

Fernando José Castellanos Menjívar

**INSTITUTIONAL AND IDENTITARIAN
INFLUENCE OF INTERNATIONAL QUALITY
ASSURANCE IN SALVADORAN HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

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ABSTRACT

Fernando José Castellanos Menjívar: Institutional and Identitarian Influence of International Quality Assurance in Salvadoran Higher Education Institutions

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Quality assurance for higher education has been a topic of much discussion across systems in Latin America since the end of the 20th century (Lemaitre, 2017). For the case of El Salvador, progress was made with the enactment of laws on higher education in 1995 and 2004 (Flores, 2021), with the last being current at the time of this publication. For the national legislation, the final accreditation of quality assurance is an optional process, with only 15 of 40 institutions possessing it. Despite this context, some of the current nationally accredited universities go even further and pursue international accreditations. Given this context, this research seeks to find the aspects of the institutional environment and organizational identity of such institutions that are influencing their pursuit of international quality assurance as part of their activities.

To answer this question, this study follows a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews of key personnel on quality assurance in two nationally and internationally accredited Salvadoran higher education institutions, as well as documental analysis of both institutions' current strategic plans. The personnel chosen are top level figures in the institution, with an average of 15 years of work experience across various roles.

The results of this research demonstrated that the organizational identity of nationally accredited institutions has a fundamental role for the choice of institutions in embarking on international quality assurance processes. From the three pillars of new institutionalism, this study proved that the Salvadoran higher education system is highly heterogeneous, with various clusters of institutions following different meanings in the regulative, normative, and cultural cognitive areas (Scott, 2014). This, combined with a mostly outdated system of regulations, created a divide among higher education institutions in which the ones with national accreditation established a deeper sense of belonging towards the continuous improvement and fitness-for-purpose concepts of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). This resulted in the reliance of international quality assurance as a guide for institutions to continue their institutional goals and further differentiate themselves in the national system.

Keywords: El Salvador, higher education, new institutionalism, organizational identity, quality assurance, international quality assurance.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	5
1.1	Research Problem	6
1.2	Research Gap	7
1.3	Research Purpose and Question.....	8
1.4	Structure of the Study.....	9
2	QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION	10
2.1	General Understandings	10
2.1.1	<i>Approaches of Quality Assurance.....</i>	<i>14</i>
2.2	Quality Assurance in Salvadoran Higher Education.....	17
2.2.1	<i>General Context of Higher Education in El Salvador</i>	<i>17</i>
2.2.2	<i>Review of Quality Assurance in El Salvador.....</i>	<i>19</i>
2.3	Previous Research in the Context of this Study.....	21
3	ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK.....	25
3.1	New Institutionalism in Higher Education	27
3.1.1	<i>Three Pillars of Institutions.....</i>	<i>29</i>
3.2	Organisational Identity	34
4	METHODOLOGY	37
4.1	Research Design.....	37
4.2	Data Collection.....	38
4.3	Data Analysis.....	40
4.4	Limitations of the Research	41
5	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	42
5.1	Results.....	43
5.1.1	<i>Findings From the Three Pillars of Institutions</i>	<i>43</i>
5.1.2	<i>Findings in Organizational Identity.....</i>	<i>52</i>
5.2	Discussion	55
6	CONCLUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	59
	REFERENCES	61
	APPENDICES	76
	Appendix 1: Interview Protocol for Data Collection	76
TABLES		
TABLE 1.	Distribution of higher education institutions in El Salvador by sector.....	18
TABLE 2.	Distribution of accredited higher education institutions in El Salvador by sector. 19	
TABLE 3.	List of interviewees, the institution they belong to and their role within it.	39

1 INTRODUCTION

Higher education in El Salvador still holds many conditions and challenges characteristic of models in Latin America (Lemaitre, 2017). However, compared to systems in the region, not much progress has been made since significant reforms in the transition from the 20th to the 21st century.

Research done in overarching aspects of this issue have progressed dialogues among institutions to tackle the heavy decentralization in the system. However, much work still needs to be done for including all institutions and incentivizing the public sector to have a more proactive role (Megan et al., 2018).

In this context quality assurance is a relevant topic for Salvadoran institutions due to its capabilities to enable the necessary changes to improve the national system and uphold it to a more relevant set of standards according to both national and institutional needs (Hou et al., 2020; Houston & Paewai, 2013; Williams & Harvey, 2015). To reach a stage in which such discussions can take place, first it is important to shed light on the current state of quality among Salvadoran higher education institutions.

This thesis focuses its efforts on displaying and analysing the aspects that Salvadoran institutions possess to be inclined towards international quality assurance in their activities, despite a national environment that has had no noteworthy progress for this topic in recent years. It uses two perspectives, one institutional (or external) aimed at analysing the factors that motivate institutions to have a focus on external quality assurance for their activities; and other one aimed at exploring whether these factors have a relationship with the organizational identity of institutions, corresponding to a more internal perspective of the problem.

The results of this research can provide a significant contribution for seeking the avenues for Salvadoran institutions to improve their activities through the participation in quality processes. The findings on both institutional and identitarian perspectives are expected to enable a necessary discussion from an epistemological view of higher education in El Salvador, thus achieving more possibilities for change of the current circumstances.

1.1 Research Problem

Quality assurance in higher education has been considered a relevant topic since its appearance in the later stages of the 20th century, when the concept appeared in contexts in which it was not considered relevant before (Newton, 2002). It also mainly appeared as a response towards increasing pressures for public accountability and discussions surrounding the effective use of public funds in higher education (Green, 1994).

Among the many ramifications in which research in quality assurance has been directed to, the measurement or analysis of how a quality assurance environment is understood in national contexts is of importance. As the practice spread, countries started adopting quality assurance mechanisms that included the potential risk of not accounting for the local needs and policies, going for copies of what other countries have done, and defeating the core principle of the process itself (Kells, 1995, 1999).

Higher education is shaped differently among regions and countries. What applies to one system will most probably not be a similar or better fit for another. Quality assurance models depend on elements such as the existing culture of evaluation, the willingness of stakeholders to take part in the process, the availability of system-wide data collection processes or the presence of existing policies and what the extent of its regulations (Kells, 1995).

Quality assurance systems have evolved from it's a focus of public accountability to also be an effective actor for how higher education is facing global trends such as massification, digitalization, internationalization and marketization (Hou et al., 2020). External evaluators have also been proven necessary when they are linked to characteristics equal to "impartiality, credibility, authority, comprehensiveness, consistency and transparency" (Thune, 1996, p.31). However, in many contexts this has also received counterarguments towards issues in trust and legitimacy of higher education (Enders, 2005).

On these scenarios, understanding how institutions, either individually or as a sector, react to their environment in terms of national quality assurance systems becomes a topic of relevance. As the providers of key elements for the development of societies, understanding what is positively or negatively impacting their operations

when it comes to quality is relevant for their self-improvement and the better of national systems overall.

1.2 Research Gap

Much of the research done regarding quality assurance in Latin America, beyond studies done per country, fail to exemplify or highlight the performance of Central American countries such as El Salvador. As shown in articles such as Lemaitre (2017) and Appe et al. (2017), many aspects of the region are shared, which could translate into providing the highlighted attributes to most or all countries. However, there is a lack of representation from the Central American perspective. As described by Gerón-Piñón et al. (2021), little research has still been conducted on quality assurance in Latin America, which has resulted in an equally small amount of evidence to support what is occurring in certain contexts. This research seeks to fill this gap for the case of El Salvador and provide evidence on how this topic is being addressed.

Previous studies about higher education in El Salvador have mentioned quality assurance as an important aspect to address for institutions. However, most publications have only highlighted superficial aspects of the matter and have not focused on how the interplay of quality assurance and higher education institutions function at a national level (Nuila, 2011; Elías, 2011). Furthermore, there is also a lack of evidence on whether or how the quality assurance system is performing, and if it provides trust for the involved stakeholders.

Furthermore, in more recent articles, Flores (2021) provides hints of how the system is performing. He concludes that, in reference to quality assurance, higher education institutions see the accreditation system to enhance their market perspective while not making so much of an effort to be up to standards in terms of education and research. Furthermore, he expresses that the standards for accreditation are outdated and lack the exigence of how an excellent institution should perform, making accreditation more of a pantomime than an instrument of truthful performance.

Deeper research on the performance of higher education in El Salvador has been done with international cooperation from the United States. The studies address, albeit not focused solely on the topic of quality, the need to raise the standards or seeking on

ways to improve the quality of higher education as one of the possibilities to tackle problems within the system. (Megan et al., 2018; United States Agency for International Development, 2012).

1.3 Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this thesis is to light evidence onto what are the current reasons for Salvadoran higher education institutions to consider external quality processes as part of their operations. As previously described in the research problem, understanding how institutions play their role in their national higher education systems is crucial for the proper accomplishment of their role in society. However, the research gap highlights that knowledge about this is scarce in the Salvadoran context. Furthermore, the available information and research done in the country is closer to a superficial focus, while other countries in Latin America have accomplished more in this regard.

The Salvadoran higher education system also possesses some peculiar differences in terms of quality assurance that differ from many other systems across the region and the world. The national accreditation system is a voluntary process (Comisión de Acreditación de la Calidad Académica, 2020). It does not depend on incentives or being mandatory to influence institutions towards enhancing an orientation towards quality on their institutional or academic processes. It is a choice for institutions to undertake them. Moreover, the national accreditation process is of institutional quality assurance, which does not include accreditation of degrees.

Considering this background, understanding the reasons for Salvadoran institutions for choosing national quality procedures, and then enhance their commitment by being participant on international accreditations, can provide valuable insights for improving the overall environment of quality assurance in Salvadoran higher education.

This research posits that there are gaps for allowing a comprehensive understanding of the environment of Salvadoran higher education institutions and their commitment to uphold themselves towards a criteria of internationally recognized quality standards that are additional from the also voluntary ones from the national accreditation agency. Moreover, opting for international standards in addition to

national ones highlights the possibility of a commitment to quality within the organization. To address this within this research, it will also be important to address the impact of the organizational elements within institutions themselves that may have an effect in how institutions act towards their environment, aside from a deep analysis of the institutional environment itself. This lies on the assumption that, because of the characteristics of the Salvadoran case, it is also necessary to seek the possibility that the behaviour of institutions is also determined by identitarian circumstances. Therefore, the main question for this thesis is: What aspects of the institutional environment and organizational identity of nationally accredited Salvadoran higher education institutions influence their pursuit of international quality assurance?

The sub-questions are:

- How is the institutional environment of Salvadoran higher education institutions who are nationally accredited affecting their behaviour towards international quality assurance?
- Does the organizational identity of Salvadoran higher education institutions who are nationally accredited influence their intent to seek international quality assurance?

1.4 Structure of the Study

This thesis is divided into six chapters, with this introduction as a part of it. It will be continued with a literature review focused on quality assurance in higher education, its complex conceptualization and typification's. It also includes two subsections dedicated to further deepening the context of this study. The first one is dedicated to exploring higher education in El Salvador, with a stronger focus on how quality assurance has developed there in relation with the previous conceptualizations. The second one is dedicated to exploring previous research in the context of the study, which includes scenarios in which the conditions are similar to the ones of El Salvador.

The third chapter focuses on detailing the analytical framework that operates for this study. First, it presents the various approaches considered for this research, followed by outlining the reasons for which the three pillars of new institutional theory and a conceptual approach of organizational identity were deemed as appropriate. This

is followed by the overall understanding of new institutionalism, and how studies have approached it in terms of quality assurance in higher education. Furthermore, the section concludes with general understandings of institutional identity in higher education.

The fourth chapter of this thesis is the methodology. This section outlines all the aspects of research design and data collection within the qualitative method. It presents a detailed description of how the research will be conducted, including the institutions that will be analysed, what data will be collected and how. Moreover, it describes how the data collected will be analysed, the measures undertaken to assure validity and reliability, and concludes with possible limitations of this research.

The fifth chapter focuses on showcasing the analysis of the data collected, outlining the relationships between the discoveries of the research and the analytical framework. The findings are also thoroughly discussed within the context of the Salvadoran higher education system.

Lastly, the sixth chapter is comprised of the conclusions and recommendations of the study. It begins by highlighting the main findings of the research, pointing in a summarized manner the main discoveries discussed in the fifth chapter. It is then continued by recommendations, which are divided for practitioners and for future researchers.

2 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 General Understandings

Much literature has been produced to try to decipher how quality assurance plays out in higher education. What has been produced suggests that, even though many scholars have done research in this topic from and to many contexts, through time the concept of quality is still difficult to precise, which according to Elassy (2015) it might be due to quality being a relative concept and at the same time it is something being used in many scenarios even inside the higher education context. In the view of Houston & Paewai (2013), this predicament can be viewed as “a ‘wicked problem’ with no immediate

solution” (p.262), which in clear terms, they explain, it means that many parties have knowledge, interest and position to provide insights to the discussion. However, this also indicates that none has the authority to set what is right and wrong as absolutes in the field.

This is also supported by Elken & Stensaker (2018), who highlight the existence of multiple concepts and the various procedures that institutions undertake as ‘quality’. Based on this, they conclude that there is fragmentation in how the term is used, as well as the lack of overarching concepts that could help to classify all this multiplicity together.

Some of the more standardized concepts are such as the one of Harvey & Green, (1993), which identified quality by viewing it as “exception, as perfection, as fitness for purpose, as value for money and as transformative” (p. 9). Furthermore, Schindler et al., (2015) summarize many attempts of conceptualization based on common themes used by authors across the spectrum. They classify four broad conceptualizations: quality as purposeful, transformative, exceptional, and accountable. From these types of conceptualizations, it has been identified that, among stakeholders, three categories appear as dominant: value for money, fitness for purpose and transformation (Williams & Harvey, 2015).

In another perspective, focused more on the performance aspect in higher education, Vlasceanu et al. (2007) refer to quality assurance as “an all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions or programmes” (p. 74). On this note, the idea of evaluating encompasses all the procedures needed to certify that quality is being guaranteed, which are tasks that need to be accounted for or by the various actors that work in a system.

All aspects considered, Harvey (2004), in the Analytic Quality Glossary, identifies the core definition of assurance in quality as “the collections of policies, procedures, systems and practices internal or external to the organisation designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality”.

From all the previous definitions, it can be noted that quality assurance in higher education is a matter of theories, actions and actors that cover various understandings of how these actors perform, according to the canons established by the theoretical

approaches they attach to, most likely according to their local, regional, or international involvement. This can direct the discussion towards seeking what is the purpose, the results, of quality assurance, for which there are also many views.

Harvey (2007) sets an example of the operativity of quality in higher education, mentioning that its basis lays on its relationship with the nature of learning. Moreover, he focuses on quality assurance as part of an interaction process, in which assurance is the principle for which others can be convinced about the adequacy of learning processes.

This purpose of quality assurance as learning is not, however, the only approach in which it can be understood in practical matters. From a more global, political-oriented perspective, Lemaitre (2002) remarks that the definition of quality that is commonly understood across the globe converges on a bias that originates from the understanding of universities that is predominantly oriented on specific ideologies and traditions. This means in consequence that quality assurance has not only expanded for its perceived benefits with terms such as value for money, fitness for purpose and transformation (Williams & Harvey, 2015), but also from a perspective based on enhancing the promotion of models of governance, educative models and policy in higher education that could be perceived as dominant or preferable.

From this view, there are some implications to be drawn in alternative views in how quality assurance purposes have been implemented or understood as in different contexts. It has been hinted, for example, that it operates as a political instrument in Asia, with the autonomy of quality assurance agencies is in doubt due to their existence being closely related to public authorities, highlighting that quality assurance is inexorably connected to a national regulatory system despite the expectations from multiple stakeholders (Hou et al., 2020). In Latin America, on the other hand, quality assurance mechanisms are set on doubts due to its perceived poor impact towards the needs of stakeholders in countries, and the need to further discuss on the role of quality assurance where universities have a closer relationship with autonomy (Mendoza, 2020). Furthermore, in Africa, there are still ongoing discussions surrounding how quality can be better implemented and improved with the assistance of international development (Shabani et al., 2014).

Kettunen (2008) reaches similar understandings in terms of the value of national evaluations influencing institutions: “Even though the aim of the quality assurance agencies and ministers of education is not to harmonize the diverse quality assurance systems, this study proposes a step towards a predetermined model but allows flexibility for individual HEIs to build their own quality assurance systems and apply their own procedures for future planning” (p. 330). It threads between the necessity of having common frameworks for institutions as a source of legitimacy for external evaluations, while also understanding that institutions need to oversee in the shaping of their own processes, distanced from external coercion.

In a more developmental sense, Houston & Paewai (2013) seek to reach further understanding on quality assurance by declaring its main purpose as improving accountability of universities, done by external agencies that evaluate teaching, learning and research. They highlight that this purpose also needs to be ingrained in institutions so they can work towards quality improvement, thus providing a more meaningful purpose to quality assurance. This posture has been backed up by other researchers such as Newton (2000), who focused on the implementation of quality processes and criticizes that quality started becoming more oriented towards accountability rather than improvement and enhancement, which further deepened the discussions over seeking for an ideal model for quality assurance.

From the view of university staff and students, Iacovidou et al. (2009) highlights from an institution in Cyprus that a quality university is one that is perceived as quality of academic facilities, student assessments, teaching and learning, general facilities, programme design, student support and competency of lecturers and students. On a different light, Van Kemenade et al. (2008), remark from a case in the Netherlands that within academia there is a lack of acceptance of external evaluation systems due to its connections towards enhancing control and not prioritizing improvement.

Further evidence on institutional approaches also highlight that there is a more likely chance of success for embedding quality when the organization strengthens and potentiates the professional development of staff that can be recognized as knowledgeable, with a high sense of leadership and with skills of human resource management (Lomas, 2004).

On this line, Williams (2016) also remarks within the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement that much of the attention of these processes needs to be focused on addressing the conditions and context of academic's work. This is with the purpose of avoiding the accountability aspect of quality assurance taking more priority than the enhancement aspect, which particularly impacts academic work.

These two perspectives, one more policy oriented that took the core ideas of quality assurance towards globalizing standards through accountability and policy initiatives; and a perspective of quality assurance as standards that allow enhancement of good practices that benefit educational activities and institutions at large seem to have been coexisting through the years. However, their fundamental differences have also been growing as time goes by. Singh (2010) remarks on this by highlighting that evaluations that seek educational benefits and evaluations oriented to larger social purposes will become more challenging. This idea can also be noted on the questioning that surrounds the focus on assurance, the process of implementing measures, entangled to enhancement, the process of continuing existing improvements. Both are still not clear among institutions and other relevant stakeholders (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013).

As time progresses, research has also focused on how quality assurance measures can enhance and improve new challenges for institutions. Prisacariu & Shah (2016) demonstrate this by suggesting an inclusion of ethics and moral values in standards for quality assurance, as the moral compasses for institutions tend to be prone to negative outcomes when higher education faces a closer relationship with marketization and competition.

2.1.1 Approaches of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance processes have two types that may converge in institutions but are different in approach: internal and external. Internal quality assurance refers to the systems implemented inside institutions that are focused on ensuring that the administrative operations are being met according to objectives set in a systematized agenda by the institution's leadership. Furthermore, it is typically managed by a specific unit and ensures the compliance over tasks from all staff (Hunter et al., 2021).

The focus of this review is, however, over external quality assurance which, it could be said, evaluates the effectiveness of processes done by institutions, including ones of internal quality assurance (Hunter et al., 2021). It includes activities previously mentioned such as reports to governing bodies, visits from evaluating peers, and its conclusion with a report that highlights the achievements and rooms to improve for institutions (Hunter et al., 2021).

Thune (1996) explains the benefits of external quality assurance as possessing “impartiality, credibility, authority, comprehensiveness, consistency and transparency” (p.31), and mentions that its success is linked to the range in which these aspects can be linked to internal quality procedures, which are based on “trust, commitment and understanding” (p.31). External accreditation took relevance from its roots in consumer protection measures, as it is an independent statement of guidelines that reflects on the trust of something for the public at large (Woodhouse, 2004).

External quality assurance, as the main focus of discussion and debate in academic spheres, has also an ample background in terms of types, or common characteristics, Harvey (2007) finds four comprehensive types: accreditation, audit, assessment and standards checking. While all these concepts have multiple of their own understandings, it is necessary to obtain a closer view on them to comprehend how they can operate within a national system.

Harvey (2004) defines Accreditation as “the establishment of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, programme (i.e. composite of modules) or module of study”. To further explain this, Campbell & Rozsnyai (2002), use an approach that can be understood from its characteristics: “it provides [proof] (or not) that a certain standard is being met in a higher education course, programme, or institution. The standard met can either be a minimum standard or a standard of excellence; it involves a benchmarking assessment; judgements are based solely on quality criteria, never on political characteristics and always yes/no; the emphasis is on accountability” (p.31).

Van Kemenade & Hardjono (2010) did a comparison among European countries to define accreditation. They concluded that for most countries the function of accreditation is accountability, which tends to be attached to different values depending on the country. It tends to be compulsory, with either limited or strict consequences. It

can also be focused on institutions or programmes, or both; and the process is mostly linked to governmental task or request (Van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2010).

For audit, Harvey (2004) highlights that it “is a process for checking that procedures are in place to assure quality, integrity or standards of provision and outcomes”. Another view comes from Westerheijden (2007), who referring to the term ‘quality audit’ mentions that it is “an evaluation mechanism that investigates the quality management arrangements within higher education institutions” (p.8)

Assessment has a more general note within quality assurance, and it refers to all the methods available to determine the performance of participants within quality processes (Harvey, 2004). In an operational sense, Woodhouse (1999) defines assessment as “an evaluation that results in a grade whether numeric (e.g. a percentage or a shorter scale of say 1 to 4), literal (e.g. A to F) or descriptive (excellent, good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory)” (p.32).

Standards checking refers to the ability to meet a specified level of any category or element that is being evaluated. For example, it can refer to the examination of academic achievement, professional competence for certain activities, or student evaluations of services provided to them (Harvey, 2007).

It can therefore be understood that quality is about processes themselves and standards are the grading of the outcome of such processes (Harvey, 2007). Coming back to the basic conceptualizations then, quality is understood as excellence, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation of the various processes done by higher education institutions (Harvey & Green, 1993). Standards, on the other hand, are executed over academic, competence, service, and organization facets (Harvey, 2007). Quality assurance is a prerequisite for accreditation, and how both processes are executed varies from one country to another (Vlasceanu et al., 2007), while standards are the necessary threshold applied by agencies to transition from assurance to accreditation.

2.2 *Quality Assurance in Salvadoran Higher Education*

2.2.1 General Context of Higher Education in El Salvador

Higher education in El Salvador presents many characteristics that are or have been present across Latin America. The region shares the heritage of the effects brought up by El Grito de Córdoba in 1918, which translates to a very high, sometimes even constitutional, level of institutional autonomy, free or low tuitions, and student participation in governance (Mendoza, 2020). However, many of the region's current differences come from the response's countries had towards massification and universalization, which meant a rapid and consistent surge of new students from lower and middle classes that was mutually interconnected to the surge of private institutions and, within those, a diverse range of providers of higher education (Lemaitre, 2017).

The current legislation in higher education from El Salvador is mandated by a Law of Higher Education whose main text was from 1995, with amendments coming from the years 2004 and 2011 (Ley de Educación Superior, 2017). This regulation covers both public and private institutions, and it is the main ruler for the system. Nevertheless, the only public university, Universidad de El Salvador, is also further legislated by an organic law from 1999 (Ley Orgánica de la Universidad de El Salvador, 1999).

In more specific terms, El Salvador's higher education system is shaped by a noticeable contrast between its public and private systems: from 201,426 students in higher education, 34.4% belong to the public system, while 65.6% are in the private one (Ministerio de Educación, 2024). In terms of institutions, there are eight public institutions and thirty-two private ones, making a total of forty (Ministerio de Educación, 2024), which are divided into three distinct types: universities, technical institutes (instituto tecnológico), and specialized institutes (instituto especializado) (Ley de Educación Superior, 2017). From this total, one university, five specialized institutes and two technological institute belong to the public sector; while twenty-three universities, six specialized institutes and three technological institutes belong to the private sector (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Distribution of higher education institutions (HEIs) in El Salvador by sector (Ministerio de Educación, 2024).

Type of HEI	Public	Private	Total
University	1	23	24
Specialized Institute	5	6	11
Technological Institute	2	3	5
Total	8	32	40

The Law mandates that public higher education institutions have an independent legal personality and rights to its own assets. In terms of funding, public institutions receive a lump sum from the state destined to sustain their activities. On the other hand, private providers are public utility corporations with non-profit goals, they must possess their own assets, and their funding must be obtained by their own efforts as nothing is provided from public resources (Ley de Educación Superior, 2017).

The policies on teaching and quality assurance establish minimum requirements that may not guarantee a good standard in pedagogical knowledge for the staff in charge of teaching practices. The Law of Higher Education states that teaching staff must possess, at minimum, the same academic level as the academic title they are teaching for (Ley de Educación Superior, 2017). As a result, it is common to see teachers with bachelor degrees providing lectures for prospective bachelors, while at national level less than 40% of all academic staff have a master degree or a PhD, with only 2.7% having a PhD, 30.7% possessing a master degree, and 4.4% possessing a specialist degree applied to medical degrees (Ministerio de Educación, 2024). Furthermore, the law only establishes that staff must possess the knowledge required to impart class content to students, ignoring any mention in regards of training and development.

In regards of quality assurance, the standards for universities to maintain accreditation with the state in regards of the teaching staff highlight the importance of providing means for staff to be updated on their fields of study, while also supporting them on training processes for their tasks (Comisión de Acreditación de la Calidad Académica, 2020). It does not mention particularities in regards of support in

pedagogical activities or learning processes, leaving these developments at the capacity of each institution.

The Law establishes a national quality assurance system which only focuses on institutional accreditations, which are optional and do not provide significant incentives (Ley de Educación Superior, 2017). Currently, from the current forty higher education institutions, only fifteen are accredited, with two being public and the thirteen remaining being private. Of these, only one specialized institute and one technological institute belong to the public sector, while eleven universities and two specialized institutes belong to the private sector (see Table 2) (Ministerio de Educación, 2024).

TABLE 2. Distribution of accredited higher education institutions (HEIs) in El Salvador by sector (Ministerio de Educación, 2024).

Type of HEI	Public	Private	Total
University	0	11	11
Specialized Institute	1	2	3
Technological Institute	1	0	1
Total	13	2	15

2.2.2 Review of Quality Assurance in El Salvador

In terms of quality assurance, which bloomed around the same time the peculiarities previously exposed in terms of academic freedom shaped each Latin American country, the environments also seemed to have shaped how the discussion around quality developed. Lemaitre (2017) analysed this situation and classified three main trends for quality assurance: the establishment of national quality assurance systems, the search for subregional arrangements and the creation of regional networks.

When it comes to a focus on the Central American region, Tünnermann Bernheim (2008) highlights that many quality mechanisms in the region are relatively young. Furthermore, the national setting of each country deals a great amount of autonomy to the public universities, while in some cases such as Guatemala and Honduras the national universities run the higher education landscape of the country, and other public

and private institutions run as a subsystem. At the same time, there are regional organizations that oversee the matter to try to build a 'Central American' quality assurance landscape.

The participation of El Salvador in such dynamics can be better understood as testimonial, compared with developments ongoing with other countries. The development of a quality assurance system for higher education in El Salvador appeared during its global 'boom' phase in the mid-1990s, alongside many reforms that shaped the local higher education landscape until what it is today (Elías, 2011).

Quality is assessed by the Ministry of Education based on a mandatory evaluation system conducted periodically, followed by an accreditation system which is optional (Ley de Educación Superior, 2017). The mandatory evaluation is divided into two different processes: one quantitative, yearly process in which institutions input quantitative data into an online system belonging to the Ministry (i.e. ratios related to students, staff, infrastructure, research, etc.); and a qualitative process that is done in a period of 3 years in which the quantitative evaluations are assessed by independent experts (Ley de Educación Superior, 2017; Meardi, 2009).

Although the accreditation procedures were established with the law in 1995, pointing out the formation of a Commission to carry them out (Ley de Educación Superior, 2017), this did not become a reality until the year 2000 due to its connection with an evaluation system from the Ministry of Education. The Commission on Accreditation of Academic Quality (CdA) is composed of seven members, who are highly recognized academics and experts who represent no institution. They are selected by the Ministry and the Council for Higher Education (a group of representatives from institutions who advise the Ministry on various matters) (Meardi, 2009).

Quality was defined by the Commission on Accreditation of Academic Quality (2020) as "the synthesis of characteristics that make it possible to recognize a specific academic programme or an institution of a certain type and to make a judgement on the relative distance between the way in which that institution or that academic programme provides that service and the optimum that corresponds to its nature" (p.3). The Commission highlighted this approach as the best method to integrate the many approaches used by other countries.

All evaluation and accreditation procedures carried out within the scope of the law are, nowadays, solely focused on institutional approaches, which particularizes the Salvadoran system compared to others in the region and the world, who tend to have a priority over programmes, or both programmes and institutions (Meardi, 2009).

2.3 Previous Research in the Context of this Study

There have been different stances on how research has been conducted relative to how the impact of external quality processes affect higher education institutions while analysing it through new institutionalism. Due to the lack of extensive research done over this in the Salvadoran case, this section highlights such views whilst prioritizing research done in contexts such the one of El Salvador by either one of the following views:

- it is a case from a country of the Global South,
- it is a case from a Latin American country, and
- it develops the theories in a closer perspective to the research question of this study.

Recent studies have shown that the relationships between institutions' presence in quality assurance and the environments in which this takes place can yield different forms depending on the context in which the cases take place.

For instance, private institutions in Lebanon do not receive any type of public funding for their operations, while compliance over quality processes has been predominantly weak as a process solely coming from public authorities. Thus, there has been evidence that quality processes in private higher education in the country relate more to mimetic and normative pressures rather than coercive ones (Khalil, 2020).

In comparison, discoveries about countries that are more connected to international standards showcase a different level of influence over compliance. The case of three universities in Canada demonstrate that regulative and normative pressures in engineering programmes sets universities in crossroads when the burdens of conforming to accreditations coming from global standards passes through more local-focused activities (Klassen & Sá, 2020). This points towards a divide for institutions

when it comes to understanding the relationship between accreditation and standards, who oversees setting them, and why institutions should respond to them.

Research in Ghana highlighted that mandatory compliance of quality standards by a national agency potentiated coercive compliance from institutions. However, this presented itself in an unbalanced form which meant that the lack of normative and cultural-cognitive compliance delivered only formal quality and not real improvement (Asamoah, G. et al., 2019). This evidences that the intertwined relationship between the regulative, normative, and cognitive aspects seems more relevant in these scenarios. Another case in Ghana focused on designing a framework for entrepreneurship in developing countries, concluded that the responsibility for ensuring enough capacity-building actions towards entrepreneurship could not rely solely on one institution, as all the actors at play need to play a significant role in shaping an effective system (Bamfo et al., 2023). It highlights, however, that governments on the developing world do need to assume a leadership role to coordinate how other actors act in the intertwined layers of regulative, normative, and cognitive pillars (Bamfo et al., 2023).

This scenario in which institutional practices collide among many institutions and stakeholders demonstrates a pattern where institutional forces are related to concepts such as legitimacy, and conformity to standards or regulations. It further illustrates that these relationships influence the performance of a system to deliver the objectives set by national authorities or institutions (Bekele et al., 2021; L. He & Wilkins, 2018).

Studies have also been previously done in the role of organizational identity within higher education. They hold a stronger relationship on how identity in higher education institutions is affected in environments with a moderate to high degree of environmental pressures. Identity is an essential preoccupation for members of organizations, due to the managerial efforts to have identity formation as a core process for the legitimation of what the institutions do (Humphreys & Brown, 2002).

Identity is related to aspects of the organizational characteristics that differentiate institutions, which gives them a determined position in a social context. Kosmützky (2012) analysed German universities from their mission statements, which to a significant degree are coerced by public policy. She argues that despite these normative restrictions, setting statements as part of their identity reinforces the closeness of institutions to their history, fields of study or geographical location. Similar arguments

are drawn from an analysis in Ukraine, which highlighted a lack of diversity on mission statements on universities due to the homogenic pressure of current policies not inviting on exploring avenues in which universities could particularize themselves (Hladchenko, 2016).

One of the pressuring points for organizational identity and quality assurance comes from international and transnational interactions. For example, Wang (2019) highlighted in findings over a Chinese-British joint venture university that organizational identity plays an important part on aligning staff's behaviour when adapting to multiple institutional logics of quality assurance. A similar point comes from cross-border higher education between African Portuguese-speaking countries, Brazil and Europe, and how organizational identities are more in the showcase due to the variety of policy context converging in one institutional setting (Amaral et al., 2016).

Quality assurance seals also play an important part in how universities identity is affected by quality procedures. An analysis of online identities in universities from the US identified that the emblematic role of quality assurance posits an important participation for universities' discourses of what their identity conveys. In this sense, quality assurance functions as public evidence and legitimacy of their successful status (Luu Blanco & Metcalfe, 2020).

Another connection of organizational identity and quality comes from evidencing a complex discussion on what is the meaning and role of quality in higher education, in terms of what it seeks to change on institutions (Bertolin, 2015).

When moving to Latin America, studies showed that quality is seen as a tool to ensure that more widespread access to higher education does not hamper its value and effectiveness. According to Lemaitre (2017), this is enhanced by identifying issues such as rapid massification, diversification and privatization, which deals with many other aspects that affect how a higher education system is shaped in a country, such as research and teaching. Furthermore, on its current state, it is also worth noting that the study done by Juanatey et al. (2021) expresses that the constitution of quality assurance agencies in the region shows a varied range of political independence, which is similar to the European landscape. However, agencies in Latin America do show more closeness to the US model of quality assurance, more focused on accountability.

As part of the whole of Latin America, the region also presents what is highlighted by Mendoza (2020), in which experts in the region agree that there is a “lack of relevance of their higher education system to the needs of their countries and employers”. This situation rises the possibility of wondering what the role of quality assurance at this instance is, if its role might be avoiding or not amounting to provide the translation of quality being transferred to national or economic relevance in certain scenarios.

Focusing more on the background of how quality assurance came to be as a topic in the region, Lemaitre (2002) argues about its origins as concepts and ideas originating from developed countries, with a focus on how developing countries not only face a situation in which they need to assure quality, but also need to develop the conditions to make quality possible, as they do not exist under the same conditions in which the concepts of quality assurance came to be.

It is also worth noting that the topic has developed differently on each country, which delivers a landscape where there are various degrees of progress, and it is hard to understand a true ‘Latin American’ quality assurance environment, plagued by concurrent cases of political instability in the region (Mendoza, 2020).

In terms of effects of external quality assurance procedures, it has been noted that one of the most recognizable ones is that of the increase of concern and involvement of higher education institutions towards their own performance. This has translated to the development of information systems that institutions share willingly with each other and more legitimate approaches towards improvement of academic activities and student outcomes (Lemaitre, 2004).

Lastly, research in organizational identity in Latin American higher education has put its focus on many aspects surrounding institutions, despite quality assurance not being so much of a prominent one.

On managerial aspects, there are strong discussions over the decreasing prominence of academic governance due to the presence of policies moving towards new managerialism and the decrease of public funding that had a presence in global north countries in the 1980’s and 1990’s. It also posits implications for how external environments may appear politically conflictive towards higher education institutions’ resistances (Ordorika, 1995; Rodriguez, 2016).

Another stream of research over organizational identity comes from the interest in enlightenment over the importance of developing a corporate identity. Having a consolidated organizational identity is regarded as an important aspect of institutions, as it is perceived as universities being aware of what they are and how are they recognized by others both nationally and internationally (Rivera-Rodriguez & Ballesteros, 2016). For this, the role of concepts such as change, academics involvement and leadership are also prioritized in successfully shaping and analysing organizational identity (Córdova, 2015; Martínez & Ibarra-Michel, 2016; Morales Domínguez, 2014).

In an overall perspective, current research has yet to shed light about these issues in the Salvadoran case. It could be implied that topics on Latin America include El Salvador by default. However, there is no evidence pointing towards the level of contribution provided from the country (by researchers, government, or external contributions) for such reports being more than superficial in terms of approach.

This thesis is an opportunity to provide an in-depth perspective of institutional and identitarian factors that shape Salvadoran higher education institutions. It contributes an opportunity to close the gap on future research on the topic while also opening the door for future research to include deeper views on Salvadoran higher education or seek for further opportunities to analyse more perspectives based on the discoveries and limitations of this study.

3 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The previous chapter highlighted a general difficulty for analysing specific national scenarios for quality assurance in Latin America, aside from the main trends that surround the region (Lemaitre, 2017). It is important to pay attention on the main characteristics of the Salvadoran case to reach a framework that can help to shed light on this environment from an institutional perspective. That is:

- Highlighting that the system is majorly occupied by private institutions (Ministerio de Educación, 2024).
- There is a national quality assurance system, focused solely on institutional quality. It is composed by two mandatory evaluations from the Ministry that focus on

basic indicators, while quality assurance through accreditation from an external agency is an additional, optional process that less than half of institutions have undertaken (Ley de Educación Superior, 2017).

- There is presence of national and regional networks that, however, do not include all institutions due to their diverse characteristics and a lack of a fully implemented national agenda (Tünnermann Bernheim, 2008).

In consequence, the most appropriate route to answer the research question comes from analysing institutions, their formal environments and attempting to highlight how quality assurance is understood for their functioning.

Three theories were considered to navigate this research. The approach of organizational Sensemaking, brought up by Karl E. Weick (1995), was considered due to its capabilities to understand how organizations construct and make sense of their environment based on different ways subjectivity takes part in their various actions both internally and externally. On the other hand, institutional logics was deemed appropriate for understanding the different pressures that organizations need to take on account to function, understand other organizations and see catalysts of change (Greenwood et al., 2011).

Lastly, the concepts coming from new institutionalism are chosen as the most idoneous. This is due to its capabilities to cover in more depth the role of systemic structures while providing a valuable backbone for grasping the formal organizational understandings in Salvadoran institutions. This theory is the most idoneous to answer the research question for its ample features that can help describing the rationalization of how Salvadoran higher education institutions operate as part of wider social structures (Klassen & Sá, 2020). Moreover, this research focuses on the three pillars of institutions highlighted by Scott (2014) due to the capacity of this approach for highlighting institutions as active participants in that not only impose regulatory, moral and cultural establishments, but also they embark in various processes that involve change or empowers certain events and actors to reach outcomes.

Furthermore, due to the characteristics specific to the national scenario, there can be an assumption that Salvadoran higher education institutions do not possess a similar line of incentives as the result of accreditation in quality assurance than other countries. Thus, as the second perspective, this research considers relevant to acknowledge that

the decision of the leadership of institutions to embark into quality assurance through international accreditations may be connected to their organizational identity.

These two perspectives could be seen as divergent in terms of how they understand institutions, due to organizational identity being based on particular aspects of organizations and new institutionalism being understood as organizations belonging to socially institutionalized categories (H. He & Baruch, 2009). On another view, both can also seem as complimentary, proposing that identity is one resource organizations possess to differentiate themselves from others (Gioia, 1998), while still being intrinsically attached to socially constructed categories. This may prove itself to be more beneficial for scenarios such as the Salvadoran one, in which there is still a persistent lack of clarity over what are the existent institutional categories.

3.1 New Institutionalism in Higher Education

According to DiMaggio & Powell (1983), “organizations compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness” (p.150). Institutional isomorphisms allow to grasp an understanding of formal processes that influence institutional behaviour, which is prompted by wider institutions, regulations, or traditions, to compliance over how they should act (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Salvadoran higher education institutions that have undertaken a process of nationally recognized external quality assurance, in terms of universities, are only private institutions. This posits a challenge in terms of whether new institutionalism could be applicable to such scenarios. Although the empirical trends followed by new institutionalism may not follow environments such as the one of private institutions, due to their wider range of opportunities in a more decentralized and market-encouraged environment, the logics of the theory do present a new challenging opportunity to discover new paradigms among the organizational diversity (Meyer & Rowan, 2006).

In this context, Salvadoran private institutions could be not adapting solely or completely to the regulations mandated by public policy, but rather to the rules of their social environment and the understanding that certain practices may deliver specific outcomes as well. As Jepperson & Meyer (2002) clarify, organizations are embedded in

institutional environments. From this, their behaviours are, to a greater or lesser degree, externally influenced by various levels of direct or indirect enactors.

For Salvadoran institutions, the 'environment' as a concept can respond to multiple scenarios and solutions. Private institutions also interpret their options in a more nonregulatory way that could be nonetheless mutually beneficial for other institutions in their environment, enhancing a debate over a higher education legal environment that leans over a facilitative environment (Edelman & Suchman, 1997).

This may not mean, however, that public policy is not a relevant factor for regulative isomorphisms to occur, as there are laws that establish certain rules for private institutions' operations and limit their procedures. It could, however, imply that other elements also become more influential. Furthermore, from a more general point of view, private institutions still share the common goal of efficient placement of graduates into the job market (Meyer & Rowan, 2006).

This view is enhanced by Scott (2008), who highlights that institutional analysis has evolved to recognize that organizations are able to participate in both similar and diverse systems, and in this same light they are also capable of existing in both coercive and uncoercive environments. In terms of the research question pertaining to this study, Salvadoran universities exist and act in a certain environment that determines how they interact with it and each other. In this case, it is determined by regulations with a decentralized view due to the high quantity of private institutions and the lack of public funding for them. Furthermore, Scott (2008) also sheds light on how this constitutes as institutional processes, and understanding what those processes are is an important asset of what this framework can offer to this topic.

Adding up on the sphere of external quality assurance and accreditation, institutionalized practices, such as data collection, research development in industry and accreditation help the organization to stablish appropriateness, rationality and modernity, traits linked to a rational view of the institution as a structure in society (Pedersen and Dobbin, 1997, in Klassen & Sá, 2020).

In terms of how Latin American institutional practices have been approached, applying new institutionalism to understand how the diversity and enhanced autonomy of private universities regarding external quality assurance could result in a certain set of institutional processes that are different from those of other regions in the world.

This conversely offers a window of opportunity to gain a better understanding of a more local perspective. Such a study has been also implemented by Pineda & Celis (2017), who investigated the effect of isomorphisms for higher education reforms in Colombia, which uncovered indications that institutional processes that were backbone for the reforms were based on a corporatist perspective of higher education, which prioritized the benefits of the market instead of other classical views of the sector.

3.1.1 Three Pillars of Institutions

This research bases its use of new institutionalism on the understanding that there are three distinct kinds of systems: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive. According to Scott (2014), these have been regarded as the vital ingredients of institutions by social theorists. With this view, he also presents a definition for institutions: “Institutions comprise regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” (Scott, 2014, p.56).

The Salvadoran scenario also posits arguments for shedding light on its situation in terms of institutionalization, in reference to institutions as process in an ever-changing nature. Social structures that determine institutionalization offer various circumstances that determine the level of institutionalization in a certain structure. As explained by Tolbert & Zucker (1999), “the broader the range of organizations, the more difficult it should be to provide convincing evidence of a structure's effectiveness, and hence the lower the level of institutionalization” (p.179).

Moreover, institutions as integral part of society showcase that they are determined by multiple causes. This means that institutions obtain meaning from events such as acting and reacting to social rules, desired rewards or values, or conformity to regulations (D'Andrade, 1997).

The three pillars serve as a base from which it will be possible to understand Salvadoran institutions by the influence they receive from rules, norms, and shared meanings (Jaime Ndaipa et al., 2023). They will also provide valuable insights to see the position of Salvadoran higher education as organizations, through their level of influence in the modern society (Scott, 2008).

3.1.1.1 Regulative Pillar

According to Scott (2014), the regulative pillar consists of processes relating to the capability to determine or mandate rules and the activities related to upholding them. This means, from the enforcers point of view, possessing the ability to review the conformity of others towards them, and apply sanctions, rewards, or punishments according to past, present or future behaviour.

The legalization of rules is an element of modern understandings of institutionalization. It plays a crucial role in clearly determining what is allowed or not for organizations to do. The values within this process, according to Abbott et al. (2000), vary along three dimensions. The first one is obligation, referring to the degree to which actors are forced to compliance. It could be by supervision of external parties or sanctions in case of faults, for example. The second dimension is precision, determined by the degree in which the imposed rules leave or restrict ground towards a required compliance. Institutions could, for example, maintain compliance over a regulation with higher or lower degree of precision according to the goals of the organization. The third dimension is delegation, determined by the degree of participation external parties could possess over administering compliance over rules.

In terms of the scope of this study, the first dimension is exemplified by cases in which national laws determine clear quality assurance mechanisms through legislation which higher education institutions require to follow (González & Claverie, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Kogan, 1990; Mendoza, 2020).

Precision is exemplified by cases such as institutions complying with quality assurance standards and legislation, however seeking goals different from the ones intended by the regulations due to wide interpretations in precision (Anderson, 2006; Klassen & Sá, 2020; Salto, 2018).

Delegation is evidenced by the enforcement of quality standards and regulations by agencies external to or independent from ministries of education or government (Aelterman, 2006; Hou et al., 2020).

Enforcing control of these dimensions is based on coercion, which according to DiMaggio & Powell (1983) is the exertion of formal and informal pressure to comply to imposed regulations. In the regulatory pillar, clear rules exist to justify the use of force

or any means necessary (which are usually also bound to normative constraints) to reach compliance. Conversely, the use of extraordinary measures depends on established rules to justify their happenstance (Scott, 2014).

All said, the regulative pillar bases its presence over the prevalence of an instrumental, mutually beneficial logic in efforts to maintain social order and stability: “Individuals craft laws and rules that they believe will advance their interests, and individuals conform to laws and rules because they seek the attendant rewards or wish to avoid sanctions” (Scott, 2014. p. 62).

3.1.1.2 Normative Pillar

The normative foundation in institutions designates socially accepted methods to achieve a desired result. This encompasses the appropriate manners in which it is acceptable to define the result of actions and the means in which such goals can be achieved (Blake & Davis, 1964). It is different from the regulative pillar in that the enforcement of action is based on socially constructed norms and values instead of clear regulation and a consequence/reward mechanism.

According to Scott (2014), the normative pillar introduces additional value into social life through allowing a dogmatic aspect of what is socially admissible through norms and values.

Norms and values are closely related concepts with significant differences (Blake & Davis, 1964). Norms refer to standards or rules that determine how humans should behave in determined settings. Values, on the other hand, are the aspirations or principles that define how a norm becomes a standard of behaviour (Blake & Davis, 1964). Scott (2014) refers to values as beliefs of the favoured actions to take based on standards to be compared with, while norms are precepts that indicate the legitimate measures to achieve such standard.

Norms are an important part of social settings, as they constitute a source of correctness and predictability when behaviours can lead to either acceptable or unacceptable consequences (Labovitz & Hagedorn, 1973). As part of a complex system, norms can be applied in various levels of pertinence or relevance, depending on the position of a person or a group of people. They can also be applied to all members of a group (Scott, 2014).

Norms can empower the same as constrain behaviour. This means it attaches rights towards what should be done, what are the right ways to do things, what could feel comfortable or uncomfortable to do, to follow and not to follow. It is different from regulative systems in that it requires awareness of context and interpretation to decipher what is socially acceptable (Scott, 2014; Weick, 1995). On these settings, norms come to be when organizations are aware of their procedures and become standardized practices. This implies bureaucratic practices and highlighting that an appropriate way to do things is based on routine and repetition (March & Olsen, 1989). Normativity is also connected to the legitimacy of actions and decisions that provide value. Legitimacy is a strong asset in the standardization of norms due to it being able to grant evidence of the norm resulting on a desired result (Ruef & Scott, 1998).

According to Casile & Davis-Blake (2002), normativity is also closely related to change. The appearance or adherence of new norms in a social system has some implications over motivating heterogeneity within a field. Regarding this research, they also pose an interesting point to explore in the Salvadoran case, as they explain in reference to the effects of normative behaviours in privatized systems:

“Our results suggest that it may be difficult to achieve normative consistency in such environments. To the extent that public and private organizations adopt new normative structures in response to distinct factors, we expect that domains that are becoming privatized are also likely to have heterogeneous normative structures. (Casile & Davis-Blake, 2002. p. 192)”

Another crucial difference that particularizes the normative pillar comes from its attachment to moral principles and rules that individuals and institutions feel enticed to follow. These reflect themselves, for example, through the act of caring in upholding standards in the work done, either internally, or for and by external accreditation procedures. In the case that such acts of caring were to be not present, following norms could become a harder process for organizations, without an added reward/penalty consequence as it is in regulatory processes (Stinchcombe, 1997). Furthermore, the consequences of following or not established norms come attached with a certain degree of emotions. Violating a norm can relate to reactions of embarrassment or grief, while the utmost respect to norms is bonded to commendation and honour (Scott, 2014).

3.1.1.3 Cultural-Cognitive Pillar

This pillar refers to an eminent connection between institutions and the identification of how meaning is produced. It evidences that beings have the capabilities to interpret reality through symbolic representations of the world, which grouped together produce an understanding of the social environment (Scott, 2014).

There is an accepted truth in that cognition works on an individual level. However, a challenge approaches when it comes to understanding the work of collective cognition, more specifically in how it operates in organizations. Fiol (2017) sheds light onto this matter by discussing that both individual and group cognitions co-exist within interactive processes. She argues that both can be understood in a 'parallel' perspective. For example, individuals may be capable of having memory from previous experiences to reach the solution of certain problems. On the other hand, organizations can rely on problem-relevant information from the experiences of group members.

Research on the cognitive processes in organizations has moved from analysing individual thoughts towards a point of view that starts from the basis that collective cognitive thinking is the source of individual thinking. This parts from the recognition that human thought is an inherently social process (Meindl et al., 1996). Cognitive understanding is then related to the interaction between individual and group, depending on symbols and metaphors to achieve a concrete grasp of a situation (Gioia et al., 1994). The cultural-cognitive pillar emphasizes then the process of realizing that although cognition may come from individual understanding it is intrinsically connected to external cultural frameworks (Scott, 2014).

The cultural aspect on this section is understood as schemes that operate in multiple levels, "from the shared definition of local situations, to the common frames and patterns of belief that comprise an organization's culture, to the organizing logics that structure organization fields, to the shared assumptions and ideologies that define preferred political and economic systems at national and transnational levels" (Scott, 2014. p. 68). According to Jepperson & Swidler (1994), cultural elements appear as part of an institutionalized process, in the sense that they are belonging to standardized routines and are considered part of day-to-day routines. This signifies looking beyond

surface level symbols and including practices that belong to reality as a matter of maintained and ritualized thinking.

Culture in organizations appears to be a challenging point for research to take on, due to the ironical difficulties that result from various elements conflagrating from social backgrounds trying to uncover each other (Martin, 1992). It is a more complicated endeavour when there is a myriad of research pointing out a wide spectrum on what culture is, what constitutes is, what is not culture and so on (Martin, 2007). When it comes to this section, the ideas pertaining to organizational culture and its relation to cognitive processes are the main point of focus.

Fundamentally, cognition provides a door for the grasping of culture (DiMaggio, 1997). Then, on its relationship with groups or organizations, culture is defined by a prevalent sense of an overarching belonging that admits conflict and arguing without disrupting fundamental commonalities (Martin, 2007; Meyerson, 1991). When including cognitive thought into it, this expands to the influence of reasoning into creating and maintaining institutions, as well as enabling or disabling change within them (Seo & Creed, 2002).

This pillar is cements itself on picking up from these conceptions to see institutions as socially mediated entities that fall upon a common framework of meanings through cognition (Scott, 2014).

3.2 Organisational Identity

Identity is a concept that has been argued more for the case of individuals rather than organizations. In the field of philosophy, it has been discussed since the ancient Greek times, it was still being discussed through the Renaissance and it is still being argued nowadays (Gioia, 1998).

Identity is conceptualized “as a general, if individualized, framework for understanding oneself that is formed and sustained via social interaction” (Gioia, 1998, p. 19). It conveys a sense of oneness, and it has been understood as part of a wide subtext for organizational behaviours (Albert et al., 2000).

From individual identity, the connection to the social element is not difficult to assess. Tajfel & Turner (2004) summarized on simple terms that a social identity is one

in which an individual's aspects of their self-image are based on the social environment they exist in. From there, they move towards useful principles of identity in a social context:

“1. Individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity.

2. Positive social identity is based to a large extent on favourable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant outgroups: the in-group must be perceived as positively differentiated or distinct from the relevant out-groups.

3. When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make their existing group more positively distinct. (Tajfel & Turner, 2004. p. 284)”

On the specific domain of organizations, several aspects of modern institutional processes point towards an increased necessity for enhancing a focus on what is the value of identity for them. Nowadays, situations such as the many evolutions in terms of hierarchies, the growth in bottom-up approaches or the dependence on external providers create an environment in which an organization needs to focus their care on what is the cognitive structure it desires to have (Albert et al., 2000).

The individual aspect of identity focuses on what makes a person a person, with a track of evidence that is distinguishable through time and particularizes it from other individuals. This also allows such people to adhere themselves to ones they consider themselves to be more closely related or associated (Erikson, 1964; Gioia, 1998).

From individual identity, the leap to organizational identity becomes a next step with some caveats that differentiates it, starting as it being a tool for organizational leadership to preserve a sense of cooperation and belonging (Gioia, 1998).

Albert and Whetten (1985; in Gioia, 1998), defined organizational identity as part of a process of self-reflection, which is summarized in three dimensions:

“(a) what is taken by organization members to be central to the organization,

(b) what makes the organization distinctive from other organizations (at least in the eyes of the beholding members); and

(c) what is perceived by members to be an enduring or continuing feature linking the present organization with the past (and presumably the future).” (p.21)

These ideas gained a regarded status among scholars, so much that a constant stream of publications resulted in doubts over its definitive meaning (Albert et al., 2000; Brunninge, 2005). However, Whetten (2006) clarified the core tenets of the theory, briefly summarizing it as such: “The concept of organizational identity is specified as the central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations” (p.220).

This conceptualization rests over two assumptions. The first one is that organizational identity is different from collective identity in that organizations are often treated in modern society as if they are individuals, with granted powers to act as such (Scott, 2003; Whetten, 2006). The second one is focused on the idea of an identity of self, in the sense that organizations, as actors, have a sense of distinctiveness over their character, which puts them in an ever-constant state of self-consciousness over its actions and beliefs (Whetten, 2006).

Organizations partake in many actions to assert their identity. They seek to differentiate themselves from other similar organizations while, at the same time, appearing to be like them. Furthermore, some attributes for organizations are their adaptability to demonstrate numerous identities depending on the scenario, and the capability to shift identities with less constraints to perennialism. These can be understood as fundamental aspects of organizational identity that differs from individual identity (Gioia, 1998).

Organizational identity appears as a beneficial model for understanding scenarios in which there is a lack of clarity over multiple and conflicting circumstances that move organizations towards a certain action, and what do members of the organization do in such circumstances (Whetten, 2006). Members of an organization have more possibilities towards having a closer, intimate relationship with what the organization stands for. Therefore, they may have more opportunities to tell between how multiple attitudes from the organization are distant or closer to its identity (Dukerich et al., 2002).

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 *Research Design*

The analysis of what aspects of the institutional environment of Salvadoran higher education institutions affect their behaviour towards international quality assurance follows a qualitative method. According to Creswell (2014), the qualitative method is characterized by the exploration of a problem with a deep understanding of a central phenomenon, while also highlighting an analysis of data based on text analysis and interpretation to reach discoveries. This method is appropriate to answer the research questions of this study, as it helps to gather a diverse range of data which can be analysed with the aim to understand how organizational identities are shaped in Salvadoran universities, and how those could be related to the institutional factors.

Furthermore, this research conducts a multi-case study design. According to Yin (2018), multiple-case designs in its simplest form refers to the selection of two or more cases that are believed to be literal replications. It follows an analogous logic, in which each case is selected so that individual case-studies are either similar in results or predict contrasting results for anticipable reasons (Yin, 2018).

This design is useful for this study due to its aim to draw a complete picture of what is understood from external quality assurance processes in Salvadoran higher education institutions. Therefore, examining individual cases from a sample to obtain a more complete analysis will provide more reliable results for the full population of institutions.

In terms of the sampling, the study follows a homogenous sampling. According to Creswell (2014), "In homogeneous sampling the researcher purposefully samples individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics". The total of Salvadoran higher education institutions is forty, from which eight are public (one university) and thirty-two are private (twenty-three universities) (Ministerio de Educación, 2024). From those, only two national institutions and fourteen private institutions possess national accreditation (Ministerio de Educación, 2024).

Due to the decentralized and variable nature of this national higher education system, the sampling focuses on characteristics that could indicate that the institution possesses an understanding or implementation of institutional quality, reason for which only nationally accredited institutions is the first subgroup for the sampling. Furthermore, due to the national institutions that are accredited being only two, the second subgroup focuses on private institutions, from which eleven are universities and two are specialized institutes. It can be noted that universities have more prominence and cover a wider group of students. Thus, this study sample focuses on private universities that are nationally accredited, selecting two case institutions which accepted to participate in the study with the caveat of being anonymized:

- Institution one: It has been more than 45 years from being established, keeping itself as a well-regarded institution in the country. It has actively participated in efforts to evaluate and improve the national higher education sector, while it is also one of the top contributors of research in the still dismayed status of research in the country.
- Institution two: It has 40 years from being founded. It is in a populous area of the country, and it has a high prestige for developing professionals in technical degrees that may not be found elsewhere in the El Salvador.

The selected staff from the institutions who will be interviewed for this study followed a qualitative purposeful sampling, in which the researcher deliberately selects individuals and various other circumstances to comprehend the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The aim of this sampling was to interview key personnel in the institution's governance that is actively involved in the external quality assurance processes that are conducted, based on their position, professional experience and time working in the institution.

4.2 Data Collection

The main source of data collection for the study was conducted by semi-structured interviews of staff in the institutions that oversee managing and coordinating external quality assurance processes for the institutions they work for. In this sense, the range of

interviews was from three to four for each case, focusing on senior staff dedicated to quality assurance, institutional planning and senior academic staff who coordinated accreditation processes from the academic perspective.

The interviews were from 40 to 75 minutes long, and the questions directed their focus from the professional experience of the person towards more topics centred on institutional objectives towards quality assurance, organizational identity, their knowledge of Salvadoran higher education, management of quality processes and institutional planning. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in Spanish, which is the language used in El Salvador. For the purposes of this research, the analysis will be made in English based on translations interpreted by the researcher.

The final list of interviewees is the following:

TABLE 3. List of interviewees, the institution they belong to and their role within it.

Participant	Position within the university	University
Participant one	Secretary General	Institution one
Participant two	Dean of Postgraduates	Institution one
Participant three	Chief of Institutional Planning	Institution one
Participant four	Director of Department Planning	Institution two
Participant five	Degree Director	Institution two
Participant six	Director of Quality	Institution two

The semi-structured aspect of the interviews allowed to follow an organic flow of data collection, allowing the researcher to cover all the points planned for the interview in any given time. The questions followed an order based on thematic areas that had the possibility to overlap during the interview due to the complexity of the answers from interviewees. This resulted in enriching interviews that covered all the main points needed for a complete analysis of the research question.

The data gathered from interviews was complemented by a review of the institutions' strategic plans for their current period of operations, with the goal of scanning how the institution's activities are related to quality procedures and their organizational identity.

The interviews took place over a three-week period, in which the purposive sampling was implemented to contact specific staff through their institutional email addresses and set a specific date for which the interview could take place in online format through the Zoom Meetings platform.

4.3 Data Analysis

The data collected for this research was analysed through theming the data. Themes are a relevant asset for the analysis of codes resulting from qualitative analysis. This type of analysis is based on “labelling and thus analysing portions of data with an extended thematic statement rather than a shorter code” (Saldaña, 2016. p. 198). According to Creswell (2014), themes are codes that are aggregated together, form a greater idea that eliminates the redundancies that individual codes may present.

A thematic analysis of the data provided benefits for a strategic approach in the results of this research. This is because it seeks to uncover the relationships between the institutional setting of Salvadoran higher education and the organizational identity of the institutions selected towards integrating international external quality assurance on their processes.

To address this complexity, the analysis follows a process of layering the themes identified. This allowed a structured classification of the themes identified by sorting minor themes withing major themes (Creswell, 2014). The initial coding and the formation of themes is derived from the research question and the analytical framework, following and abductive approach. According to Tavory & Timmermans, (2014), “abduction is the form of reasoning through which we perceive an observation as related to other observations” (p.37). In the case of this study, this allows the organization of the analysis to focus on the characteristics of the Salvadoran case, taking on account the lack of previous research on this national context and allowing a more complex singularization of the situation. This allows to provide a coherent interpretation that accurately represents the objectives of this study, considering the possible nuances that may result of how new institutionalism and organizational identity interact in the Salvadoran higher education system.

To enhance the process of data analysis of both document analysis and the interviews, the software Atlas.ti was used for the coding process and the thematic distribution of results. It was selected due to its availability in Tampere University and previous experience of the researcher. Furthermore, the use of Atlas.ti enhances the quality of the results due to its capabilities for streamlining the identification and distribution of data with multiple layers of clarity, thus improving the validity of the results.

4.4 Limitations of the Research

The research presents limitations that have been addressed with the highest possible precision.

In terms of the representativity of the results that could be obtained, first it is important to remember that the Salvadoran higher education system is highly decentralized and private-oriented, while the regulations towards quality assurance move from small towards non-existent. This meant that this study required special considerations for the sampling in a way that could achieve the most relevant representativity. To mitigate this limitation, this study focuses on providing a necessary groundwork for institutional managers, academics, and policymakers to gain major understandings of institutional characteristics that institutions have for addressing an identity oriented towards quality, with the aim of fostering future endeavours that contribute to a more understandable picture of Salvadoran higher education.

A second limitation comes from only addressing the perspective of staff involved in quality procedures, while it does not include the views of public authorities or other relevant stakeholders such as teaching staff, students, or businesses. Involving only people concerned with quality assurance provides valuable information for the status and developments in the topic; however, it also misses the possibility of addressing if or how such concerns are in the scope of awareness in actors that are not necessarily involved directly with quality assurance.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter reviews and considers the data collected from the interviews to analyse and answer the research question of what aspects of the institutional environment and organizational identity of nationally accredited Salvadoran higher education institutions influence their pursuit of international quality assurance. The basic assumption undertaken for this is that the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive aspects of the Salvadoran higher education system affect how institutions view and react towards quality assurance in a heterogeneous and divergent form. Such aspects are determining certain behaviours from institutions towards the choice of approaching international quality assurance.

Furthermore, to deepen the views on this, key attributes of the organizational identity of the institutions selected from this study are considered under the assumption that they may play a key role in their choice of undergoing international quality assurance processes.

As mentioned in Chapter VI, the coding process in Atlas.ti followed a thematic analysis procedure, with the important addendum of layering the themes. The analysis of data from six interviews and two documents resulted in eighteen minor themes, which were then distributed into four major themes that reference the main tenets of new institutionalism and organizational identity.

It is also relevant to note that interviewed personnel in both institutions have considerable time of experience working for their institutions. Of the six interviewees, four had around twenty years of experience, one had around ten years and one had only four years of experience. The ones with around twenty years of experience have had multiple positions within their career between academic and administrative duties, while also possessing various leadership positions during their tenures.

This chapter distributes the results in three distinct stages. First, it presents the institutional perspective from both institutions from the study, highlighting how the different pillars impact the system from the institution's view based on main findings according to the data collection and the framework. Second, this will be followed by an

individual review of each institution's organizational identity, highlighting differentiating factors inside of each that provide insights into their views on quality assurance and international accreditations.

The discussion section will supply itself from the results to showcase a complete picture of the landscape in quality assurance on Salvadoran higher education. It will contrast the results obtained with the theoretical principles of the analytical framework and offer a window for institutional behaviour in higher education institutions to be observable.

5.1 Results

5.1.1 Findings From the Three Pillars of Institutions

The data collected provided an ample overview of the current circumstances of the Salvadoran higher education system in terms of matters surrounding quality assurance. In general, the interviews with experts demonstrated that quality is a relevant topic for nationally accredited institutions. On the other hand, the range of possibilities or restrictions caused by the national legislation and regulatory bodies poses a significant challenge. This environment is accompanied with the highly decentralized nature of private institutions, who attach themselves to a diversity of norms and values to rationalize their operations, as well as making sense of their key goals.

On this context, following up with international accreditations appears as a relevant addition that enhances its purpose due to the local scenario. Beyond the gradual isomorphism that comes from supranational conformism to certain quality standards (Zapp & Ramirez, 2019), the circumstances surrounding the Salvadoran system are also favourable for institutions that are capable to reach international quality assurance. The following findings distributed according to the three pillars provide a systematized view of the situation.

5.1.1.1 Regulative Pillar

How institutions view the rules they need to adhere to plays a significant role in shaping their actions and reactions towards conformity. Compliance to rules influences the behaviour of institutions under expeditive and restrictive action (Scott, 2014). In the

case of the institutions participating in this study, interviewed staff criticize the national regulations they need to follow, as they are outdated with the last big reform in the system being from twenty years ago (Flores, 2021). In consequence, this complicates the activities of institutions due to the matters that require regulation being non-compatible with present-time challenges. Regulative pressures are then on misaligned needs of what nationally accredited institutions seek:

“There are no standardized processes like in other countries, where accreditations are required. The processes of self-assessment and quality recognition (in other countries) are common to all HEIs, so it can be assumed that at least a common basis exists.” (Participant two, Institution one)

"One of the biggest challenges, in my opinion, is the issue of government, the entire government apparatus. How much support do you offer to higher education? If we look at it in terms of public policies and legislation, there is no support that they offer to higher education institutions." (Participant four, Institution two)

"There is no internal body that accredits programmes. There is no national internal body. Although the CDA had to accredit programs in its manual, because it says so there, in the end it no longer did. Only institutional accreditation." (Participant six, Institution two)

When it comes to compliance, it is also noteworthy to highlight the degree to which regulations reward or punish that institutions follow what is established in the law. As it was mentioned beforehand, Salvadoran higher education institutions should receive small incentives for following the accreditation process, although it is optional (Ley de Educación Superior 2017). According to the interviews, these matters of reward or punishment are not so clear, as institutions are still not receiving any sort of incentives for accrediting themselves, thus nulling how the regulation should operate:

“I think that when those (incentives for accreditation) were proposed in the law, it was like saying: 'go ahead, universities, if you are accredited, you will have these benefits. (...) We have not seen that benefit because we always have to go through the review process. It was not fully implemented.” (Participant one, Institution one).

"I believe that (the law) needs to be updated and should focus on quality criteria that allow the quality of the service provided in universities to be raised. By demanding it, this entity of the country is in a certain way forcing the institutions to improve" (Participant 3, Institution one).

On the other hand, it is also significant to highlight the relationship of these matters with the current misalignments of the law to tackle present issues. Back when it was first implemented, regulations in the law proved effective to close institutions that were considered in a far-below standards condition, as a proof of punishment for non-compliance (Flores, 2021):

“(The law) is a check for institutions to do things well. At some point I do think it worked. Because when the new law was born, they closed universities. Many universities that had been born in garages. (...) About ten universities disappeared and I think it was good.” (Participant four, Institution two)

Another aspect of note within this pillar comes in the aspect of delegation (Abbott et al., 2000), which refers to the degree of responsibility or obligation institutions address towards the accreditation agency (CDA) as an external body attached to the Ministry with the duty of providing the final accreditation. The totality of respondents agrees that the requirements for universities, including the national accreditation being a mandatory process, should be stricter, although not for their current position but for the betterment of the system as a whole. Moreover, the respondents also identify deficiencies for this agency to operate in the way that is intended by regulations due to the lack of financial support from national authorities, which could also be a root cause for why the national accreditation of degrees has never been implemented:

"It was thought that the accreditation commission would be an autonomous entity from the Ministry of Education, but in certain periods of past administrations the accreditation commission was not given a greater budget to function. If you don't give a budget to an entity that is important for validating the quality of higher education institutions, then there will be deficiencies." (Participant one, Institution one)

"A little more than 40 institutions have different characteristics, ways of conducting, of developing their management, their university functions in very different ways. By not having mandatory evaluation processes, we could say that the qualities can be diverse." (Participant two, Institution one)

"Regarding the legislation on the issue of quality, in our particular case as a university we would not be affected. We are already accredited and in addition to the national accreditation of the CDA, we have the international accreditation." (Participant one, Institution one)

Precision on compliance is another relevant topic from the regulative pillar that is highlighted by the respondents, recalling that it pertains to the degree in which rules are

restricted or open possibilities for organizations to act more freely (Abbott et al., 2000). The interviewees highlighted a lack of understanding when it comes to how compliance is addressed, independently of if it is coming from the Ministry or the accreditation agency. On the other hand, there are comments noting that in recent years the precision of the mandatory evaluations and the subsequent accreditation has increased. This has been received in a positive light despite the prevailing misalignments product of the outdated legislation being a potential cause of turmoil during the execution of such procedures.

"Many times, there are elements, for example, that those who review our plans from the Ministry are reviewed by different people or have a different perspective. So, they make observations that don't apply. In one way or another, time is wasted. The observation is returned, we review the observation as a HEI, we correct the observations, we send it again. So, sometimes we go through up to three reviews for approval of a curriculum." (Participant one, Institution one)

"These models (of quality assurance) that we currently have are from 2009. And from 2009 to 2024 things have changed a lot. So, all of a sudden, a lot of priority is placed on some topics related to face-to-face classes or with some models more focused on content, in master classes, when today the entire educational part has changed (...), all of that must be updated when it comes to evaluation. However, not all models are so obvious." (Participant two, Institution one)

"The CDA is doing a good job. I think the last three years has had a strengthening that we haven't had for a long time. There was a time when the CDA said goodbye to the processes a lot. Now it's kind of recharged, and we're keeping an eye on accredited institutions. Year after year a report has been delivered, now another one has to be delivered, but in the end what we see is that all this information is being systematized, and I think that is for the better." (Participant four, Institution two)

When referring to coercive attitudes from authorities, respondents re-emphasize a situation in which pressures for compliance still follow old parameters, while the lack of uncertainty in respect of when and how new and updated regulations will appear. They also highlight the positive impact of new regulations, in the sense that it can foster constructive changes as it has done in the past:

"By having the (new) Law still on pause, it gives an indication of the importance or value of these issues (to public authorities)." (Participant one, Institution one)

"(Thanks to the law) they closed universities. We were the only ones in the region. I think that from then on, all the universities soaked their beards to keep improving.

Although it didn't work out completely, because now I think there are no more than fifteen universities that are accredited." (Participant four, Institution two)

Another important aspect of the regulative pillar is that its purpose also depends on an environment in which compliance to regulations is seen as mutually beneficial for maintaining social order (Scott, 2014). Respondents are again unanimously in accordance with the usefulness of regulations for such a purpose. However, they reaffirm their regret on the lack of commitment seen from authorities to improve how the system functions:

"I do believe that it (doing national accreditation) (...) is an action responding to our commitment to quality assurance in higher education. So, yes, it's necessary for the institution. (...) A university can say that it is of high quality, but if it does not submit to these evaluation processes, it is difficult for it to sustain itself." (Participant two, Institution one)

"There is also a congress that is held at the international level where we all meet, from all countries, where we can also learn about what other institutions are doing. That is where one identifies the most advanced accreditation processes. We see government institutions more committed to quality, more than just asking for requirements to give you your higher education institution certificate again. I feel like there's a greater commitment to quality in other countries." (Participant three, Institution one)

"I think it's valuable for the government to be on the lookout as well, because somehow we have to improve. We Salvadorans (...) leave things to free will and it doesn't have to be that way. Even more on the subject of education." (Participant four, Institution two)

5.1.1.2 Normative Pillar

The results of the interviews demonstrate that there have been developments in terms of approaching a less heterogeneous understanding of quality in the system. However, the interviews also shed light on particular issues of importance for internationally and nationally accredited universities, such as using accreditation as a point of reference for stakeholders, the function of quality processes, and the lack of development on this topic for most of the institutions in the country.

Another point of importance for the universities of this study is the remark that their benchmark for assessing their quality has surpassed national standards, looking more at the international stage. Respondents also highlight an increase on the interest

of other national institutions towards approaching to quality assurance procedures voluntarily:

"Nowadays, it seems to me that there is an interest on the part of higher education institutions to improve their academic quality, their commitment and responsibility to society. Proof of this is the effort that I have at least perceived from the institutions, to work together with each other." (Participant one, Institution one)

"Unlike other countries where I know that when HEIs are presented, they are presented as being accredited by these and these organizations, it is a way of presenting themselves. The same employers ask and find out if that HEI is accredited or not. Here in El Salvador, it seems to me that employers in general do not have it as a criterion for consultation" (Participant two, Institution one)

"I believe that quality is being able to guarantee that the student. That the user (...) who is in a higher education institution receives what is expected of that higher education institution. It's meeting the expectation." (Participant four, Institution two)

"More than anything, we see it (seeking to compare with other institutions) maybe not inside the country, but outside the country. We see our benchmark, I see Europe, for example, what Europe is doing." (Participant six, Institution two)

Norms also appear to be determined, according to findings from international accredited institutions, around the financial toll of embarking on international quality assurance and their own understanding of quality as improvement as behaviours that arrive to positive outcomes:

"Because that (international quality procedures) not only requires an effort at the institutional level in terms of organization, administration, but it also requires a budget, because accreditations, each accreditation of a curriculum can be around \$20,000 upwards." (Participant one, Institution one)

"Many of us already understood that (following quality procedures as something positive). Some still don't. Some are more commercial. I mean, they boast of having 25,000 students, but you can have five chances to pass an exam. That's not quality." (Participant four, Institution two)

"Each accreditation has involved an improvement project. Both of that career and of the entire institution, because they are program accreditations. But in the end, that's another institutional accreditation. Because it moves the entire institutional apparatus." (Participant four, Institution two)

The norm expressing an understanding of quality as improvement is further developed with comments addressing the role of improvement as a necessity for assessing the institutions' quality. Improvement is seen a task that moves the

institutions forward in terms of seeking international accreditation and tracking what likeminded institutions do. On the other hand, interviewees also recognize that is an activity determined by what the heads of institutions decide, which for every private institution entails different organizational settings and goals:

(In motivations for international accreditation) "To measure ourselves against international organizations, to know where we are, where we can improve. Accreditations are minimum standards. So, if we want to, if we are committed to continuous improvement, we have to measure ourselves more and more in this way on other courts and in other categories." (Participant two, Institution one)

"There are a lot of universities that do extremely valuable things. Enviably. Envy of the good kind. We have a unit that is independent of our universities here in El Salvador. The good stuff is always known. So, if there's something good, we try to see how they did it, how to improve it, and do it better." (Participant four, Institution two)

"In private universities, if the owner of this institution intends to have a quality university, he can guide that and since he is the owner, he will look for it. If it doesn't look for it, it's subjective, we're not going to judge it, so it's all born from the spirit of the people who are implementing the institution of higher education." (Participant three, Institution one)

Heterogeneity appears to be motivated by processes of change within the normative structures of internationally accredited institutions, which seek to divert from what is understood by other institutions as the standard (Casile & Davis-Blake, 2002). In this sense, the origin of heterogeneity could be partly attributed to the institutions that seek to divert from only complying to established regulations to also surpass self-imposed limitations. In contrast, there is likelihood that other institutions undertook such diversions not to engage in surpassing regulations but rather circumvent them in favour of more personal gains:

"(The accreditation) is like a cover letter. For the Consortium (group of universities that collaborate for enhance change), one of the aspects that was defined is that in order to belong to the Consortium the institution had to be accredited." (Participant one, Institution one)

"There are private institutions to private institutions, because there are private institutions of public utility that clearly do not intend to generate profits for their own benefit, but what is generated is reinvested in the same institution. On the other hand, there are other HEIs that do have a private character, more from a business conception and we cannot deny that as well." (Participant two, Institution one)

"I have identified different types of institutions and with different levels of development. You notice the good universities that are at the highest levels of development. Others are small and have remained small. Perhaps their objectives do not intend to go beyond that, it also depends on the authorities of each institution" (Participant three, Institution one)

For internationally accredited institutions, violating the norms that they attach themselves to bears significant consequences that appear in the form of not identifying themselves as similar institutions. In that sense, any relationship between institutions of different values will most likely result in the accredited institution undertaking a role of superiority, in which they may seek to support the unaccredited institution to reach similar conditions, despite having no significant regulative agency to do so:

"I think it helps a lot to establish alliances and networks, this thing of which university you approach. It is no coincidence that our graduate co-degree programs are with [Institution 2]. In other words, it is an accredited university, with recognition as well. It is no coincidence that we already have several programs with them" (Participant two, Institution one)

"Apart from the fact that also as an institution itself we have sometimes looked for peers and universities with whom we do projects or work, we are very cautious with who we choose to try to see that action." (Participant five, Institution two)

"We have several professors who are peer reviewers and who are going to evaluate other universities. So, when people see that they are going to be sent peer evaluators from [Institution 2] they are distressed because they say, 'ah, they are in [Institution 2], they have high standards, they are going to come demanding more from us'. (Participant six, Institution two)

5.1.1.3 Cultural-Cognitive Pillar

The results on the cultural-cognitive pillar showcase that the concept of quality from the perspective of internationally accredited universities moves towards quality as continuous improvement and the fitness for purpose approaches. This showcases a proactive attitude from the institutions to reach the purpose they seek to fulfil. Combined with an approach of continuous improvement, accredited institutions constantly seek new methods to fulfil their purpose as part of a continuously standardized process (Jepperson & Swidler, 1994):

"That beyond is a continuous improvement approach, because it's not just about complying. One must not only check if I have it or not, if I comply or not, but it is to go further. If I don't have it and it's aligned with the institutional purposes and objectives, we're going to seek not only to comply, but to incorporate it from our

work and how that adds to the added value towards the social sectors and the rest of those involved at the university level." (Participant one, Institution one)

"We say that something has quality, or it doesn't, not necessarily because it goes through studies, but because of a perception in which there is a recognition that that product, that organization, meets the minimum attributes that it is expected to have." (Participant two, Institution one)

"Every time a new process was known, it was appreciated that each one of them led us to an additional point of improvement. In other words, we did not lose, we won. That permanent reflection led us to that, to continue backing on quality." (Participant four, Institution two)

The same cultural aspects can be perceived when respondents clarify their thoughts towards pursuing international accreditation. They see it as an additional seal that safeguards their recognition and showcases their commitment towards improvement. Furthermore, it justifies their sense of belonging on their own self while still being part of the national system (Martin, 2007):

"Every external accreditation is an improvement project. Not just from that degree. Rather, it is the whole university (...) Because we are better than before, and that's not going to be our own in the end. The graduates are going to say it, society is going to say it, the other universities are going to say it." (Participant four, Institution two)

"If someone stops believing in the CDA, (...) If the standard goes down, then we don't make sure of those elements. So, by having accreditations from outside the country, being international, we say, look, we are competing in training at this same level." (Participant five, Institution two)

"Externally, the standards are higher. We are looking for higher standards. We want our students to be regional, for our graduates to be able to work here and to be able to help the region as well. This has to do not only with universities, but also with socio-economic structures." (Participant six, Institution two)

The belief in keeping high quality standards is also reflected in the institutions' cultures. When referring to quality, the interviews demonstrated that quality maintains an overarching presence in what universities do. Through constant iteration, the universities on this study were able to achieve continuous improvement that could be understood as institutional change through institutionally embedded praxis (Seo & Creed, 2002):

"Compliance with parameters that guarantee quality and excellence. Although it is true that, let's say, we already have it at the national level, it is also important that

a third party or an accreditation agency comes and does the accreditation to validate what we do. Not only in terms of compliance with technical requirements, but also in terms of systematization, management, evaluation and implementation of this improvement cycle." (Participant one, Institution one)

"All the efforts that are made, social projection, research, teaching, are oriented to the social issue, and I think that point is to be highlighted. Even if others don't, we do. That's why I think that, at the country level, we are among the top five universities." (Participant four, Institution two)

"The institution's part of believing in that additional accreditation. That is, I think, looking for a quality label to be able to always position ourselves in a global way." (Participant five, Institution two)

5.1.2 Findings in Organizational Identity

The data obtained from the three pillars suggests that the system has progressively developed a reticent behaviour towards addressing the needs of institutions. Due to the heterogeneity of the system, there can be many views on this matter depending on the institutions that are studied. In the case of nationally accredited private universities, the recognition of such difficulties and the subsequent dismissal of the status quo could not be fully explained by the system itself.

With the findings in the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars displaying various dissonances among what the system imposes and what the institutions believe and do, the data collected in organizational identity fill this later gap for the universities on this study. The results indicate that both institutions present a quality culture inside of their key statements, which translates to both displaying a strong commitment to quality as continuous improvement.

In terms of differences, while Institution one demonstrates this through a discourse more focused on having a stronger impact nationally, institution two sets a platform in which every person in the university matters for achieving quality. Both views do not discredit each other, neither they deny the existence of similar aspects in the other, thus becoming able to coexist in a sympathetic form.

5.1.2.1 Institution one

The university one demonstrates a prominent level of awareness over possessing quality as a differential characteristic for their operations. Respondents and document

analysis highlight this differential as its focus on improvement and the desire of always seek standards above the average for the betterment of the country. On that sense, this institution's identity instrumentalizes their uniqueness in regards of quality as an important aspect for achieving a key goal that determines the institution's attitude and moves their actions as a guiding light (Dukerich et al., 2002; Whetten, 2006):

"We follow an approach not focused on quality assurance, but one step higher, which is the issue of quality culture, the focus of continuous improvement in everything we do." (Participant one, Institution one)

"I think the institution goes beyond. Not only to provide the tools, but also to think that I can have a positive impact on the country, that my work can make a positive change in my country. Even though I can have professional development, not only think about that, but also think about the development in the country. I think it's an issue that not all universities address." (Participant three, Institution one)

"[Institution 1] redoubles its efforts —based on its mystique and work team— in favour of excellence, continuous improvement, innovation in institutional management and international academic projection." (Strategic Plan, Institution one)

The previous efforts are also enhanced by discourses complimenting the differential factors with a strong sense of identity that sees quality procedures as fundamental for a need to identify and self-reflect on challenges the institution needs to overcome for accomplishing institutional goals Albert and Whetten (1985; in Gioia, 1998):

"We're also looking to compare ourselves with the best at the international level, to see what they're doing well that we maybe need to improve. In this case, seeing those aspects is key to continuous improvement. But that is also born of a desire of the institution to want to be better." (Participant three, Institution one)

"People who come from the outside tell you without institutional or labour commitments, saying what you can improve on, and that the HEI itself commits to improving with a benefit outside of itself." (Participant two, Institution one)

"(We are) a university characterized by its impact on social change, by an educational model that trains competent professionals committed to the common good, and by its up-to-date and quality academic offerings." (Strategic plan, Institution one)

5.1.2.2 Institution two

This university displays an even deeper connection towards quality procedures. Respondents and the strategic plan demonstrate that the institution consolidates quality through a deep implementation that streams from their leadership figures to their students, part of a narrative process that began with the national accreditation. Furthermore, it highlights its distinctiveness thorough this discourse showcasing also a degree of adaptability towards including quality in many areas of the institution, as well as functioning as a tool for providing clarity over what the institution aims to achieve. (Gioia, 1998; Whetten, 2006). Moreover, this is enhanced by an understanding that quality is not solely a discourse originating in the leadership of the institution, but it is rather a matter that is shared in a widespread approach thorough all the staff in an attempt to showcase the university's identity in any setting:

"(The national accreditation) led us to reflect on consolidating quality as a university. It was something that was no longer going to disappear from our DNA. From there, we began to review other processes." (Participant four, Institution two)

"I think that quality as such is the commitment of the heads of the universities, the managements. But it is also that they transfer it to the rest, the administrative part and even the teaching part, even to the students themselves." (Participant five, Institution two)

"The Master Plan sets itself new challenges, and all of this is assumed from a vision of continuous improvement in order to become a standard in the different areas." (Strategic Plan, Institution two)

The data obtained also demonstrate that Institution two sees quality as an enduring feature in their operations Albert and Whetten (1985; in Gioia, 1998). Thus, there is a perception that the institution would not be the same if it were pursuing other goals different from quality:

"The university has to think about quality as a key to growth, as a key to shine in society to contribute to that society. If we have the commercial parameter first, we're not doing anything." (Participant four, Institution two)

"But we need to work harder, we do. And that is why we keep improving. In other words, we do not stop, because the quality does not stop. It is like saying excellence above all else. If we call it that, excellence goes higher. Excellence is what is never achieved. Because it is always getting higher. That's what we're looking for." (Participant six, Institution two)

"(We aim to) be a university with a student-centred educational model, with an innovative, accredited and relevant academic offering, with co-titled degrees."
(Strategic Plan, Institution two)

5.2 Discussion

The results showcase that international quality assurance accomplishes a relevant role for nationally accredited higher education institutions in El Salvador. The tenets of the three pillars of new institutionalism (Scott, 2014) showcase different pressures and understandings for institutions that undertake quality assurance procedures.

When it comes to the regulative pillar, evidence of the data collected showcase that nationally accredited institutions are at odds with current regulations, due to the rules that they need to adhere to being either on an outdated status or in a mismatch with what the institutions believe that needs to be more strongly or loosely regulated.

These aspects are present in points such as the final national accreditation being an optional requirement Ley de Educación Superior (2017). For accredited institutions, the fact that this regulation has stood for close to twenty years has proved ineffective in having all higher education institutions in the country involved in nurturing the quality assurance of their processes, as it is clear that less than half of institutions is accredited despite having the possibility to do so. Furthermore, the incentives that the regulations present for undertaking this accreditation are not sufficient enough to leverage the participation of the majority of institutions in the system; even more, those were not a major reason for the presently accredited institutions, and they were never implemented, according to the interviews.

Further mismatches are seen around the current legislation not fulfilling the needs of institutions in the present time, not only in matters related to assessing quality. The resulting issue of this matter hampers accredited institutions' intent to pursue further growth. The data collected on this study displays that institutions perceive that they are not being impacted in a cohesive manner by regulations. This has an effect that goes beyond overly restrictive or permissive policies, as there is a prevalent state of unintended consequences being indirectly stimulated regardless of the type of legislation. For example, the current legislation establishes that the evaluation of students is based on 'Valuative Units' (UV), assessed by the hours students have in front

of a professor during class rather than how the credit system operates, in which the integral workload of a student during academic activities are counting the amount of credits to obtain by a student. For quality assurance procedures, this means that the goal of mandatory evaluations aims to satisfy requirements of functions oriented towards this assessment of students. For nationally accredited institutions, this signifies additional efforts to try to adhere to more modern and innovative standards of assessment while regulations push them towards compliance. There is an additional implication that non-accredited institutions may simply follow the legislation, hampering their possibilities of growth as time moves on.

For the normative pillar, findings show a closely related set of circumstances in which institutions with accreditation attached themselves to norms inclined towards nurturing their quality as an enabler for change. Similar to the views of Casile & Davis-Blake (2002) regarding their comments on the effects on normative structures being different in the private-public divide, this research highlights that in the Salvadoran case this is partially present.

As Salvadoran higher education has been dominated by the presence of private institutions for many years after massification occurred, the results of the interviews prove the possibility of the appearance of 'clusters' or 'categories' among the local private institutions. As the quantity and quality of institutions is not regarded in the same category by the interviewees, they demonstrated a sense of belonging to a specific category of institutions in the landscape. This consisted in behaviours such as distancing themselves from institutions who did not share the attributes of their institutions, inviting closeness to institutions whom they perceived a sense of familiarity in terms of values and efforts, and displaying superiority towards institutions who do not follow as many and as comprehensive set of standards (Scott, 2014).

Within this cluster of nationally accredited institutions, there is also division pertaining to what institutions some universities want to be associated with according to their perception of how the norms are being instrumentalized (Labovitz & Hagedorn, 1973). Although possessing national and international accreditation is a principal factor for institutions to consider associating themselves with others, the set of values for how these institutions work is also a factor to be considered by them. For example, interviews

highlight that although legislation prohibits institutions from being for-profit, many still pursue behaviours that are classified as questionable.

Despite this picture, the participant institutions of this research also emphasize a commitment to participate on initiatives that reduce the gaps perceived in the system. The challenge to note on this matter comes from finding avenues for making these interactions possible and sustaining them for long enough to reach significant impact in a context where the regulative pressures lack a stronger involvement. More challenges appear when sustaining involvement in international quality assurance, either by institution or for degrees, requires a significant financial investment that increases difficulties to access for most institutions.

In the cultural-cognitive area, the strong presence of quality being viewed as continuous improvement and fitness for purpose is a constant through the data collection process, as much as it being with high likelihood the central focus for accredited institutions to carry them out. Due to being private institutions, their foundation and institutional goals could be more attached to their role as service providers. As such, the commitment towards improvement appears to be a significant factor in recognizing their service as one of ambitious standards.

Cognitive and moral views towards international quality follow up these thoughts, transitioning from the individual to group perspectives (Fiol, 2017). Opening the institutional processes to the international stage seems to be seen as a valuable asset for increasing the distinctiveness and appeal of institutions in terms of being able to keep themselves present in larger settings beyond the national one. As the beliefs over the national system are that it is in dire need of improvements, international quality assurance plays the role of a 'larger overseer' in terms of providing institutions with feedback for them to continue their strategies on improvement, allowing the appearance of a culture that does not disrupt the system as a whole (Martin, 2007).

This is strongly linked with the cultural aspects of the institutions. The belief that constant improvement is a crucial answer for institutional activities is actively encouraged and practiced in the participant institutions. At the same time, it relates with other crucial elements that characterize how the institutions wish to work, such as having a strong commitment to producing an impact in the country with a social focus.

On this context, organizational identity follows up on these matters as a response to understand why the universities on these studies have responded in the way they do to their environment. The results on the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars have shed light over an environment that can be understood as confusing in the regulative side, layered on the normative, and committed in the cultural-cognitive one.

Organizational identity, as it is more closely related to cultural-cognitive findings, sustains this show of commitment and further evidence it thorough the discussion of results on the three pillars. For the institutions in the study, the view of quality as a differential characteristic comes as a source for institutions to overcome the environmental limitations that are perceived as having a high degree of difficulty for the successful accomplishment of tasks, providing them also with the thought of maintaining a positive social identity (Gioia, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). To reach the degree of involvement they have in the current circumstances, the findings demonstrate that it is likely that their identity played a crucial role to distance themselves from the traditional or expected degree of compliance. This contributed to create a deeper divide between internationally accredited universities and others, following an us vs them point of view (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Whetten, 2006).

The interiorization of quality procedures appears reflected in the respondents answers as well as in the institutional documentation used for this study. International quality assurance appears as an activity done with the aim of legitimizing such intent, while attaining recognition among a broader group of peers. Moreover, this has a high degree of coherence towards the main meanings of quality for the institutions, as continuous improvement has progressively become a systematized belief system for which institutions have cared for, with the creation of new units and roles dedicated to attaining, sustain and overcome the standards achieved, which could also be evidence of isomorphic practices as most accredited institutions have took such a route (Dukerich et al., 2002; Gioia, 1998; H. He & Baruch, 2009).

6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study have provided sustained evidence for identifying and understanding the various aspects of the institutional environment and organizational identity of nationally accredited higher education institutions in El Salvador for their pursuit of international quality assurance.

The institutional environment in the Salvadoran higher education system is mainly recognized as heterogeneous from the three pillars of new institutionalism (Scott, 2014). For the purposes of this study, this has meant the possibility of a divide generated by accredited institutions in which topics of quality assurance have progressively become more relevant through time, generating the possibility of isomorphisms among these group of institutions and opening the door for more international influence (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014)

It can be noted that the regulative pillar possess an outdated degree of obligations, a misaligned degree of precision, and a prevailing lack of support on the delegative dimension (Abbott et al., 2000). The degree of coercion in such situations can be understood as mixed, as base regulations are being implemented, however, complex matters such as grading systems and quality assurance are either outdated or not fully in force.

For the normative pillar, the heterogeneous environment allowed to only analyse the cluster of nationally accredited institutions. Thus, this scenario highlights strong normative structures that orient the behaviour of institutions towards embracing accreditation, which becomes an useful feature to showcase their position within the system and helps them to understand how to address other institutions in favourable or unfavourable ways (Casile & Davis-Blake, 2002; Labovitz & Hagedorn, 1973; Stinchcombe, 1997).

The cultural-cognitive pillar for accredited institutions showcases the insightful processes institutions undertook when they approached quality assurance for the first time until present time. Such experiences provided elements that became part of institutions' cultures, allowing them to transform quality assurance to part of their

standardized routines and becoming part of their social structures (Fiol, 2017; Jepperson & Swidler, 1994; Meindl et al., 1996).

The divide for these institutions in the wider institutional environment has its origins and sustained itself thanks to the strong identity of nationally accredited universities on improvement. Through time, this aspect became increasingly relevant to differentiate and particularize the efforts of institutions towards quality assurance. As improvement naturally grew within their cultures, international quality assurance appears to be a natural step forward in terms of actions that are central to these universities, makes them distinctive among their national counterparts, and became now a strong link through the past, present and future of their actions (Gioia, 1998; Whetten, 2006).

In terms of the range of recommendations for further research, it is needed to address the view of academics for quality assurance in Salvadoran higher education institutions. As highlighted by Newton (2000), academic staff is particularly not a passive recipient of quality implementations, and there is lack of knowledge on the circumstances that would drive them towards compliance or resistance in Salvadoran accredited institutions. Furthermore, there is also a relevant need for understanding the institutional environment of institutions in a wider sense beyond only quality assurance and only nationally accredited institutions. As the scope of this research only included universities that have already progressed from only national to also adding international accreditation, there is a prevalent gap on understanding why non-accredited institutions have not taken the steps for quality assurance, and what impact does it have on stakeholders.

Higher education in El Salvador is still in need of deeper research to address many topics that affects institutions, students, employers, government, and other relevant figures. While this study has provided a key step forward, there are still many open avenues to be explored for the betterment of the country's system.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview Protocol for Data Collection

Interview Protocol

Thesis topic: The Role of Organizational Identities for External Quality Assurance Processes in Salvadoran Nationally Accredited Universities

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Interviewee's institution:

Position of Interviewee:

Introductory Words: Esta investigación tiene el propósito de descubrir y evidenciar cuáles son las razones por las que actualmente las instituciones de educación superior salvadoreñas buscan procesos de calidad internacionales como parte de sus operaciones, y qué relación tienen estas razones con la identidad organizacional de las instituciones. Como parte de la muestra, la investigación se limita a instituciones que ya tienen una noción de calidad, comprobada a partir de encontrarse acreditadas por la Comisión de Acreditación de la Calidad.

Toda la información recolectada a través de esta entrevista, desde el nombre de la institución hasta los datos recolectados, con total confidencialidad dentro del documento final. La entrevista tiene una duración prevista entre 40 a 70 minutos bajo un estilo semiestructurado.

Topics:

- **Introductory questions**
- **Perceptions of Higher Education in El Salvador**
- **Organizational identity of their institution**
- **Quality processes**

Questions:

Introductory Questions

1. ¿Puede explicar de forma detallada qué rol tiene en su institución?
2. ¿Cuál ha sido su experiencia profesional y académica?
3. ¿Por cuánto tiempo ha trabajado en su institución?

Perceptions of Higher Education in El Salvador

1. ¿Qué opinión tiene de la educación superior en El Salvador?
2. ¿Cuál considera que es la posición de su institución en la educación superior salvadoreña?
3. ¿Qué desafíos considera que enfrenta la educación superior en El Salvador?
4. ¿Cuál es su opinión de la actual legislación en educación superior salvadoreña?

Organizational identity of their institution

1. ¿Desde su experiencia, cuáles considera que son los valores más importantes en su institución?
2. ¿Qué esfuerzos hace la institución para enseñar sus valores a sus empleados? ¿Forma parte de la organización de alguno de estos?
3. ¿Qué aspectos de su universidad considera que la hacen única entre las universidades salvadoreñas?
4. ¿Qué aspectos de su universidad considera que la hacen parte de las universidades salvadoreñas?

Quality processes as part of the organization

1. ¿En su opinión, cuál es el significado de la calidad en la educación superior salvadoreña?
2. ¿Cuál considera que es el rol del aseguramiento de la calidad provisto por el estado en la educación superior salvadoreña?
3. ¿Cuál es su rol dentro de los procesos de calidad de su institución?
4. ¿Qué razones han motivado a su institución para buscar acreditaciones con organismos externos?
5. ¿Puede describir cómo participa usted en dichos procesos de acreditación?
6. ¿Cómo considera que dichos procesos contribuyen a la institución tanto interna como externamente?

Interview Question	Topic	Notes
¿Puede explicar de forma detallada qué rol tiene en su institución?	Introductory questions	
¿Cuál ha sido su experiencia profesional y académica?		
¿Por cuánto tiempo ha trabajado en su institución?		
¿Qué opinión tiene de la educación superior en El Salvador?	Perceptions of Higher Education in El Salvador	
¿Cuál considera que es la posición de su institución en la educación superior salvadoreña?		
¿Qué desafíos considera que enfrenta la educación superior en El Salvador?		
¿Cuál es su opinión de la actual legislación en educación superior salvadoreña?		
¿Desde su experiencia, cuáles considera que son los valores más importantes en su institución?	Organizational identity of their institution	
¿Qué esfuerzos hace la institución para enseñar sus valores a sus empleados? ¿Forma parte de la organización de alguno de estos?		
¿Qué aspectos de su universidad considera que la hacen única entre las universidades salvadoreñas?		

<p>¿En su opinión, cuál es el significado de la calidad en la educación superior salvadoreña?</p>	<p>Quality processes as part of the organization</p>	
<p>¿Se toma en cuenta lo que otras universidades acreditadas hacen?</p>		
<p>¿Cuál considera que es el rol del aseguramiento de la calidad provisto por el estado en la educación superior salvadoreña?</p>		
<p>¿Qué razones han motivado a su institución para buscar acreditaciones con el organismo nacional?</p>		
<p>¿Qué razones han motivado a su institución para buscar acreditaciones con organismos externos?</p>		