El Salvador, the general legislation encompasses policies related to the evaluation of higher education quality and the processes that lead to accreditation. Beyond these differences—which are normal and even desirable—it is important to consider the evolution of the system in both countries. This includes recognizing opportunities for improvement, enhanced access to information, increased transparency in processes, inter-institutional dialogue, and the identification of critical points within procedures, systems, mechanisms, and regulations. According to Fernández and Ramos [42] while the system and PACES represent an essential framework for reflecting the status of HEIs, they also offer accrediting agencies a valuable opportunity, as they enable the development of organizational capacities and contribute to the overall enhancement of the quality assurance system.

Each agency has designed mechanisms to account for the evaluation process at both the institutional (corporate) level and the level of individual academic programs. However, whether or not accreditation is mandatory reflects not only the model adopted by the respective agency, but also the maturity of the educational system, the strengthening of policies related to quality assurance in higher education, and the broader projections embedded in a country's public education policies [10, 13]. Therefore, when comparing Chile and El Salvador to other countries, it becomes evident that, in the international context, Chile would be positioned as a country that has made significant progress in the development of its quality assurance systems and PACES [13, 36]. Nevertheless, Chile implements frequent and significant changes within limited timeframes, which constrains the ability of higher education institutions to process and effectively implement those changes. While such an observation might be interpreted as reflecting institutional complacency or a lack of willingness to enhance quality assurance processes—particularly in relation to the development of a culture of quality within IES—it is important to recognize that legal and regulatory implementation is typically far swifter than cultural

assimilation. This is especially true when addressing organizational habits and institutional conceptions [43]. Therefore, it must be understood that building a true culture of quality within a university involves much more than the mere institutional adjustment to legislative changes.

In the case of El Salvador, quality assurance processes in higher education are voluntary. When compared to other countries in the region, a certain lag becomes evident in terms of public policies aimed at strengthening the implementation of more robust and consistent quality assurance systems in higher education. While an emerging model is in place, progress can be observed over recent years, particularly when comparing the findings of the Comisión Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria [13] study with those of the International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean [36].

As a result, quality assurance policies in higher education in Chile and El Salvador present both differences and similarities in their approaches and processes, with the accrediting agencies and their decision-making mechanisms playing a central role. In Chile, the CNA has the authority to determine whether an institution will be accredited or denied accreditation, based on the development and implementation of its internal policies and quality mechanisms. The accreditation period can range from three to seven years, depending on the institution's level of development and compliance with quality standards [3]. In El Salvador, the process is carried out by the Commission for Accreditation of Quality in Higher Education. Although the processes are relatively similar in structure, they reflect an official recognition based on predefined quality indicators and criteria.

Despite the differing nuances, the evolution of evaluative standards in both contexts demonstrates that the integration of the concept of quality in higher education is a firmly established and irreversible development. In terms of the institutional expression of quality from the perspective of state systems—although the legal frameworks underpinning its implementation in Chile and El Salvador may vary in specificity or equivalency—both countries have succeeded in establishing regulations, criteria, and standards that are broadly and sectorally applied, enabling these structures to be sustained and effective in the long term. However, this expression goes beyond regulatory frameworks. As Rojas and Simicic [25] argue, accreditation processes are only one component of a broader quality assurance system, and recognizing the complexity of such processes requires a culture of quality that permeates everyday institutional management.

In Chile's case, the CNA introduced specific guidelines in 2019 related to the evaluation of virtual programs—whether blended or fully online. As highlighted by Valdés, et al. [44] the evaluation criteria for virtual programs initially mirrored those of face-to-face programs, but included up to 23 additional criteria to address the distinct characteristics and quality of virtual education. Under the new guidelines, however, this distinction no longer exists. In El Salvador, there are no specific directives related to virtual programs in the documents analysed.

With relation to international engagement, Chile's CNA stands out—compared to its Salvadoran counterpart—for having a more decisive presence and stronger involvement in regional quality assurance systems. The CNA's international role is evident in its direct participation in the Ibero-American System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (SIACES). In contrast, El Salvador's CdA does not participate directly in SIACES; rather, it is represented through the Central American Accreditation Council for Higher Education, under the Ministry of Education, which serves as the link to SIACES.

What does this allow? It enables the sharing of challenges and issues related to national policies (in their full scope), the evaluation of the evolution of their processes, and the assimilation of regional definitions that strengthen national processes, regulations, and national policies, among other aspects.

In this context, what can accreditation agencies (such as the CNA and CdA) improve within the framework of higher education quality assurance systems? What are the critical focal points in each country that drive these agencies to continue implementing internal improvement plans? Based on the analyses presented, it can be argued that both Chile and El Salvador—especially the latter—face challenges related to expanding the autonomy of their quality assurance agencies. This expansion

should go beyond jurisdictional aspects and even beyond the institutional levels reached so far (as is the case in Chile, for instance). Another key challenge lies in the need to deepen the collective understanding of the importance of further enhancing the quality of educational services in order to guarantee the right to education and to quality education in both Chile and El Salvador. This indicates that the matter is one of State responsibility, requiring the involvement of all stakeholders engaged in the mission of education [45]. Such involvement is essential, on the decision making in this realm inevitably reshape national social dynamics, for instance: education budgets; funding for HEIs; transparency in the selection of authorities; formulation of laws and policies; improvement of evaluation systems; establishment of standards tailored to different types of universities in accordance with their organizational capacities, coverage, and developmental thresholds; and the impact of accreditation processes on the academic paths of students, faculty, administrators, and other HEIs staff, among others.

5. Conclusions

Quality in higher education is a significant and complex issue in Latin America. The accreditation processes implemented reflect the specific measures adopted by each country to improve and strengthen educational quality at this level.

A comparative analysis of higher education quality assurance policies in Chile and El Salvador highlights the importance of understanding these processes as key tools for continuous improvement. In this context, each State plays a fundamental role as a unifying force of collective will through its various bodies—ranging from the design of public education policy to the allocation of resources through fiscal policy. A central component in this system is the role of evaluation agencies, which serve as a cornerstone in the assessment and certification of these quality measures.

Experience shows that the challenge of quality assurance goes beyond evaluating academic offerings or the number of graduates. Rather, it points to an institutional commitment to a culture of quality, grounded in criteria such as academic excellence, social responsibility, and adherence to the standards of university institutions, while fostering their unique cultures and capabilities. Strengthening quality assurance policies in both countries, through the implementation of diverse models tailored to their respective realities and grounded in a culture of quality, requires a shared commitment to building a competent higher education system—one capable of effectively responding to both current and future challenges.

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Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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