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# The Enactment of Quality Assurance Policies in Ecuadorian Higher Education: A Case Study in the Public Universities in the Province of Manabí

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education

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## Abstract

This study investigates how the administrators in the research and quality assurance offices in the regional universities in Ecuador enact the national research quality assurance policy. The massification and diversification of higher education and the internationalization, as well as globalization of higher education institutions create an increasingly competitive environment. Given this competition, resources are scarce, resulting in more frequent and more aggressive budgetary constraints. Government and national funding agencies are including the notion of “quality” in their policies to measure the performance and efficiency of universities and determine budget allocation, demanding universities to “prove their value” to remain operational. In a qualitative case study, I incorporated Bourdieu's practice theory to investigate how accountability mechanisms (such as quality standards, quality evaluation models, and performance outcomes) influence research practices in Ecuadorian Higher Education. Data sources included several policy documents and semi-structured interviews with administrators (n=9) in charge of the research and quality assurance offices in the four public regional universities in Manabí. This work makes conceptual and theoretical contributions to the existing literature on regional universities and quality assurance in higher education. In terms of the conceptual contribution, it provides one of the first definitions of regional universities applicable to the Ecuadorian higher education context. This study also brings to light the contradictions between the definitions of quality in the policy text and the practical view of the policy actors in charge of its enactment. The theoretical contribution of this research is framed by the use of Bourdieu's practice theory, which is used to identify the critical components of research practices in Ecuadorian higher education. Since the existing literature about quality assurance in Ecuador is primarily quantitative, this study constitutes the first attempt to map out the capitals of the Ecuadorian higher education field, the predispositions, and strategies of universities to face the rules set by the policy, and some of the existing structural constraints in the field. By identifying these key components, this work provides insights into the often-overlooked mechanisms of policy translation into research practices by the administrators in universities in Manabí Province.

## Keywords

Accountability, Higher education, Practice Theory, Quality enhancement, Regional Universities, Managerialism, University Governance, Policy Enactment, Qualitative Research, Research Performance.

## Summary for lay audience

This study investigates how the administrators in the research and quality assurance offices in the regional universities in Ecuador put the national research quality assurance policy into practice. The massification and diversification of higher education, as well as the internationalization and globalization of higher education institutions, create an increasingly competitive environment. Given this competition, resources are scarce, resulting in more frequent and aggressive budgetary constraints. Government and national funding agencies are including the notion of “quality” in their policies to measure the performance and efficiency of universities and to determine budget allocation; they are demanding that universities “prove their value” to remain operational. In this qualitative case study, I have incorporated Bourdieu's practice theory to investigate how accountability mechanisms (such as quality standards, quality-evaluation models, and performance outcomes) influence research practices in Ecuadorian higher education. Data sources for this study include several policy documents and semi-structured interviews with nine administrators in charge of the research and quality assurance offices in the four public regional universities in Manabí. This work makes conceptual and theoretical contributions to the existing literature on regional universities and quality assurance in higher education. In terms of the conceptual contribution, it provides one of the first definitions of regional universities specifically applicable to Ecuadorian higher education. This study also brings to light the contradictions that exist between the definitions of quality in the policy text and the practical view of the policy actors in charge of its enactment. The theoretical contribution of this research stems from the use of Bourdieu's practice theory to identify the critical components of research practices in Ecuadorian higher education. Given that, up until this point, research on quality assurance in Ecuador has been primarily quantitative, this study constitutes the first attempt to map out the capitals of the Ecuadorian higher education field, the predispositions of universities, how their strategies are constrained by the rules set by a given policy, and to highlight some of the existing structural constraints in the field. By identifying these key components, this work provides insights into the often overlooked mechanisms of policy translation into research practices by the administrators in Manabí universities.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Augusto (Gus) Riveros, for his continuous support. I immensely appreciate your wisdom, dedication, and patience over the entire program. Your guidance has made me a better researcher and a better person. I promise I will do my best to treat my students as well as you treated me.

I also would like to thank Dr. Paul Tarc for providing timely and accurate feedback. Your thoughtful suggestions and observations motivated me to reflect on every step and they have significantly improved the outcome of this work.

My gratitude also goes to the administrators at the Manabí Universities for selflessly sharing their time, knowledge, and experiences. Your demonstration of service humbles me.

I thank my parents, Emilio and Marina, for prioritizing my education, even in times of scarcity. I thank my sister Gema for being always an inspiration. I thank my wife Magdalena and my children Kael and Ellie for their love, caring, understanding and encouragement. I love you all, and I am forever grateful for the joy you bring to my life.

This work was supported by the Universidad Estatal del Sur de Manabí and the Scholarship No. CZ04-000651-2018, funded by the Ecuadorian Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (SENESCYT).

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## Chapter 1

### 1 Introduction

#### 1.1 Research problem

This study investigates how the administrators in the research office and the quality assurance office in the regional universities in Ecuador enact the national research quality assurance policy. The increase in the massification and diversification of higher education and the internationalization and globalization of higher education institutions create an increasingly competitive environment (Miranda, 2007). Given this competition, resources are scarce, resulting in more frequent and restrictive budgetary constraints (Giroto et al., 2013). Government and national funding agencies are including the notion of “quality” in their policies as a tool to measure the performance and efficiency of universities and to determine budget allocation, and in this manner, requiring universities to “prove their value” to remain operational and to access funding. As a consequence, higher education institutions have been pushed to adopt managerialist practices and principles.

Managerialism has been widely used as an ideological discourse to guide universities' administration; however, Davis (2017) found that despite managerialism's efficiency promises, it has also had a negative influence on various academic and administrative processes and practices within universities. Managerialism includes linguistic terms such as “performance indicators”, “rankings”, “quality assurance processes”, and this commercially tinged language influences universities' activities.

Possible impacts of managerialist practices include the increase in the fragility of academic identities and the deterioration of working conditions that are the direct result of the increase in workloads (Kalfa & Taksa, 2017). Similarly, Lynch (2015) considers that the establishment of rankings and an academic culture permeated by a perennial

ethos of measurement alters the internal culture of universities, pressing them to move from teaching centers to business organizations driven by productivity objectives.

In the field of academic research activities, Kalfa and Taksa (2017) found that faculty members are struggling to resist managerialist pressures. For Nickson (2014), some researchers accept managerialist practices, while simultaneously trying to maintain their own values and research agendas. For Alvesson and Spicer (2016), the reason for this acceptance is an exaggerated focus on the “publish or perish” mindset and the focus on career advancement, while for Leathwood and Read (2013), if researchers simply want to keep their jobs, they have no alternative but to submit to the exigencies of managerialism. These studies have been conducted in different academic contexts and in both developing countries (like Ecuador) and developed nations (e.g., United Kingdom and Australia). This research is an opportunity to identify how Ecuadorian administrators, with their limited economic resources and with little time for research activities, can implement the quality assurance policy.

## 1.2 Research context

Countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom were pioneers in applying private-sector management methods in the public sector in the late 1980s. This interest in finding adequate solutions to public-sector problems motivated higher education institutions in various parts of the world to adopt managerialist practices (Giroto et al., 2013). Ecuador is not the exception. In Ecuador's higher education system, the government recognizes quality assurance as a systematic necessity, with the three purposes defined by CACES<sup>1</sup> (CACES, 2018b):

- *The purpose of licensing or regulation* seeks to ensure that only institutions that meet the necessary conditions operate in the system, while also giving legitimacy to institutions that meet the established criteria.

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<sup>1</sup> Spanish acronym for: Higher Education Quality Assurance Council

- *The public guarantee of quality* delineates how governments (both national and provincial) certify to society that the country's higher education system meets declared institutional purposes and quality standards.
- *Continuous quality improvement*, which is the capacity for self-regulation of higher education institutions, understood as the ability to guide their own behaviour, assuming that the pursuit of quality is their primary responsibility.

The evaluation of research activities in the universities in Manabí Province is based on the criteria defined by the quality standards developed by the three higher education-governing institutions: CACES, CES (Spanish for Higher Education Council), and SENEKYT (Spanish for Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation). Research "performance" for Ecuadorian higher institutions is determined in the External Evaluation Model for Universities and Polytechnic Schools (CACES, 2015) by:

- the number of publications in "regional impact journals" (*Latindex*, *DOAJ*, and *Scielo*, among others listed in the model);
- the number of publications in "world impact journals" (e.g., *SCOPUS* and *ISI Web of Knowledge*), and
- the capacity of the universities to plan, procure and execute research grants.

Evaluation and accreditation are mandatory and necessary for an institution to belong to the Ecuadorian higher education system (CACES, 2018a). That said, the influence of quality assurance policy goes beyond providing institutions access to the system; it determines the universities' funding allocation. The Ecuadorian government uses an equation (directly below) that considers the following metrics (CES, 2013, p.8):

- Quality ( $\alpha$ ), is worth 60% of the outcome. It is defined as the continuous and systematic search for excellence. It depends exclusively on the quality assurance policy indicators.
- Excellence ( $\beta$ ), is worth 6% of the outcome. This value is only distributed among the top-ranked universities according to the CACES-defined methodology.

- Administrative Efficiency ( $\gamma_1$ ), is worth 2% of the outcome. This value is dependent on the previous year's budget execution.
- Academic Relevance ( $\gamma_2$ ), is worth 32% of the outcome. This value is based on the contextual relevance of the educational offer and the cost per student. It is calculated using parameters defined yearly by SENESCYT.

$$A_{itF} = \left( \alpha \frac{(C_{iti} + \Delta C_{it-1}) NE_{it-1}}{\sum_{i=1}^n (C_{iti} + \Delta C_{it-1}) NE_{it-1}} + \beta E_{it-1} + \gamma_1 EFAD_{it-1} + \gamma_2 EFA_{it-1} \right) AT_{tj} \quad (1)$$

Where:

$A_{itF}$  = Total funding allocation a higher education institution  $i$  receives in the  $t$  period where the equation was applied

$i$  = Higher education institution

$t$  = Year in which resources are allocated

$j$  = Type of institution

$\alpha$  = Quality component

$\beta$  = Excellence component

$\gamma_1$  = Administrative efficiency component

$\gamma_2$  = Academic relevance component

$C$  = Quality

$NE$  = Number of students

$E$  = Excellence

$EFAD$  = Administrative efficiency



*EFA* = Academic relevance

*AT* = Resources to be allocated according to the type of institution

Being so beholden to the indicators' outcomes adds an extra layer of pressure to regional universities in Ecuador. Regional universities have had to adapt their programs to meet the demands of societal change. These demands create challenges for university management, which, according to CACES' quality indicators, should seek to be globally competitive without neglecting their local contexts (Ortiz Velosa, 2018). Regional public universities do indeed have an important role in advancing the goals of regional development. However, because regional universities tend to embody the problems and challenges of their localities, such as reduced access to resources and opportunities, they are put in a disadvantaged position compared to national universities, which arguably have different priorities. It is clear that, by failing to recognize the differences between national universities and regional universities, the current funding model perpetuates and reproduces the inequality built into the system (Flores Franulič & Fleet Oyarce, 2018).

Considering that quality indicators measure the individual performance of universities, the current model limits collaborative initiatives. It turns higher education into an arena of competition for students and economic resources, creating an environment where quantity rather than relevance—however else that might be defined—determines what is measured as quality. The abundance of quality assurance processes, forms, and tasks may cause the processes to lose their meaning, and to become rituals designed to fulfill the accountability requirements (Davis, 2017).

### 1.3 Research questions

CACES performs periodic measurements of the indicators used to evaluate higher education institutions; however, every higher education institution depends upon its research office to translate the quality assurance policy into practice. Research offices in these institutions are important policy actors: they are mediators between the

administration and those implementing policy. They are narrators, entrepreneurs, enthusiasts, translators, and transactors of the quality assurance policy (Ball et al., 2011).

Research offices in Manabí universities can take different forms and names (“research direction”, “research coordination”, and “general research coordination”). Still, they share some responsibilities: proposing and implementing research policies, monitoring and evaluating research activities, and coordinating the execution of research activities with other internal units or external institutions, such as CACES, SENESCYT, and other universities (Estatuto de La Escuela Superior Politecnica Agropecuaria de Manabí Manuel Felix Lopez, 2015; Estatuto de La Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí , 2019; Estatuto de La Universidad Estatal Del Sur de Manabí, 2014). Research offices oversee the adoption of government institutions' research guidelines and regulations. Considering the importance of these activities, these research offices play a central role in the universities' performance, reputation, and ability to acquire research resources.

Some studies provide historical perspectives on the evolution of quality assurance protocols in Ecuadorian higher education institutions (Espinoza Cevallos, 2016; Sánchez et al., 2018; Véliz Briones, 2018). Several others have focused on developing technological tools to manage and quantify the fulfillment of the indicators (Colcha & Quinde, 2014; Erazo et al., 2017), but no studies have focused on understanding how research offices in Manabí's universities have translated Research Quality Assurance Policies (RQAP) into practice, that is, how these offices influence the development of research practices, research grants, researchers training and support, and scientific production. This study also provides an opportunity to identify the challenges that regional universities face under managerialist systems. The literature on higher education generally focuses on national (i.e., top-tier) universities, so there is still much to explore about the way regional universities carry out their activities. In the Latin American context, Chile and Colombia (Arenas Charlín, 2015; Flores Franulič & Fleet Oyarce, 2018; Ortiz Velosa, 2018; Vergaño, 2018) are the countries in which research has been carried out on this type of university; in Ecuador it is still an incipient field of study.

This research investigates research offices in each public university in Manabí in order to identify how research policies are translated into practices. Social practices are diverse and multifaceted. The use of practice theory in this research provides opportunities to discover the logic of operation in the research practices in the universities of Manabí, the rules of the game (*doxa*), and the existence of conflicts in the enactment of quality assurance policies. The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions:

- How do administrators in charge of adopting the quality assurance policy in the regional universities of Manabí make sense of research quality as stated in the policy?
- How has the Ecuadorian Quality Assurance Policy influenced research practices in the universities in Manabí Province?
- What are the challenges and opportunities derived from the enactment of the Ecuadorian Quality Assurance Policy?

## 1.4 Researcher positionality

Power relations between the researcher and the researched are usually asymmetrical. Positionality addresses the influence of "cultural values, beliefs, ascribed and achieved social position, status, gender, race, sexuality, insider and outsider status" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 306) on how knowledge is produced, used, and evaluated. Before pursuing a PhD degree at Western University, I was a full-time instructor at one of the universities in Manabí. In addition, I was part of the Technical Committee of the Quality Assurance Department at the same university. This experience gave me a first-hand perspective of the influence of quality assurance processes on research activities, both from an individual (as a researcher) and an institutional (as a policy-implementer or enforcer) perspective. It was expected that my familiarity with the institutions would provide me with increased access to the site and ease the participants' recruitment. In addition, due to working for several years in policy implementation, I knew I could be biased toward supporting and accepting the quality assurance policy without questioning its purposes or methods. To address this concern, I was reflexive about any possible bias resulting from

my previous participation as an insider during all stages of this study. This reflexivity exercise increased the trustworthiness of the findings. Since being objective is not expected in qualitative research, reflexivity is crucial for qualitative studies because it offers qualitative researchers awareness of how "their interpretation of findings is shaped by their background" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200).

I moved to Canada to pursue doctoral studies in the critical policy, equity, and leadership field. This educational experience reinforced my interest in understanding how research quality assurance policy is interpreted and translated into practices by the universities in the province of Manabí. I believe that examining people's experiences is fundamental to understanding the policy's influence on research activities. I chose a qualitative methodology because, through the participant's experiences, research has the potential to uncover the hidden structures of policy enactment and actors' strategies to translate these structures into research practices. Using a practice-based theory, I defined "practice" as the central unit of analysis of this study, given that human action can produce perdurable consequences in social fields.

## 1.5 Significance of the study

This study seeks to identify the organizational structures that inform the enactment of quality assurance policies. Enactment is a crucial term here because this study does not focus on measuring the outputs of quality assurance processes. Instead, the main focus was on how each institution makes sense of the policy when translating it into practice.

This research offers insights to those researchers, administrators, and policymakers in Ecuadorian higher education interested in introducing flexibility in the policy-formulation process. Furthermore, the study aims to recognize the possibility of different institutional interpretations of the policy. The critical approach to managerialist practices—specifically concerning quality assurance systems in Ecuadorian higher education—provides an alternative perspective on the consequences of the policy adoption and allows the recognition of the challenges that regional public universities

face, given that they are often marginalized in the research literature, policy construction, and policy development.

## 1.6 Summary

This chapter presented the research problem and the research questions that guided this work. It also provides a general overview of the context of research quality assurance in Ecuadorian higher education. This chapter also explained the implications of the researcher's positionality for the study and the significance of this work for researchers, administrators and policymakers. The following chapter reviews the existing literature about quality assurance, higher education governance and accountability and regional universities.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Literature review

#### 2.1 Quality assurance in Higher Education

While the concept of quality assurance is not entirely new, the terminology and methodology used to define and apply it are relatively recent. Quality assurance “emerged as a principal business methodology in the Western world throughout the 1950s and early 1960s” (Friend-Pereira et al., 2002, p. 10). The origins of quality assurance in higher education are still under debate. For Williams and Harvey (2016), the political origins of quality assurance can be traced back to the 1980s as an attempt by governments to enact neoliberal policies designed to make higher education institutions accountable for their use of public money. Relatedly, for Miranda (2007), the 1980s witnessed an increased massification and diversification of higher education, as well as the internationalization and globalization of higher education institutions, initiating a global academic debate about regulatory procedures, and advocating for an increase in productivity and efficiency (Miranda, 2007).

Nowadays, higher education institutions face complex challenges related to the demands for highly trained professionals, research and knowledge production, and the perennial struggle against social, economic, and development inequalities (Hernández Bringas et al., 2015). At the same time, they need to maintain high levels of efficiency, accountability, and societal engagement, becoming more entrepreneurial and competitive (Austin & Jones, 2018). The concept of quality is introduced into the higher education context as a means of measuring performance and observing relative differences between higher education institutions (Friend-Pereira et al., 2002). The introduction of “quality” as an indicator created the conditions for the emergence of new tools and mechanisms for managing the scope and content of teaching, research, and administration, which all became undergirded by the concept of quality assurance.

The social and economic relevance attributed to the access of the population to knowledge as a social mobility mechanism promotes the regional, national, and international interest in quality (De Vincenzi, 2018), thus making quality assurance one of the major concerns for higher education in the past decades (Utuka, 2013). Quality assurance requires continuous attention and formalized structures (Vroeijerstijn, 1995), giving rise to the creation of internal spaces in universities and external regulatory bodies that are dedicated to assessing quality.

### 2.1.1 The concept of quality in higher education

The concept, methodologies, and instruments of quality had been traditionally applied in an industrial and economic context. Given their roots, quality models can be oriented to address several functions, such as certification, accreditation, and competition among business and economic sectors, continuous improvement of products, goods, and services, as well as addressing customers' needs (Morales Requenes & Rueda Araya, 2019).

Understanding quality is a fundamental prerequisite to understanding quality assurance. However, quality is quite a problematic term to define, especially in higher education, where most universities have the autonomy to define their strategic goals. But in addition to the independence of higher education institutions, there are several other factors that make difficult to comprehensively define the concept of quality:

- 1) Understanding the purpose of quality involves the assumption that the purpose of higher education is constant and clearly defined. The purpose of higher education is amorphous, and can change by region, country, or institution. Although quality measuring tools and methods are becoming more diverse and complex, they need to be adapted to specific contexts. It is essential to understand that higher education quality (or quality assurance) should not be seen as the end itself but as a means for higher education institutions to achieve their purpose.

2) The definition of quality will depend on who is using the term (González & Espinoza, 2018), meaning that the definition of quality is different for each stakeholder (Welzant et al., 2015), yet, all of them are affected by quality in its manifold senses (Williams & Harvey, 2016);

3) Quality in higher education is a multidimensional concept. The scope of quality is not limited to teaching, but also includes research, personnel administration, infrastructure and equipment of universities, and services to members of the university community (internal) and society (external) (Abad Peña et al., 2017);

4) Quality is not static; it is inherently dynamic. Considering that many quality assurance models are imported from countries in the Global North to countries in the Global South (Williams & Harvey, 2016), the pursuit of excellence must consider the context, whether that is of an economic, political, or social nature (Welzant et al., 2015)

The contested discussion about quality has engaged the interest of scholars in the higher education field in the last few years (Cartwright, 2007), motivating several authors to conceptualize the idea of quality in higher education. Akin (1994) and Giertz (2000) agree that in an academic setting, even when it is complicated to describe the components of quality, scholars share values and a working framework that enables them to intuitively know what quality is, and to identify both its presence and absence.

In the Iberoamerican context, in 1994, the “Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo (CINDA [Inter-University Center for Development]) defined quality in higher education as:

a set of qualities of an institution or organization estimated in a given time and situation. It is a way of being of the institution that meets the characteristics of integrity (includes all the factors necessary for the development of human beings), coherence (congruence between ends, objectives, strategies, activities, means, and evaluation), and effectiveness (achievement of ends through the proper functioning of all the elements involved). (CINDA, 1994, p.45 [translation]).



It is clear that reaching a universal definition of quality is not an easy task, and more research is required even to determine the feasibility of ever achieving one (Welzant et al., 2015). Despite the inherent difficulties in defining quality, according to how the concept is applied in the real world, there are two broad approaches to quality: the managerial and the critical perspectives. The difference between these approaches is that from a managerial perspective, quality is considered a self-contained technical process that can be measured and controlled with managerial knowledge. In contrast, from a critical perspective, quality has multiple contradictory meanings that render quality a political, symbolic, and cultural process (Kelemen, 2003). Blanco Ramírez (2013), Harvey and Green (1993), Kelemen (2003), and Welzant et al. (2015) provide descriptions of the different approaches to quality. Table 1 shows a classification of their concepts, resulting in four managerial perspectives: 1) quality as fitness for purpose, 2) quality as transformation, 3) quality as value for money, and 4) quality as perfection; and three critical perspectives: 1) quality as exceptional, 2) quality as a social constructivist approach, and 3) quality as a discursive approach. The rest of this section provides an overview of the major elements in each of the categories.

Table 1: *Classification of the meanings associated with quality*

	<b>Harvey and Green (1993)</b>	<b>Welzant et al. (2015)</b>	<b>Kelemen (2003)</b>	<b>Blanco Ramírez (2013)</b>
<b>Managerial Perspectives</b>	Quality as fitness for purpose	Quality as purposeful	User-based approach	
	Quality as transformation	Quality as transformative	Product-based approach	
	Quality as value for money	Quality as accountable	Value-based approach	
	Quality as perfection		Manufacturing-based approach	
<b>Critical Perspectives</b>	Quality as exceptional	Quality as exceptional	Transcendental approach	
			Social Constructivist approach	Political perspective
			Discursive approach	Symbolic perspective

### 2.1.1.1 Quality as purposeful (fitness for purpose)

Fitness for purpose describes a functional definition of quality. In this approach, a product or a process has quality if it accomplishes a purpose. Unlike the idea of quality as exception (that is, as an exclusive characteristic), this approach is inclusive, because every product or service has the potential to fit its purpose and achieve quality (Vásquez Córdova, 2015).

A user or a provider can determine the expectations of accomplishment. However, it is not easy in higher education to realize students' requirements. Students adapt their behaviour according to what is available to them in terms of access opportunities, previous knowledge requirements, and mobility (De Vincenzi, 2018). Students can only provide feedback on the quality of the services they receive. In addition, Gonzalez and Espinoza (2018) consider that applying a customer perspective in higher education produces several questions, such as: Who is the customer? Is it the students or the parents paying for their children's education? Are the students the customers or the products? From the provider's perspective, fitness for purpose would be based on fulfilling the institution's mission and vision. In any case, "quality is achieved when the product or service meets stated purposes" (Goff, 2017). But again, how can we know if the institutions are fulfilling the goals of their stated missions?

This concept of quality supports quality evaluation initiatives that privilege improvement. Self-assessment plays a central role, and external evaluation verifies that the institution can efficiently manage internal quality assurance (De Vincenzi, 2018). According to Woodhouse (1999), this approach favours institutional diversity in that it helps higher education institutions show how they can plan and execute their own specific strategy as opposed to simply cloning other universities' strategies.

### 2.1.1.2 Quality as transformation or transformative action

Transformation entails transitioning from the current state to the desired state (i.e., one that is considered better); this entails a qualitative change from one state to another

(Harvey, 2006a). This approach empowers the leading educational actors (instructors, researchers, students, and administrators). It involves communication, teamwork, and the actors' ability to critically make decisions about their transformation (De Vincenzi, 2018).

There are some problems translating notions of quality based on products to the services sector. Unlike other services where the provider is doing something *for* the customer, in education, the provider is doing something *to* the customer (Vásquez Córdova, 2015), either by enhancing the customer in terms of increasing their knowledge and skills through the educational experience or by empowering the customer by helping them to influence their own transformation (Harvey, 2006a). In research, the provider is not producing knowledge out of nowhere; instead, the provider is transforming a particular body of knowledge with a specific purpose (Vásquez Córdova, 2015).

From the students' perspective, education is a process that engenders a transformation in them, providing them with value, which can be described in terms of “empowerment, autonomy and critical thinking ability” (Goff, 2017). Ideally, the students own the learning process and acquire responsibility for determining their learning style (González & Espinoza, 2018).

This transformation is not limited to students or researchers. It can also happen at an institutional level, changing institutional processes, behaviours, and higher education institutions' ability to provide transformative research and learning (Harvey, 2006a). This institutional transformation is dependent on policy formulation. At a policy level, Stensaker (2008) calls for a migration from an accreditation-based quality assurance model to one based on self-regulation, continuous enhancement, and evidence-based analysis and policy-making. An improvement audit could be a good fit for this approach to quality because it has a prospective vision and is oriented towards institutional transformation (Vásquez Córdova, 2015).

### 2.1.1.3 Quality as accountable (value for money)

The conception of ‘value for money’ has gained notoriety since the 1980s. It is related to the state's financial accountability (the state provides funding) and the public (De Vincenzi, 2018). In this sense, quality can be defined as the degree of excellence obtained for an affordable price, while controlling the variances at an acceptable cost (González & Espinoza, 2018). Quality is assessed by a given return on investment, focusing on cost-effectiveness (Goff, 2017). In practice, this means producing more graduates for less money and having an increase in the number of per-capita peer-reviewed publications from the academic staff, a higher number of PhDs inside the faculty, and more self-funded activity (such as external grants and contracts) built into the institutions’ strategic plans (Biggs, 2001).

Competitiveness is a central element of this approach. The government aims to increase access to higher education with minimal additional investment. It follows that all higher education institutions must compete for research grants and funds (Vásquez Córdova, 2015).

### 2.1.1.4 Quality as perfection

This approach is closely related to consistency because it focuses on the reliability of processes to generate products without defects (Harvey, 2006a). *Quality as perfection* is expressed in two main propositions: *zero defects* and *doing things right* (De Vincenzi, 2018). Quality here is understood as prioritizing planning over inspection, meaning that it is necessary to ensure that there will be no errors at any stage of a process. Every member of a higher education institution is responsible for qualitative advancement, leading to a “quality culture.” Instead of being dependent on the measurement of inputs or outputs, quality is assessed by the fulfillment of standards in the process, which is assumed to lead to “flawless outcomes” (Goff, 2017).

### 2.1.1.5 Quality as exceptional (excellence)

This is probably the most traditional approach to defining quality, where quality is understood as being focused on meeting high standards. Harvey and Green (1993) claimed that one of this approach's main conditions is that quality is seen as something special. Quality is not easy to define in this conception, but it should be easily identifiable in its self-manifestation: as the best, “the gold standard” (Goff, 2017).

*Quality as exceptional* includes three variants (De Vincenzi, 2018): 1) the notion of quality as an exclusive or elite status given to a particular institution. In this variant, quality does not require a set of criteria to validate its existence; 2) the notion of quality as excellence—in this variant, quality is validated against standards achievable under very limited circumstances, and 3) the idea of quality as the achievement of minimum standards. This variant undergirds most quality assurance initiatives conducted by different countries and institutions.

### 2.1.1.6 Social constructivist approach to quality

This approach looks at quality not as an inherent characteristic of the product but as the result of the construction of powerful agents (e.g., an external certification body, the customers) to recognize or confer quality to the product. As a social construction, quality cannot be value-free. Its meaning is derived from a political process that depends on the particular context and needs to be negotiated, developed, and enacted according to the existing contextual power relations (Kelemen, 2003). In the academic setting, this political process involves a rebalancing power that favours a technocratic mindset. According to Blanco Ramírez (2013), this is why the leading voice of quality assurance processes is increasingly focused on a bureaucratic set of actors instead of on academics.

Different stakeholders' competing interests are present in all stages of quality assurance, from policy development to day-to-day management of quality indices. Because of this power struggle, instead of looking for a conclusive definition of quality, organizations must “attempt to democratize their quality-related practices to the extent that marginal

voices (e.g., employees) become heard” (Kelemen, 2003, p.8) and pay attention to the micro-politics (the influence of quality in power distribution) of the universities if they wish to develop quality assurance initiatives and policy (Blanco Ramírez, 2013).

#### 2.1.1.7 Discursive approach to quality

In this approach, discourse is a central element in the conceptual construction of quality. Reality is not just reflected in language and signs but is constructed by both (Kelemen, 2003). The conceptualization of quality as a collection of symbols and discourses involves some level of performativity. By participating in quality assurance initiatives, higher education institutions represent themselves as the best version of their reality to comply with the defined standards (Blanco Ramírez, 2013).

This approach relies on Foucault’s concepts such as knowledge, power, and the self (Foucault, 1980) by establishing an interdependence among reality, power, and language. Using a discursive or symbolic approach opens up possibilities for exploring the discursive construction of quality as part of social activity, a process that is not visible from a technical-rational perspective (Blanco Ramírez, 2013). This last characteristic of discursive approaches to quality is not without difficulties. In an organizational setting, analyzing discourse is complicated and it is not seen by administrators as easily translatable into practice (Kelemen, 2003).

#### 2.1.2 Quality assurance and quality enhancement

The purpose of quality assurance is a subject of debate. Williams (2016) found that for some authors, the final goal of quality assurance should be one that privileges quality improvement by reaching stated standards; for others, the term can be used as a synonym for accountability, and finally, for another group, quality assurance should focus on the *processes* that are employed so as to attain quality. Welzant et al. (2015) narrowed down the discussion about quality assurance in higher education to two overarching concepts: 1) a focus on processes, actions, and policies, and 2) a focus on accountability and continuous improvement.

On occasions, the terms “quality assurance” and “quality enhancement” are used interchangeably. Even though these two terms have different meanings, they are part of the same process. Unfortunately, studies that explore the relationship between these two terms appear infrequently in the literature (Williams, 2016). In the simplest of terms, quality enhancement cannot be achieved without quality assurance (Williams & Harvey, 2016). In higher education, the idea is that the improvement in an institution’s quality process should by extension improve teaching/learning and research performance, generating an indirect process of overall enhancement (Harvey, 2006a).

To strive for quality enhancement, higher education institutions must implement continuous improvement processes at the institutional level (Colling & Harvey, 1995). A more robust response to external accountability demands, providing stakeholders with relevant information, will decrease the external scrutiny (Kristensen, 2010). Nevertheless, on occasion, “contrary to [their] intended purposes to improve and enhance, quality assurance processes have often been used to control and regulate higher education institutions”(Mussawy & Rossman, 2020, p. 16). Mussawy and Rossman’s assertion explains why quality assurance is generally presented as a negative process while quality improvement receives a more positive reception. This contrast is evident in Table 2, which summarizes the most notable differences between quality assurance and quality enhancement.

Table 2: *Differences between quality assurance and quality enhancement. Adapted from Elassy (2015, p. 257).*

<b>Quality Assurance</b>	<b>Quality Enhancement</b>
Usually associated with assessment and accountability	Usually associated with improvement and development
Meets external standards	Meets internal standards
Moves from top to lower levels	Moves from lower to top levels
A summative process	A formative process
A quantitative performance	A qualitative performance
Focuses on the past	Focuses on the present and the future
Less freedom	More freedom
Gives a greater space for administrators	Gives a greater space for academics

Table 2 shows that quality enhancement is often portrayed as a negotiated, qualitative bottom-up process. Quality assurance is considered to be an inflexible, quantitative, top-down approach (Williams, 2016), and is therefore prone to the generation of political tensions.

According to Gómez et al. (2017), to be effective, quality assurance processes should be provided with independence from any political and ideological bias; evaluation processes should be defined as ones based on equality, clear rules, and consideration of the particular institutional context. Unfortunately, in practice, this is almost always an unachievable goal. Universities face two conflicting narratives: one that rewards intellectual curiosity, academic freedom, and the expansion of knowledge frontiers, and another that, through regulation and the ideals of efficiency and performance, tries to control universities in such a way that they serve the interests of the state and the economy (Jarvis, 2014). Sometimes, quality assurance systems are introduced to force higher education institutions to adapt to a government's ideology regarding universities' contribution to the national economic goals (Utuka, 2013). Rubaii and Bandeira (2018) used discourse analysis in a comparative study of Colombia and Ecuador to demonstrate that despite some superficial similarities in the governments' quality assurance initiatives, each government's ideological discourse could be found in their policies and regulations.

There is limited research about the impact of quality assurance on post-secondary educational institutions. Nevertheless, in recent years, enhancement has been progressively identified as the primary purpose of quality agencies and government institutions (Harvey, 2006a). Ecuador, the focus of this research, is no exception. Articles 93 and 94 of the Higher Education Act, introduced in 2010, acknowledged quality as a principle of the Ecuadorian higher education system. Quality as a principle consists in “the constant and systematic search for excellence, relevance, optimal production, knowledge mobilization and development of thought through self-criticism, external criticism and *permanent improvement* [emphasis added, translated from Spanish]” (Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior (LOES) [Higher Education Act], 2010).



### 2.1.3 Types of quality assurance in higher education

Quality assurance is a broad term used to describe a permanent process of monitoring, controlling, and improving the performance of a higher education institution (Vásquez Córdova, 2015). This term includes all the procedures, initiatives, and mechanisms designed and implemented in order to improve educational institutions' quality of learning, research, and administration. Quality assurance should be an informed and periodical process in which a higher education institution and/or program meet previously defined expectations or standards. The standards are generally defined outside of the work setting and are then used to compare performance, and to subsequently use this information to make decisions regarding future goals (Watson, 2002). Quality assurance in higher education can be carried out internally by the institution, in the form of self-regulation or by an external agency, or it can be implemented in the form of an external evaluation that confers a public quality certification (Comisión Nacional de Acreditación de Pregrado de Chile, 2002).

Both internal and external evaluations are necessary to strengthen higher education institutions. Kristensen (2010) considers that an external quality assessment can provide an institution with relevant information. Still, the impact of that information will depend on how developed and sophisticated the internal systems at the institution are. As we can see, each type of quality assurance has several limitations. On the one hand, self-regulation gives institutions a powerful tool to identify their working conditions and move toward achieving their goals (although an entirely self-regulatory process could devolve into a state of self-complacency). On the other hand, an approach based only on external evaluation causes the changes to the institution to be implemented by external imposition, limiting the ability of higher education institutions to incorporate their own creative capacities (Vásquez Córdova, 2015).

#### 2.1.3.1 Internal quality assurance

Internal quality assurance initiatives have received mixed reviews. On the one hand, for Jarvis (2014), "Quality assurance regimes are not benign managerial instruments – they

must also be understood as part of a broader series of agendas associated with neoliberal policy prescriptions that valorize market rationality" (p.164). On the other hand, Kristensen (2010) highlights the importance of internal quality assurance systems. This author claims that there is no doubt that higher education quality has been improved thanks to external quality assurance. Still, the results could be even further enhanced with a proper balance with the quality assurance initiatives taking place inside institutions.

Internal quality assurance refers to the mechanisms and initiatives carried out by the institutions themselves. Such mechanisms can emerge as a response to external regulations but focus on the institution's development and the increase of internal accountability (Utuka, 2013). The goal of internal quality assurance is to concentrate on collecting evidence regarding the fulfilment of the institutional mission and how efficiently different activities can lead to quality improvement.

Internal quality assurance processes can take multiple forms, thanks to the autonomy of higher education institutions and the diversity of regulations that exist in different countries. In an attempt to reach a consensus, Mussawy and Rossman (2020) explain that quality assurance initiatives can positively influence higher education institutions if they apply several specific conditions: 1) an adequate structure provided by the government to promote institutional ownership of the quality assurance initiatives; 2) the internalization of the quality assurance processes by staff, administrators, and faculty as an opportunity to achieve quality improvement (maintaining the status quo); and 3) the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, especially faculty (leading to an increase in accountability).

Vroeijenstijn (1995) identified several of the main components of the internal mechanism of quality assurance in higher education institutions:

- 1) The existence of adequate institutional objectives that will be used as a reference for internal quality assurance;
- 2) The design and implementation of mechanisms to control and measure institutional performance at different levels;

- 3) The verification of the information generated by the monitoring mechanisms to validate its relevance;
- 4) The presence of administrative structures capable of supporting any improvement plans that originate in the evaluation process.

Principles should accompany the components identified by Vroeijenstijn. Kristensen (2010, p.156) proposes several principles and practices that can be used to build successful internal quality systems and that can lead to the development of a *quality culture*:

- Care for quality at all levels in the institution;
- The international orientation;
- An operational quality concept and quality system embedded in the overall institutional strategy;
- Closing the feedback loops;
- Distributed leadership at all levels in the organization;
- A quality culture based on a top-down and a bottom-up approach;
- Involvement of students, and
- Use of external expertise.

All the conditions, components, and principles described above are part of an ideal scenario. However, in reality, quality assurance processes inside institutions are not free from deficiencies. Quality assurance generates an increase in bureaucratization and workload for faculty. Most of the time, academics do not perceive a tangible link between quality assurance initiatives and the quality of their work (Harvey, 2018). At an institutional level, there is a risk that universities become over-compliant with these initiatives. Salto (2018) studied two universities in Argentina and found that both universities, as a response to external quality assurance pressures, created internal regulatory control bodies that acted as an extension of the national regulator. The internal control bodies created even stricter standards to ensure compliance, increasing workload and creating a gap between compliance and organizational change.

### 2.1.3.2 External quality assurance

External quality assurance includes the systems operated by external agencies focused on controlling higher education institutions' quality in the name of public accountability (Utuka, 2013). These agencies started with the expectation that higher education institutions would develop their own internal processes focused on quality improvement (Kristensen, 2010). The external quality assurance systems analysis shows a wide variety of approaches in how different countries implement these processes; nonetheless, several common features can be found in the literature. Green (1994) said that the motivations and approaches might differ. Still, the methodology integrates three essential components: 1) a judicious mix of subjective and objective data through self-assessment, 2) statistical or performance indicators, and 3) peer-evaluation, generally in the form of an institutional visit. This denotes the ordinary existence of three stages in external quality assurance processes. Salazar and Caillón (2012) make a succinct description of the three stages that, as detailed in Section 2.1.5, are consistent with the model used in Ecuador:

- 1) The *first stage* consists of assessing relevant information from the institution, career, or program evaluated based on a given (and public) set of evaluation criteria. In most cases, this includes a self-assessment or self-study report that analyzes the information provided, identifying strengths and weaknesses. This stage involves a high level of coordination between the institution and the external quality assurance agency.
- 2) The *second stage* refers to the external evaluation carried out by a team of peers. This involves an analysis of the self-evaluation report that the institution or program has presented and is usually accompanied by an *in situ* visit to the institution or program to validate the self-evaluation process. This culminates in a report on the validity of the self-evaluation results, the degree of fulfillment of institutional purposes, and the quality criteria.
- 3) Finally, in the *third stage* the agency makes a final decision based on the peer committee's recommendation. It is made public and, in most cases, has limited and temporary validity. This final decision can be based on the external evaluation team's recommendation, the self-evaluation report, or both. In addition, any other relevant information about the institution, career, or program evaluated

could also support it. The specific content of the document that makes this final decision public varies from agency to agency and from country to country.

Some authors (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994) identified another stage related to how agencies responsible for quality assurance establish their criteria. However, this is a prerequisite for developing the external quality assurance process and not one of its stages. Other authors (Salazar & Caillón, 2012; Vásquez Córdova, 2015) claim that the design and implementation of improvement actions resulting from the evaluation process and the application of mechanisms for internal monitoring of those actions could be considered a fourth stage. Nevertheless, the three-stage model described above is the one that is most commonly accepted by quality assurance researchers.

External quality assurance can benefit higher education institutions because the guidelines and control can help these institutions achieve their missions and objectives. Moreover, by including external experts in the quality assurance process, the institutions and, for that matter, the country's higher education system can boost their reputation. Finally, these processes help ensure that public resources go to programs and institutions that meet minimum quality standards, thus increasing public confidence (Utuka, 2013).

In spite of the benefits and popularity that external quality assurance processes provide, they are not always entirely accepted, and they face some recurring critiques. For Kristensen (2010), the external quality assurance processes take a dominant role in many countries. She urges higher education institutions to take the initiative and lead quality assurance and quality improvement initiatives from the inside (Kristensen, 2010). On occasion, external quality assurance models are accused of limiting innovation and restraining creativity (Salazar & Caillón, 2012). External agencies' decisions are based on their specific criteria and backed up by the people's experience of the process. Both the criteria and participants' experience represent the past and not the future. They are based on past performance and do not consider the projection of higher education institutions' efforts. An academic audit approach has been proposed as an alternative because it focuses on past processes, current processes, and the forecast of their success

possibilities (Vásquez Córdova, 2015). The academic audit will demand the external peers' experience and some degree of flexibility, vision, and judgment ability.

#### 2.1.4 Approaches to quality assurance in higher education

While the literature shows that the approaches to quality assurance in higher education vary from country to country, there are some important commonalities. For Harman and Meek (2000), “most quality assurance mechanisms depend on one or a combination of a limited number of methodologies, the most important of which are self-studies or self-evaluation; peer review by panels of experts; use of relevant statistical information and performance indicators; and surveys of key groups, such as students, graduates, and employers” (p. 16). This section focuses on the different approaches and strategies used in quality assurance. The first subsection describes broad approaches such as accreditation and quality audits. This is followed by a second subsection that delves into specific strategies, such as self-assessments, peer-reviews, *in situ* visits, and external examiners' inclusion in quality assurance initiatives.

##### 2.1.4.1 Broad approaches

The need to justify their disbursement of funds has meant that higher education institutions have faced greater scrutiny on academic relevance, employability of graduates, financial efficiency, and effective operations. These concerns are often cited as rationales for adopting quality improvement strategies conducted by external agencies (Woodhouse, 1999). There are many forms of external quality assurance, but two of the most analyzed in the literature are accreditation and quality audits. Although this section analyzes accreditation and quality audits as separate topics, they are not mutually exclusive, and sometimes there is overlapping in their methods (Harvey, 2004).

##### 2.1.4.1.1 Accreditation

Accreditation is a process by which an external organization assesses the quality of a higher education institution or program and formally acknowledges its compliance (or non-compliance) with a previously defined set of criteria or minimum standards

(Vásquez Córdova, 2015). This process's formal result is usually the obtention (or denial) of the accredited condition and the license to operate as part of a higher education system for a determined period. Accreditation usually involves a recurrent process designed to ensure that the accredited institutions continuously fulfill the agency's requirements (Harvey, 2004).

The rationale undergirding the accreditation process is that it allows governments to maintain financial control of the offered programs and the higher education sector, employing a strategy of compliance and accountability (Harvey, 2004). Some governments use the accreditation process results to define state funding for higher education institutions and to determine the amount of financial aid provided to students (Utuka, 2013). Accreditation is a voluntary process in some countries, and is based on a self-regulatory approach (Utuka, 2013). In the case of Ecuador, the process is mandatory for all higher education institutions. It is run by the Consejo de Aseguramiento de la Calidad en la Educación Superior [Higher Education Quality Assurance Council, CACES], a government body external to the universities.

Accreditation methods and practices include, among others, self-assessments, document analysis, performance-indicators monitoring, peer-review, external examiners, *in situ* visits, surveys and interviews with relevant stakeholders, and direct observation (Vásquez Córdova, 2015). Accreditation has been seen as a form of recognition and prestige that brings credibility to the educational processes and results (Ramos Castro et al., 2020). But at the same time, accreditation has been criticized because instead of increasing the attention to quality improvement practices, it creates new sets of formal rules and routines (Stura et al., 2019). The pressure that is part and parcel of accreditation processes increases bureaucracy and workload inside institutions, and the preparation and paperwork can be time-consuming and costly (Utuka, 2013).

In some Latin American countries (e.g., Argentina and Ecuador), higher education institutions have created internal quality assurance structures that sometimes include instructors' and researchers' participation. These structures are tasked with producing,

collecting, and organizing relevant documentation to inform the external visits. Because of the associated increased workload, academics often perceive accreditation processes as a distraction from research and teaching, negatively affecting their work quality (Harvey, 2018).

It has also been noted (Andreani et al., 2019) that, unlike other sectors, accreditation initiatives in higher education are affected by these institutions' specific organizational elements. For instance, an accreditation programs' implementation and impact inside the institutions are influenced by the complex nature of specific academic fields' outcomes. Concerning this last topic, Stura et al. (2019) pointed out that technical, scientific, and more applied disciplines usually obtain better results in accreditation processes.

#### 2.1.4.1.2 Quality audit

The modern conception of academic quality audits can be traced back to the 1980s in the UK, where the government demanded heightened scrutiny to increase educational quality levels in a rapidly expanding higher education sector (Ramos Castro et al., 2020). An audit is a form of assessment where the institution is evaluated against its own claims, using a fitness-for-purpose approach to quality (Shah, 2012). This means that in a quality audit, what is measured is a higher education institution's ability to achieve its objectives, probing the effectiveness of its processes for attaining such goals (Woodhouse, 1999). Quality audits require a high degree of flexibility, given that they rely on higher education institutions' ability to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to take corrective actions rather than the institutional performance being judged based on a set of external standards (Utuka, 2013).

Quality audits usually include a visit of three or more days (Utuka, 2013) and can be conducted in three different ways (Woodhouse, 1999): 1) a *direct audit*, in which the external quality body reviews the effectiveness of the higher education institution processes without requiring any special documentation from them, 2) a *validation audit*, which is based on a self-assessment report carried out periodically by the higher



education institution; and, 3) a *meta-audit*, in which the external agency reviews the effectiveness of the institution's quality assurance processes.

Harvey (2006b) recognizes that isolating the factors associated with quality assurance, and defining their impact, are very complex tasks. However, some of the measurable effects of external quality audits could be seen in the institution's comparative changes from one review to another, the adoption of formal quality processes, and in the feedback from students and other stakeholders about the programs. Reviewing Australian higher education, Shah (2012) concluded that although improvement processes initially relied on internal reviews, external quality audits pushed universities to address some areas identified for improvement.

Focusing on research, Kumar (2017) argued for the usefulness of academic audit results as a tool for faculty improvement. He claimed that academic audit outcomes allowed institutional administrators to assess faculties' performance levels (participation in congresses and publications). According to Kumar, institutional administrators used the feedback of academic audits as a foundation for identifying opportunities to improve faculty performance. In contrast, Harvey (2006b) argued that the impact of quality audits on research is minimal, wasting a chance to ameliorate teaching practice through research and scholarship.

#### 2.1.4.2 Specific approaches

Higher education institutions can apply a wide array of strategies when implementing quality assurance processes, but self-assessments, peer reviews, and *in situ* visits are the most commonly used (Harvey, 2018). Although these are not the only ones described in the literature, this section will focus on three of these approaches identified as relevant to the Ecuadorian higher education quality assurance system.

##### 2.1.4.2.1 Self-assessments

Self-assessments are the first step in many quality assurance methodologies (Van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2010). A university conducts a self-assessment to identify its

weaknesses and strengths, setting the baseline for an external examination (Shah, 2012). Self-assessment reviews enable universities to develop cyclical improvement and assessment processes, impacting student experiences, course development, and overall quality assurance processes (Shah, 2012).

To achieve relevant and effective results, it is crucial to define self-evaluation processes with clear, stable, equitable, non-discretionary, and transparent rules that consider the reality of higher education institutions' environment (Gómez et al., 2017). Self-assessment exercises should also be focused on the critical areas that the institution considers fundamental in realizing better educational outcomes (Utuka, 2013). Unfortunately, this is not an easy task, given that internal quality assurance processes are frequently based on the accreditation agency's external standards.

Thanks to their inherent autonomy, self-assessments are seen as one of the most valuable elements of quality assurance processes (Harvey, 2018). This is not the only advantage attributed to the internal assessment of quality. Utuka (2013) argues that they involve minimal expenditures because they are internally executed. Also, the participation of the institution's staff and academics creates a sense of ownership and empowerment. When high participation is combined with high trust levels, the process can reveal deficiencies and critical areas that need improvement. But under a compulsory accreditation system (such as the Ecuadorian one), the consequences of failing (especially if they are severe) create substantial pressure on the internal reviewers. This pressure could make these individuals extremely careful about what reality is reflected in their assessment reports. This could lead them to hide vulnerabilities that need to be addressed to achieve institutional improvement (Van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2010). Self-assessments require an honest approach and openness to self-criticism (Harvey, 2018).

For Vásquez Córdova (2015), the logic of performing periodical self-assessments does not engender a satisfactory result and it needs to be transformed into a different logic—one of continuous awareness. He considers that institutions and programs should create, maintain, and continuously update their information model, summarizing in real-time

qualitative values and quantitative descriptions, offering an informed decision-making process to academics, administrators, and external examiners.

#### 2.1.4.2.2 Peer review

Peer review is not exclusive to the quality assurance process. In academia, peer review is one of the most influential mechanisms used to assure academic research quality, and it has become the predominant methodology (Dill, 2018). External academics' inclusion in quality assurance practices is fundamental, given that they provide legitimacy to the accreditation system (Baumann & Krücken, 2019). According to Vásquez Córdova (2015), accreditation processes are perceived with more legitimacy and validity if they are undertaken by accreditors external to the institution.

The way peers are chosen changes from country to country. In the USA, for instance, accreditation involves both administrative and faculty peers in charge of reviewing documentation and conducting *in situ* visits (Kis, 2005). In Ecuador's case, CACES selects faculty members from all accredited universities according to criteria like the completion of postgraduate studies and the number of years of experience (usually from three to five) as a researcher or an instructor in an Ecuadorian University.

In contrast with the advantages of relying on an external perspective for quality assurance processes, some possible problems have also been identified. The subjectivity of the external examiners (Gómez et al., 2017), the bias on the reference framework, and the difficulties in maintaining the same amount of rigour at different times (evaluation tends to become stricter or less strict at different points) are among the most frequent problems, negatively affecting the quality assurance processes (Stura et al., 2019).

#### 2.1.4.2.3 *In situ* visit

An *in situ* visit is a quality assurance procedure consisting of the attendance of professional experts (or trained academic peers) to the institution or program to be evaluated (Vásquez Córdova, 2015). The primary purpose of *in situ* visits is to verify the information about the quality and the fulfillment of standards published or submitted to

the quality assurance agency by the higher education institution (Gómez et al., 2017). When the visit is concluded, the external reviewers submit a report to the accreditation agency that serves as a basis for the accreditation decision (Utuka, 2013).

External visits to universities require proper technical training of peer evaluators and preparation to avoid bias and preconceived judgments that can result in confrontational encounters (Harvey, 2018). It is also necessary to balance the level of reciprocity and rapport between the higher education institution and the external evaluators to avoid concealment or misrepresentation (Kis, 2005).

*In situ* visits have also been criticized because they can create a separation between quality assurance and quality improvement. In preparation for the visits, universities can excessively focus on compliance (mostly bureaucratic and documental) instead of identifying improvement opportunities (Salto, 2018). As Kis (2005) points out, there is a risk of “ritualism,” where the participants are exclusively centred on learning and following the “rules of the game” instead of paying attention to the needs of the institution.

### 2.1.4.3 Industrial approaches imported into Higher Education

#### 2.1.4.3.1 ISO

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is a non-governmental international organization officially founded in 1947 with the purpose of shaping the future of international standardization. To this date, ISO has developed over 23,000 standards covering different aspects of technology and manufacturing (<https://www.iso.org/about-us.html>). In the educational setting, the ISO 9000 family has been the most adopted of the various available standards, until the emergence of ISO 21001:2018. The latter is an adaptation of ISO 9001 specially designed for educational institutions. ISO 9001 moved quality management closer to strategic management by strengthening risk-based analysis, context analysis, and stakeholder analysis (R. Guerra & Jaya, 2016). According to Ramos Castro et al. (2020), applying quality management

principles that are included in the international standard ISO 9001:2015 provides higher education institutions with a tool to organize their processes, improve performance and achieve stakeholders' satisfaction.

In the Ecuadorian context, Rojas et al. (2019) compared the ISO 9001 standard with the national evaluation model of higher education institutions developed by CACES, finding that they are not mutually exclusive or incompatible. They argue that the application of both quality assurance systems helped the Technical University of Machala improve its institutional performance and obtain a more robust positioning in the accreditation processes.

Studies examining the impacts experienced when implementing ISO 21001 are not very abundant. Guerra et al. (2020) analyzed how well ISO 21001 was integrated into postgraduate programs. They concluded that the standard application allows internal quality management of educational services to achieve a higher number of accreditations and a higher level of satisfaction on the part of the stakeholders. However, this claim still needs to be proved empirically. One of the identified disadvantages of implementing ISO in higher education institutions is the added workload, which usually comes with an associated high cost. Many activities, like registration, training, and consulting, generate a new stream of expenses for higher education institutions and a lot of human effort and commitment to create the documentation required by the standard (Utuka, 2013). Table 3 compares ISO 9001 and ISO 21001 so as to provide a better understanding of the recent changes.

Table 3: *Correspondences between ISO 9001 and ISO 21001. Adapted from Guerra Bretaña et al., (2020) [translation from Spanish]*

<b>ISO 9001:2015</b>	<b>ISO 21001:2018</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Focused on the customer	Focused on the necessities of the students	The objective is to exceed students' expectations
Leadership	Visionary leadership	Including all stakeholders in the creation and revision of the institutional strategy

<b>ISO 9001:2015</b>	<b>ISO 21001:2018</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
People's commitment	People's commitment	People in the organization need to be proficient, empowered, and committed to the creation of value
Focused on processes	Focused on processes	Efficient management of interrelated processes to achieve predictable and consistent results
Improvement	Improvement	Continuous improvement based on the organizational objectives and goals
Evidence-based decision-making	Evidence-based decision making	Evidence-based decisions increase the probability of better results
Relationship management	Relationship management	Sustained development. Thanks to the relationships with providers and partners
	Social responsibility	Social responsibility as a means of achieving long-term success

#### 2.1.4.3.2 Total Quality Management

Total Quality Management (TQM) is a set of theoretical and practical management strategies designed to develop quality products (Alsulami, 2014). From the perspective of TQM, “quality” means that the product needs to translate customer requirements into reality, while “total” specifies that this cannot be achieved without the participation of all members of the organization (González & Espinoza, 2018). TQM aims to exceed customer expectations by creating an environment of effectiveness and creativity by using all the organization’s resources (In’airat & Al-Kassem, 2014). This quality strategy encompasses all organization functions, employees, customer-supplier relationships, and product life cycle activities.

TQM initiatives are based on 11 principles (González & Espinoza, 2018):

1) Quality is key to achieving competitiveness.

- 2) The customer determines quality.
- 3) The production process is present in all the organization.
- 4) The quality of outcomes is a result of the quality of the processes.
- 5) Providers are part of the management process.
- 6) Internal supplier-customer chains are fundamental.
- 7) Quality is achieved by people and for people.
- 8) A zero-defect mentality must be cultivated.
- 9) Competitive advantage is the result of error reduction and continuous improvement.
- 10) Everyone must participate.
- 11) A new culture is required (everyone thinks, everyone does).

The reception of TQM in the educational setting has been mixed. Psomas and Antony (2017) report some of the advantages expounded upon in the literature. They claim that TQM can produce financial savings, improved performance, and an increased sense of teamwork, but these impacts are difficult to measure, and more evidence is needed to validate these claims. But TQM has also been strongly criticized in academia. In an industrial-based quality model, customers decide what product they will use, based on their expectations and the market-based transaction's perceived value (Houston, 2007). For academics, this quality approach's business orientation is not one that is suitable for the education sector, given that the conception of “students as customers” questions the instructors' knowledge and experience and generates incentive mechanisms that threaten academic freedom (González & Espinoza, 2018). Higher education institutions also have different responsibilities to different societal groups, so defining who the final “customer” is, is a complex and dynamic task.

Transferring TQM principles into a higher education setting is difficult because “learning as a product” skills and resources are not similar to those found in factories where the product is more tangible (Utuka, 2013). Although Nasim et al. (2020) recommend the development of a specific adaptation of TQM to the specific needs of higher education,

for Houston (2007), the attempt to use a TQM approach in higher education requires either an over-simplification of the educational field (by adopting an uncritical acceptance of the industrial world terminology to fit in the TQM parameters), or a significant adaptation of TQM, that at some point stops being TQM and becomes a different methodology.

### 2.1.5 Quality assurance in Ecuadorian higher education

Latin American higher education has faced several transformations, responding to societal demands and numerous shifts in government. According to Raza (2019), there have been at least three critical reforms in Latin American higher education:

- 1) The democratization of the access, with a focus on the discussion around institutional autonomy;
- 2) The commercialization of higher education, with an increase of the academic offerings (mostly from private universities) and the promise of a better return-on-investment, guided by the logic of the market; and
- 3) A defensive approach by national higher education systems, where the state gains renewed importance, motivating a new wave of regulation through quality assurance systems.

The increased interest in controlling the higher education sector has motivated the implementation of quality assurance systems in many jurisdictions worldwide. Countries like the USA, UK, France, and Spain have adopted quality assurance processes for a long time (Terán-Cano & Tituaña-Dávila, 2020). However, in Ecuador, the evaluation and accreditation of higher education are relatively recent phenomena. The following section summarizes the focus of the studies on quality assurance in Ecuadorian higher education.

#### 2.1.5.1 Studies on quality assurance in Ecuadorian higher education

Quality assurance in Ecuador emphasizes self-assessment and internal quality assurance. CACES claims that accreditation and external evaluation contribute to internal quality improvement (CACES, 2019, p.7). This claim is not frequently contested. Instead, the



quality approach of CACES has been accepted and integrated into the daily functioning of higher education institutions. Many of the studies about quality assurance in Ecuador are focused on documenting the results of the evaluation process in a specific program or institution (Briones García, 2013; Vizcaíno & Veloz, 2019), and also on the different strategies programs adopt when facing external examinations.

The work of Vizcaíno and Veloz (2019) exemplifies this trend. Based on their experience with previous external evaluation processes, these researchers investigated applying a Sistema Integrado Interno de Aseguramiento de la Calidad [Internal Quality Assurance Integrated System] (QAIS) at the University of Cotopaxi. The QAIS is based on a participatory methodology. According to the researchers' findings, QAIS motivated the different institutional actors to engage in quality assurance initiatives. Still, they also noted that their participation in these initiatives affected the faculties' academic performance. In a similar vein, Ayala Bolaños (Ayala Bolaños, 2018) agrees with the need to include all relevant actors in the evaluation processes. She claims that having committed and adequately trained personnel is key to developing a quality culture in a university setting. For Nuñez-Pilligua and Michelena-Fernández (2017), having the appropriate management of the evaluation process is fundamental to achieving the objectives defined by CACES.

Other studies have focused on implementing technological solutions to control and measure the model's indicators. Camacho Marín et al. (2020) point out that the adoption of information technologies helps in the different stages of the accreditation process, contributing to the collection, processing, organization, and analysis of data, generating more accurate results, and increasing the level of participant response within the institutions. More specific technological applications include the development of dashboards to calculate the outcomes of indicators in real-time (Colcha & Quinde, 2014) and analyze the accessibility level and limitations of university websites (Acosta-Vargas et al., 2016).

To this point, only a limited number of studies have tried to reflect on the concept or the purpose of quality as presented by CACES (2019c). Cabezas Guerra et al. (2019) claim that since quality assurance models are imported from developed countries, they do not recognize alternative or complementary ways to do research and to teach, imposing “globally standardized types of knowledge” (as defined in the mandatory evaluation criteria) through laws and regulations. This imposition forces less powerful universities to lose their intellectual autonomy as they seek access to the global stage (Altbach, 2008). Veliz Briones (2018) questions the model's focus, which is based on measuring outcomes of institutional objectives. For him, in the Ecuadorian setting, the model should focus on the processes necessary to achieve the outcomes and not on the outcomes themselves. He concluded that the existing model does not acknowledge or fit into the diversity of the Ecuadorian higher education institutions' missions and visions. Similarly, Villavicencio (2014) proposes that the evaluation model needs to change from a technical exercise of control to include more flexible definitions of quality that adjust to the diversity of institutions, students, and societal demands in Ecuadorian higher education.

Finally, one term is commonly associated with quality in the Ecuadorian higher education context: *pertinencia* [relevance]. In the Ecuadorian context, *relevance* has been defined as the universities' response to society's expectations and needs. It includes universal access, links with the industry, and social responsibility (Álvarez Gómez et al., 2018). Abad Peña et al. (2017) identified relevance and quality as two of the primary guiding (and inescapable) principles in Ecuadorian higher education, speculating that some institutions' lack of relevance explains their poor performance and perceived lack of quality. The importance of relevance in Ecuador reinforces the need for an evaluation model that responds to the specific demands of the different universities' particular context in the country.

#### 2.1.5.2 The evolution of quality assurance in Ecuador

The origins of quality assurance in Ecuador can be traced to 1995, when the National Council of Universities and Polytechnic Schools (CONUEP, [Consejo Nacional de

Universidades y Escuelas Politécnicas]) identified five critical aspects that affected higher education institutions in Ecuador: 1) their disconnection from their immediate social and cultural contexts, 2) poor academic performance of universities, 3) ineffective management, 4) lack of financial support, and 5) the absence of a system of social accountability (Sánchez et al., 2018).

Quality assurance emerged as a public policy in Ecuador in the year 1998. The Ecuadorian Constitution of 1998 defined primary functions of universities as being scientific research, professional and technical training, the development and diffusion of culture, and the ongoing analysis and search for a solution to the country's problems (Rojas, 2011). The same constitution created the Evaluation and Accreditation Autonomous System to achieve quality objectives for higher education institutions while simultaneously respecting universities' autonomy (Sánchez et al., 2018). The Higher Education Act (LOES, for its Spanish acronym) replaced CONUEP with the National Council of Higher Education (CONESUP, for its Spanish acronym) and defined the National Council of Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEA, for its Spanish acronym) as the executive agency in charge of the National Evaluation and Accreditation System (Rojas, 2011).

The national constitution of Ecuador went through a significant reform in 2008. This reform introduced *quality* as one of the main principles of higher education in Ecuador and included articles for regulating the sector in the form of quality assurance. In addition, the constitution ordered the creation of a public, technical accreditation, and a quality assurance organization that, in order to ensure independence and neutrality, should not be comprised of the regulated institutions' representatives. Under this new set of regulations, universities needed to pass an evaluation and accreditation process to become part of the national higher education system (Mintegiaga, 2010).

CONEA executed the first institutional accreditation in 2009, one that mainly focused on Ecuadorian universities' general processes and infrastructure (Cárdenas Pérez, 2016). CONEA faced budget constraints and the rejection by higher education institutions, based

on the assumption that the evaluation jeopardized universities' autonomy. Rojas (2011) argues that despite the limitations of CONEA, this agency changed the landscape of higher education in Ecuador by developing an evaluation culture in universities.

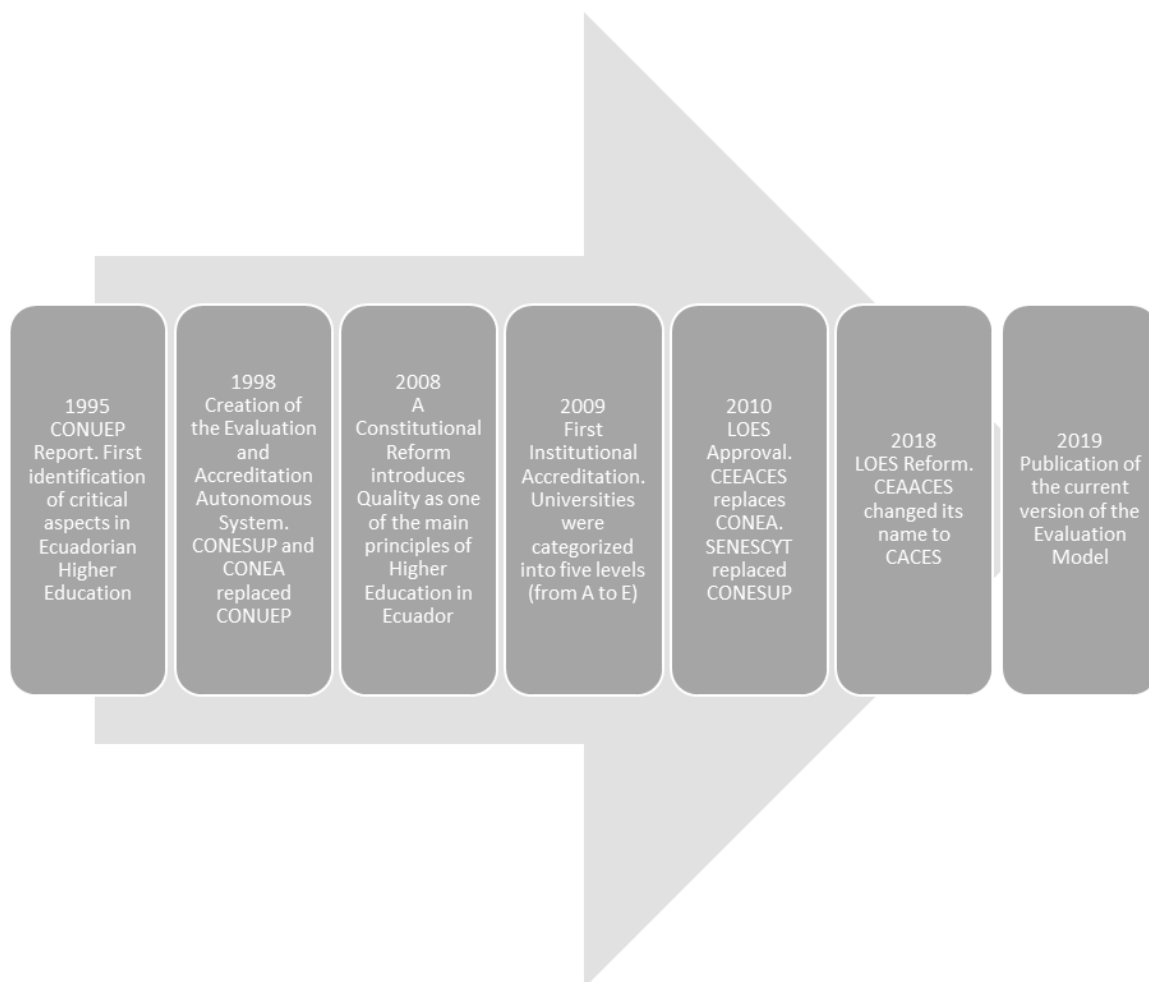
In response to Constitutional Mandate No. 14, CONEA developed a report outlining higher education institutions' performance levels in Ecuador. The report aimed to show the positive outcomes from the quality evaluation process, the resultant facilitating of the accreditation processes, and the consequent improvement of the higher education system (Sánchez et al., 2018). According to Condor Bermeo (2017), the findings in CONEA's report highlighted an unsustainable increase in the number of programs offered, revealed educational institutions operating under unacceptable conditions, and demonstrated that universities were taking advantage of the most in-demand and profitable segment of higher education: post-graduate studies. This report demonstrated how some of the universities' missions had been commodified, which had the effect of undermining the idea that higher education is a public good and service. The report advocated for the concept of higher education as a public good: the responsibility of the state, and under its regulation and control.

In CONEA's report, universities were categorized according to their quality level (A to E), placing the best universities in the A category. The evaluation used criteria like infrastructure, the number of instructors with master's and PhD degrees, the number of graduates, and the number of publications (Condor Bermeo, 2017). Universities in the E category were mandated to close, and those in the D category were mandated to improve their quality under the threat of closure (Minteguiaga, 2010). CONEA's report was the first step toward restructuring the Ecuadorian higher education system (Contreras & Uriguen, 2015). This restructuring also transformed the role of universities in the regulatory process. Instead of being the main actors and policy decision-makers in a self-regulatory model, they were now reduced to the state's control agency's simple advisors, with no absolute control over the higher education regulation system (Ganga Contreras & Maluk Uriguen, 2017).

The Higher Education Act (LOES), approved in 2010, replaced CONEA with the Council for the Evaluation, Accreditation, and Quality of Higher Education (CEAACES) as the organization in charge of the evaluation and accreditation of academic programs and universities in Ecuador (CACES, 2018b). The Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (SENESCYT) was designated as the organization responsible for coordinating Higher Education (Rojas, 2011). SENESCYT has a political focus, and CEAACES has a more technical orientation.

### 2.1.5.3 The current state of quality assurance in Ecuador

The LOES was reformed again in 2018. This reform introduced the Interinstitutional System for Quality Assurance (SIAC), composed of the accredited Higher Education Institutions, The Higher Education Council (CES), and the CEAACES. This consortium was named: The Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (CACES). The purpose of the SIAC is to create an accreditation culture, primarily based on higher education institutions' permanent self-assessment (CACES, 2018b). CACES is responsible for developing the evaluation model for higher education institutions as part of the accreditation planning processes. In the latest version of the evaluation model (CACES, 2019a), the objective has shifted from universities' categorization to focusing solely on accreditation. Figure 1 summarizes some of the most critical milestones in the evolution of quality assurance in the Ecuadorian Higher Education context.



**Figure 1. Milestones of Quality Assurance in Ecuadorian Higher Education**

The evaluation model (CACES, 2019b) comprises four main components: teaching, research, social engagement, and institutional conditions. The components are disaggregated into 20 qualitative and quantitative standards (Table 4). Quantitative standards are calculated using mathematical calculations. The qualitative standards are defined and parsed into five levels (from best to worse): 1) satisfactory accomplishment, 2) close-to-satisfactory accomplishment, 3) partial accomplishment, 4) insufficient accomplishment, and 5) nonfulfillment.

The standards are the conditions that are necessary for a higher education institution to fulfill, to become, or maintain its status as part of Ecuador's higher education system. A

higher education institution needs to obtain a "Satisfactory accomplishment" or a "Close-to-satisfactory" evaluation in at least ten of the standards, with no "Nonfulfillment" outcomes in any of the remaining ones.

Table 4: *Components and Standards of the Quality Assurance Model (CACES, 2019b)*

<b>Component</b>	<b>Standard</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Teaching	Planning of faculty-related processes	Qualitative	The institution has regulations and procedures for planning and managing the teaching staff.
	Execution of faculty-related processes	Qualitative	The institution executes the processes of selection, distribution of activities, tenure track, promotion, training, and evaluation of the instructors' performance.
	Faculty tenure	Quantitative	The institution has tenured professors to guarantee the development of substantive functions in the long term.
	Faculty post-graduate training	Quantitative	The institution has teachers with academic training and the required master's degree.
	Planning of student-related processes	Qualitative	The institution has regulations and procedures for the planning and managing of admission, academic tutoring, graduation, and student participation processes
	Execution of student-related processes	Qualitative	The institution executes the admission, academic tutoring, graduation, and student-participation processes.
	Graduation rates	Quantitative	The institution ensures that its students complete their careers and graduate within the established timeline.
Research	Planning of research-related processes	Qualitative	The institution has regulations, procedures, and responsible bodies, for the development of research and the selection and allocation of resources.
	Execution of research-related processes	Qualitative	The institution selects programs and projects for scientific or technological research through arbitration procedures, executes resources from internal and external grants, and recognizes the faculties' and students' achievements.
	Academic and scientific production	Quantitative	The institution produces books and book chapters, industrial property, and prototypes as the products of scientific or technological research programs and projects.

<b>Component</b>	<b>Standard</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
	Publication of papers in indexed journals	Quantitative	Institutional faculties publish papers in journals indexed in a list of databases defined by CACES (e.g., <i>Latindex</i> , <i>SCOPUS</i> , and <i>Web of Knowledge</i> )
Society engagement	Planning of the social-engagement processes (SEPs)	Qualitative	The institution has regulations, procedures, and responsible bodies to develop social engagement activities.
	Execution of the SEPs	Qualitative	The institution executes society-engagement programs and projects with faculty, students, and relevant stakeholders.
	Results of the SEPs	Qualitative	The results of the social engagement programs and projects are consistent with their planning.
Institutional conditions	Strategic and operational planning	Qualitative	The institution has strategic and operational planning that guides the institutional activities and is monitored and evaluated by the internal responsible bodies.
	Infrastructure and IT equipment	Qualitative	The institution has the infrastructure and physical and computer equipment, functional and sufficient for academic and administrative activities.
	Libraries	Qualitative	According to the academic offerings, the institution has libraries with appropriate physical and digital bibliographic collection facilities.
	Internal quality management	Qualitative	The institution applies regulations and procedures for the continuous improvement of its processes and has a body responsible for coordinating quality assurance.
	Students' wellness	Qualitative	The institution guarantees appropriate conditions for the student body's well-being, free from violence; it carries out wellness projects and provides services with which the student body is familiar.
	Equal opportunities	Qualitative	The institution applies regulations and procedures to guarantee equal opportunities for the university community without any kind of discrimination.

The evaluation model also defines the methodology applied in external accreditation processes, and higher education institutions have also adopted it to execute self-assessments. This model is explained in a guide for external examiners (CACES, 2019a),



and it is consistent with the three stages defined by Salazar and Caillón (2012) in section 2.1.3.2.

In the first stage, higher education institutions perform their own self-assessment. Self-assessments have been recognized as one of the main components of the entire quality assurance process (Ricardo Velázquez et al., 2019). All self-assessments conclude with the creation of a report. This report is the first contact between the institution and the external examiners. Next, the external examiners analyze the information included in the report as well as the pieces of evidence (documents) uploaded by the institutions on an online platform. The external examiners then prepare a preliminary diagnostic report that serves as an input for preparing the *in situ* visit.

The *in situ* visit is the second stage of the external evaluation process. The evaluation model defines the *in situ* visit as a verification carried out by external peers in conjunction with CACES staff to determine if the institution's or the program's performance meets the quality standards defined by CACES (Véliz Briones, 2018). The preparation for this stage includes the selection of the relevant actors inside the higher education institutions. During the *in situ* visits, these actors are interviewed about the findings of the preliminary diagnostic report. After completing the *in situ* visit, the external examiners re-evaluate the initial report results based on information not previously reported, the institutions' experience, and the improvement initiatives implemented by the higher education institutions.

In the third stage, the resultant evaluation report is submitted to CACES. The various CACES committees analyze the reports' findings, and address any questions about the results to the external examiners. CACES sends the detailed evaluation report to the universities, using the same online platform universities use to upload the first stage documentation. Universities then have ten days to challenge the findings or ask for clarifications about the evaluation results. Once the feedback process between CACES and higher education institutions is completed, CACES sends the final report to the

universities. The report includes the accreditation conditions for the institution, and this outcome can be publicly promulgated.

## 2.2 Higher education governance and accountability

### 2.2.1 Governance models in higher education

Each university operates in a different context and has different characteristics, yet they all share a common heritage. Universities still preserve some elements of the model that originated in France and Italy at the end of the twelfth century. This professor-centred model relied on autonomy as intrinsic to its nature (Altbach, 2016). Research was conducted in these universities, but the research purpose was guided by the scholars' particular interests, not by institutional policies (Davidovitch & Iram, 2015).

In the early modern era (1500-1800), the rise of nationalist movements replaced Latin as the dominant language of science with the local languages (Altbach, 2016). Universities sacrificed a part of their autonomy to develop a more reciprocal relationship with the government, in which “the state protects the action of the university [and] the university safeguards the thought of the state” (Davidovitch & Iram, 2015).

With the creation of the University of Berlin in 1810, Humboldt proposed an autonomous model of higher education (Davidovitch & Iram, 2015), focusing on teaching and research as the core of the university activities. Students were considered co-creators of knowledge, and so as to guide and support them properly, instructors were expected to have notable expertise in the research field (Macfarlane & Erikson, 2020). This model motivated universities to focus their research efforts on national development and industrialization and to adapt their structures to develop new scientific disciplines (Altbach, 2016). The Humboldtian university model's main goal was the moral enrichment of the nation and its population by developing critical and humanistic thinking in the students, thanks to the transformation of knowledge in reflection (Casa-Nova, 2019).

The Western model has been dominant in higher education because it linked universities with the world's prevailing economic systems. It allowed universities to become centers for the accumulation of knowledge with access to (or in possession of) research institutes and networks (journals and databases) for the diffusion of scientific knowledge (Altbach, 2016). The accelerated growth of universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was also partially accomplished by access to public funding. Austin and Jones (2018) observed that public funding shifted the higher education landscape's logic, with stricter accountability measures and more substantial control of the state over universities' performance outcomes.

Adopting accountability practices has created a clear distinction between governance and administration in higher education. Governance bodies are in charge of strategic decision-making. They are accountable for the institution's strategic positioning; administrative bodies accomplish specific tasks, receive a budget to execute them, and are held responsible for the outcomes of the tasks (Sporn, 2008). Consequently, governance is related to the different processes used in an organization to control it, direct it, and hold it accountable (Baird, 2007). Governance also defines who is in charge of the decision-making process and what is the focus of those decisions (Davidovitch & Iram, 2015), including the structure, the methods employed, and the participation of the different stakeholders (Sporn, 2008). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2003) explains that higher education governance influences complex elements of higher education institutions, such as the regulatory framework and the formal and informal structures that shape their organizational behaviour. Today, higher education institutions' governance is bonded to the specific national regulations and the governmental objectives (Dobbins et al., 2011). That said, they still need to respond to the demands of a globalized world. Higher education cannot remain separated from society's demands, the market, and the knowledge-based production processes (Austin & Jones, 2018). To make this a reality, universities need to quickly adapt their governance model if they wish to remain on the path to success (Sporn, 2008).

Several authors have attempted to classify the relatively recent proliferation of governance models for higher education. The focus of the classification depends on the approach of each author. For instance, Brunner (2011) considers an intersection of governance (internal vs. external) and administration (bureaucratic vs. entrepreneurial) to explain the evolution of governance models in higher education; Sporn (2008) analyzes European universities, with a focus on the decision-making process; Austin and Jones (2018) bring an accountability perspective to detail new governance models that universities are adopting to respond to managerialist and neoliberal pressures, and finally, Gonzalez Ledesma (2014) focus on the intervention of the state in the strategy and operation of universities in Latin America.

**Table 5** summarizes some of the characteristics of the governance models found in the existing literature.

Table 5: *Models of governance in higher education*

<b>Governance Form</b>	<b>Decision-making</b>	<b>Role of the State</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>References</b>
Shared governance	All Stakeholders		Consensus	(Sporn, 2008)
Corporate governance	Executive Board	Supervisory	Efficiency	
Flexible structure governance	Ad-Hoc Governance Structures		Results	
Entrepreneurial university	Executive management and external boards		Market-oriented	(Austin & Jones, 2018)
Responsibility-centred management	Functional unit level		Decentralization. Similar to shared governance	
Knowledge transfer and technological commercialization	Technology transfer offices		University-industry relationship	
Universities and regional	Community needs-based		Local development. University-	

<b>Governance Form</b>	<b>Decision-making</b>	<b>Role of the State</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>References</b>
economic development			region interaction	
Procedural	University-defined objectives. Consistent with the government objectives	Imposition of procedures		(González Ledesma, 2014)
Hierarchical	State-defined objectives and means to achieve them	Total control		
Steering-at-a-distance	Internal, with little intervention of the State in collective objectives	Supervisory. Incentivizes provider		
Self-governance	Complete autonomy of the universities	To provide complete freedom to universities. Reserves the right to verticalize decision-making if necessary.		

### 2.2.2 Accountability in Higher Education

Accountability is the “responsibility for the creation and use of resources and public recognition of how they are used.” (Hubbell, 2007, p. 6) However, accountability by itself is insufficient to determine the efficacy and efficiency of a higher education institution, the operation of which is based on the quality of the processes of knowledge creation and teaching-learning (Escotet, 2006). Accountability has become a “rhetorical tool to convey an image of good governance” (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010, p. 10). The concept of accountability represents a way to inform anyone who has the right and the need to know how the institution performs measured against stakeholders' goals and expectations (Kis, 2005). In other words, accountability represents a social relationship

with a dialogue about expectations and how the participating actors can live up to those expectations (Huisman, 2018). Accountability requires higher education institutions to meet three criteria:

- 1) The institutions should be open to external examination;
- 2) The results of the analysis should be publicly available;
- 3) The results should be easily understood by all the stakeholders (Colling & Harvey, 1995).

In higher education, the increase in the demand for accountability can be traced back to two causes (Kristensen, 2010): 1) the societal expectation for the proper use of public resources, and 2) the reticence on the part of governments to increase the institutional autonomy of higher education institutions. Although diverse political tensions in different countries cause them to introduce different versions of quality assurance, it is evident that most nations have set up a policy to enhance accountability in higher education (El-Khawas, 2008). Recent development—such as the emergence of distance education (e.g., virtual universities), globalization, and internationalization—have also created new questions about how to evaluate the quality of higher education programs (El-Khawas, 2008).

To cope with financial constraints and an increasingly competitive environment, public higher education institutions adopt New Public Management (NPM) and managerialist strategies (Giroto et al., 2013). The following section reviews the existing literature on NPM and managerialism, and concludes with a review of Latin American accountability processes.

### 2.2.2.1 Managerialism

Managerialism is a practice based on the belief that “organizations have more similarities than differences and thus the performance of all organizations can be optimized by the application of generic management skills and theory” (Klikauer, 2015, p. 2). Countries such as the USA and the UK were pioneers in the late 1980s in applying private-sector

management methods to the public sector. This interest in finding adequate solutions to public-sector problems motivated higher education institutions to adopt managerialist practices in various parts of the world (Giroto et al., 2013). Ecuador is no exception to this rule.

Managerialism can have different manifestations in higher education institutions. For Trow (1994), the application of managerialism in higher education can take two forms: 1) a soft form, focused on improving the efficiency of the provision of quality in higher education at a low cost; this form recognizes managerial effectiveness as an essential element in the sector, and 2) a hard form, focused on reshaping higher education with the inclusion of management systems that are not only important but dominant in quality provision.

Because it influences organizational performance, managerialism is intimately linked with institutional governance. The adoption of managerialist practices involves changes in the organization's management and culture (Giroto et al., 2013). But as Davis (2017) has discovered, managerialism has also negatively influenced universities' processes and practices despite its promises of increased efficiency. Although managerialism has been widely used as an ideological discourse to guide university administrations, it has been criticized because, arguably, the purpose of higher education should not prioritize economic interest, but should reflect a social commitment (Giroto et al., 2013).

The social orientation of universities forces them to adapt constantly to the changes in the ever-dynamic global context. The transition to a knowledge economy, the rapid technological transformation, and the globalization of markets and communications have caused noticeable changes in higher education worldwide. In addition to producing and reproducing knowledge (J. Webb et al., 2002), universities also try to increase their graduates' employability. Given the overarching influence of managerialist ideologies, higher education institutions are facing conflicting narratives: one that rewards the exploration and creation of new knowledge frontiers; and the other that privileges the

intervention of the state to control the sector, requiring universities to prove their economic worth through efficiency and performance indicators (Jarvis, 2014).

It is hard to assess if managerialist practices improve or deteriorate higher education institutions' operation, mainly because it is hard to isolate the effects of managerialist practices from other conditions at play (Olaskoaga-Larrauri et al., 2015). Nonetheless, several attempts have been made to identify the consequences of managerialism. Kalfa and Taksa (2017) recognize an increase in the fragility of academic identities and the deterioration of working conditions due to the increase in workloads in an attempt to advance the teaching careers as possible impacts of managerialist practices. Lynch (2015) adds that the establishment of rankings and permanent measurement alters universities' internal culture, forcing them to move from teaching centers to business organizations, driven by their productivity objectives.

Specifically referring to academic research activities, Kalfa and Taksa (2017) found that faculty members do not resist managerialist pressures, but for a variety of reasons. For Nickson (2014), researchers accept managerialist practices and maintain their values and research agendas; for Alvesson and Spicer (2016), the reason for this acceptance is an exaggerated focus on high-ranked journals publishing on the part of academics, in the hope of acquiring better working conditions; while for Leathwood and Read (2013), researchers have no alternative but to submit to the exigencies of managerialism if they want to keep their jobs. Davis (2017) concludes that: "the influence of managerialism and the perceptions of quality assurance lead to quality assurance mechanisms that seek to manage, steer and control the work of academics in ways that serve the interests of management" (Davis, 2017, p. 319). These studies have been conducted in different contexts and countries at different levels of development, from Ecuador to the UK and Australia. This research is an opportunity to identify how Ecuadorian researchers are reacting to quality assurance policy and processes in the face of limited economic resources and insufficient time for research activities.



### 2.2.2.2 New public management

In recent decades, the OECD countries have carried out different reforms to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of public organizations, including public universities. These reforms can be classified as New Public Management (NPM) initiatives, focusing on results and achieving higher accountability levels (Broucker & De Wit, 2016). NPM is a complex and multifaceted concept. It refers to the various currents of thought around the globe regarding public administration; these promote practical applications of state and administrative reforms in both developed and developing countries (Sosa, 2016).

Although managerialism and NPM are closely and related terms, they have different meanings. Managerialism is a “belief or belief system,” while NPM is a “set of principles and methods.” As Ese suggests, “managerialism is the ideology behind NPM” (Ese, 2019, p. 51).

In general terms, NPM refers to the process of applying private sector instruments to the public sector. This includes, but is not limited to, the creation of internal markets to promote competitiveness, the establishment of public-private partnerships, and more intensive use of performance-management and evaluation techniques. (Ferlie et al., 2008; R. King, 2016), the desire to subject public administration to robust accountability mechanisms, and the strengthening of managers’ roles in public institutions in place of a more traditional collegial approach (Olaskoaga-Larrauri et al., 2015). Under NPM, universities stopped being seen as collegial structures. They were seen as formal organizations, moving from a state dependency to ones with a new management style defined by “corporatization, verticalization, and hierarchization” (Broucker & De Wit, 2016, p. 67).

In the knowledge-based economy, research is characterized as a significant source of innovation. NPM practices are often invoked when the ability of collegial structures to manage research activities efficiently is called into question. The increasing cost of funding the high-performing institutions motivates a shift from input-based funding (e.g., the number of enrolled students) to performance-based (or output-based) funding. Under

this funding model, cutting-edge research universities hold an advantage, given that they usually “have built precious assets over time, above all long-standing material resources and an organizational culture sustained by well-established rules and norms”(Paradeise, 2020, p. 2).

NPM has become an integral part of higher education policies in several Western countries (Broucker & De Wit, 2016). This perspective assumes that the private sector techniques have superiority and that their application will automatically increase the public-sector institution’s performance, yet there is little evidence that the application of reform strategies based on the NPM model produces the expected results (Sosa, 2016). Instead, the consequences seem to be of a more negative sort. For instance, Davies and Thomas (2002) suggested that with NPM adopting a value-for-money perspective (see section 2.1.1.3), the discourses of academic efficiency promoted by NPM create hostile and competitive environments between and within universities. Externally, universities fight for funding allocation, sometimes moving away from their commitment to local development to a focus on the outcomes expected from quality standards. Internally, the scarcity of resources leads to stress regarding financial control for research activities, producing more challenging budgetary constraints.

The budgetary restrictions do not impact the administrative processes exclusively. Ferlie et al. (2008) argued that financial limitations had motivated the growth of performance-related pay to faculty, imitating the private sector’s styles of human resource management (Ferlie et al., 2008). According to Broucker and De Wit (2016), academics do not perceive value in NPM practices in higher education. Instead, they see them as an “increased burden of tickbox exercises” (p. 70) that distract them from pursuing relevant research opportunities.

### 2.2.2.3 Accountability in Latin American higher education

Latin American countries include nations located in South America, Central America, and the Caribbean and share a Spanish or Portuguese colonial past (Lemaitre, 2010).

Reviewing the literature about accountability in Latin America is a challenging task. First, Latin American higher education's accountability is not a popular topic for English-speaking researchers, who are mainly absent from Latin America's scholarship discussions and practices (Rubaii & Lima Bandeira, 2018). Second, Spanish-speaking researchers have not developed a consensus about how the term should be translated. For instance, the UNESCO Thesaurus (<http://vocabularies.unesco.org/>) translates accountability as "*rendición de cuentas*,"; with Rubaii and Lima Bandeira (2018) supporting this translation by explaining that it retained the original definition of "rendering the accounts". However, Escotet (2006) disputes this translation, arguing that accountability is only a part of the institutional assessments while "*rendición de cuentas*" goes beyond analyzing specific and global effects of assessments concerning the objectives, processes, and results of university practices.

The uncertainty about how public resources are used raised questions about the legitimacy of higher education institutions dedicated to knowledge production. At that point, these institutions were not accountable for their outcomes. According to Lemaitre (2010), Latin American governments responded to these questions by implementing accountability mechanisms (mainly in the form of quality assurance systems) and new approaches to how funding was provided to universities. The governments' discourse suggests that the primary objective of accountability processes is to verify that the universities maintain their principles and ethical practices, that they reduce any possible incongruity between what is said and what is done, and between what is offered academically and what is delivered (Escotet, 2006). However, it has been argued that the accountability mechanisms mask political forces aiming for centralized government control (Benveniste, 1985).

Higher education institutions, despite their autonomy, cannot be exempt from both internal and external control. Escotet (2006) argues that accountability processes must be part of universities' normative practices, but they need to be based on technical and scientific assumptions rather than political ones. In contrast, Rubaii and Lima Bandeira

(2018) affirm that even when some Latin American countries share similarities when implementing accountability mechanisms, the regulations reflect the countries' specific government ideologies.

In addition to the ideological implications, some authors have emphasized that the implementation of accountability mechanisms can harm regional universities. For Escotet (2006), the excessive amount of existing legislation creates heavy bureaucratic burdens that hamper universities' ability to create and innovate. Lemaitre (2010) adds to this claim that, given that universities need to prove their efficiency, they could also be tempted to postpone implementing any necessary improvements so as to avoid facing external reviews with uncompleted processes. Furthermore, external reviewers can contribute to organizational models' imposition based on their own views rather than the institution's goals and objectives.

Although studies about quality assurance in Ecuadorian higher education are slowly gaining popularity, more specific studies about accountability are scarce in the same context. One of the reasons for the limited research production about accountability is the lack of publicly accessible data about accountability processes and results. For Rubaii and Lima Bandeira (2018), it is contradictory that, on the one hand, the Ecuadorian government has detailed technological mechanisms to collect data from the universities, yet on the other hand, there is limited data available for higher education institutions and the general population, which indicates a lack of transparency.

### 2.2.3 Higher education funding models and mechanisms

Funding mechanisms in higher education are tools of governance that “enforce common goals set for higher education (e.g., access, efficiency), set incentives for certain behaviour (e.g., competitive research grants), and attempt to maximize the desired output with limited resources” (Jongbloed, 2008, p. 5). Funding directly influences universities' ability to provide opportunities for student access, to maintain the quality of the services they provide, and to effectively develop research activities (Dobbins et al., 2011).

Governments' role in research funding is motivated by its spillovers on society, and thus fundamental research, especially when there is no apparent commercial application, is not prioritized (Jongbloed & Lepori, 2015). As Jongbloed (2004) explained, investing in higher education and research "provides social and economic benefits" (p. 4).

There is no such thing as an ideal funding system (Jongbloed, 2004). Consequently, researchers hold a variety of positions regarding the impact of funding mechanisms on their work. Horta et al. (2008, p. 156) argued that competitive funding mechanisms encourage higher education institutions to diversify their income sources. Nonetheless, "only a few universities have the resources, organizational structure, incentive system, and research culture to attract large R&D funding." Liefner (2003) observed that the form of resource allocation has three possible impacts on higher education institutions: 1) the level of attention paid by universities to the government and other relevant stakeholders, 2) how universities organize their structures to respond to needs and opportunities, and 3) how funds are internally assigned to academics. An element of concern is that, in the end, the selection of a funding mechanism will have a strong political impetus, given that it will depend on the goals of the funding authorities and what they think are the best ways to achieve those goals (Jongbloed & Vossensteyn, 2001).

In Latin America, funding for public higher education is heterogeneous inside the region. Public higher education is constantly under threat, given that this sector must compete for funding relentlessly with other public social sectors such as housing, health, and transportation. However, it has been observed that countries that devote a higher share of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to higher education produce better performing universities in the international rankings (Jongbloed, 2008) and have more opportunities to raise funding from non-governmental sources (Jongbloed, 2004).

Although there are additional funding sources for public higher education, such as donations from charities and private companies, contracts, and grants (Jongbloed & Lepori, 2015), regional universities' income in Ecuador (especially in the province of Manabí) is almost exclusively provided by the government. For this reason, the following

section will focus on governmental mechanisms designed to fund educational and research activities in universities.

### 2.2.3.1 The funding of research in higher education

Public universities have a commitment to society that goes beyond the training of professionals. These institutions contribute to social mobility and improve the general population's living conditions through research (Hernández Bringas et al., 2015). Lynch and Aydin (2004) indicated that funding university research is “a good investment for the regional, state and national economy” (p. 13). They argued that university research improves the quality of life, engenders industrial and scientific progress, technological diffusion, and is instrumental in the development of new technologies.

To meet their research objectives, universities receive government funding. Funding for research mainly reflects the level of government centralization (state control vs. market orientation), as well as the use of activities-and-inputs vs. performance-and-outcomes as the criteria to calculate funding allocation (Jongbloed & Lepori, 2015). In a state-controlled system, funds are allocated in ways that fulfill government objectives. In contrast, in a market-oriented system, universities have greater freedom to allocate funds to achieve their strategic objectives and goals (Dobbins et al., 2011).

Many public funding systems have, to some extent, been modified to include performance-based (outcome-based) funding. (Jongbloed & Lepori, 2015). New public accountability expectations have motivated several countries to link the outcomes of quality assurance processes with funding, intending to make a measured use of the public resources to solve society's needs (Liefner, 2003). But even if performance-based funding only involves a portion of the university's budget, it has substantial effects on higher education institutions. First, this funding model's application is assumed to improve quality and efficiency (Jongbloed & Lepori, 2015) and increase accountability and transparency (Jongbloed & Vossensteyn, 2001). By delivering more resources,

performance funding gives a competitive edge to the best-performing universities while stimulating the lowest-performing universities to improve their work (Hicks, 2011).

Some adverse effects have nonetheless been identified. It has been argued, for instance, that the fear of revealing the existing limitations to external reviewers can cause higher education institutions to hide their problems instead of solving them (Kis, 2005). Also, the focus on outcomes could limit the university's mission and objectives, favouring only the activities rewarded by the measurement criteria (Dougherty et al., 2016). At an individual level, researchers may ignore the development of research projects that are difficult to measure, such as non-patentable research and basic research in the social sciences (Payne & Siow, 2003). New researchers could also start in a disadvantaged position in the fight for funds, given that performance evaluations are based on past achievements (Jongbloed & Lepori, 2015). Furthermore, the behaviour of researchers could get "performance-altered by money" (Dougherty & Reddy, 2011, p. 2), meaning that researchers would avoid innovative projects with low chances of success so that they could focus on more conservative projects with outcomes that are more consistent with the funding criteria (Liefner, 2003), increasing researchers' possibilities of getting funded for future projects

Another concern is choosing indicators for measuring the performance of research. It is challenging to measure the progress of research activities, primarily because academics have specialized knowledge about their actions that administrators do not have (Liefner, 2003). For example, the number of publications produced by a researcher, a group of researchers, or a higher education institution does not necessarily reflect the impact or the originality of the research (Jongbloed & Vossensteyn, 2001). A study in the U.S. found that although increasing federal funding results in the expansion of the number of research outcomes, measured mainly by published papers and patents, this increase does not necessarily represent an increase in the quality of those research outputs. For instance, federal funding could help increase the number of papers produced by faculty members of an institution but not necessarily the number of their citations (Payne &

Siow, 2003). In the particular case of publications, when the volume is the measure of research performance, academics could avoid publishing in highly-recognized journals to pursue other journals without the same level of recognition but with higher acceptance rates and faster publishing timelines (Jongbloed & Vossensteyn, 2001). With a more limited capacity to produce higher-quality international publications, some scientific fields may risk marginalization by using performance metrics (Frølich et al., 2010).

### 2.2.3.2 Input-based funding

Input-based funding has been described as a centralized funding system where allocations are line item-based (Jongbloed, 2004). The line items represent expenditure items in separate lines of the budget. This system usually considers the previous year's allocation for specific items, and any change needs to be negotiated item by item with the funding authority. This type of funding considers elements such as the number of places available for students and the resources required by the universities (Jongbloed & Vossensteyn, 2001; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015).

For some authors, input-based funding could be beneficial because it provides universities with the opportunity to maintain consistent levels of quality (Spooner, 2019) and the ability to plan for the future (Frølich et al., 2010). The administrative costs are also low. Also, it protects universities' autonomy and encourages long-term and diverse research, opening the door for more researchers to get involved (Geuna & Martin, 2003). Several drawbacks of input-based funding have also been identified in the literature. Liefner (2003) found that having a fixed budget can promote inactivity on the part of researchers. In addition, Geuna and Martin (2003) observed that the application of an input-based funding system might give excessive power to departments in charge of distributing funding inside the institutions, diminishing accountability levels and weakening the ability of institutions to compete with each other (given an even but thin level of resource allocation).



### 2.2.3.3 Performance-based funding

The growth in the offerings of the higher education field increased the demands for public funding and forced higher education institutions to demonstrate that they are using resources effectively and efficiently. With more financial constraints, governments prioritized development in certain areas, and increasingly linked funding to performance (Lemaitre, 2018). Frølich et al. (2010) observed that the stress on accountability, quality, and efficiency and the movement toward performance-based funding are common tendencies in several higher education systems. Since 2010, several countries have introduced “national performance-based research funding systems, including Australia, Belgium (Flemish), Denmark, Finland, Hong Kong, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, and the U.K.” (Spooner, 2019, p. 2).

Performance-based funding (also known as output-based or results-based funding) can be defined as “the allocation of resources contingent on an output-indicator” (Canton & van der Meer, 2001, p. 86). Performance-based funding considers the performance of higher education institutions to determine their budget, either in its entirety, or a part thereof. The idea behind performance-based funding is that “institutional performance will be improved through material incentives that mimic the profit motive for businesses” (Dougherty & Reddy, 2011, p. 2). Although performance-based funding systems can differ in the units of analysis (individual researchers, research groups, departments, institutions), frequency (semi-annual, annual, multi-annual), and measurement method (peer-review, evaluation committees, quantitative formulas) (Hicks, 2011), two primary forms of performance-based funding can be distinguished (Dougherty et al., 2016): one in which performance results in an additional bonus to top of the government's traditional financing, and a second version, where performance is no longer seen as a bonus, but becomes the leading metric that the government uses to calculate universities' funding. The first is the case of higher education in Tennessee, in the USA, where performance generates a reward equivalent to five percent of the institution's general budget. An example of the second case is higher education in Ecuador, where up to 60% of the

university budget is determined by the outcomes of the performance quality indicators (CES, 2013).

Performance-based funding's effectiveness depends on the way outputs are selected and measured (Jongbloed & Lepori, 2015). Spooner (2019) claimed that inadequate metrics could create a winners-losers environment, fostering blame on the universities that fail to adjust their operations to cope with the misleading metrics' expectations. Furthermore, activities based on innovation, creativity, and originality (commonly found in academia) can be affected by an excessive focus on outputs like quantity and speediness (Frølich et al., 2010).

For some authors, these mechanisms send a clear message to the institutions and their staff about the motivation and reward for excellence (Harman, 1998), the promotion of efficiency, the increase of transparency (Canton & van der Meer, 2001), the enhancement of accountability, the promotion of service orientation and the facilitation of policy evaluation (Hicks, 2011). In contrast, for other authors, this approach motivates the development of research activities with more predictable results that may limit innovation (Frølich et al., 2010; Jongbloed & Lepori, 2015) and may erode solidarity among universities because they are forced to compete to obtain a piece of the decreasingly available funding (Spooner, 2019).

Dougherty and Reddy (2011) recognize that there are unintended impacts of performance-based funding, such as: “costs of compliance, narrowing of institutional missions, grade inflation and lowering of academic standards, restrictions on student admissions, and diminished faculty voice in academic governance.” (Dougherty & Reddy, 2011, p. 44). Still, they argue that the amount of performance funding should be increased. In contrast, Jongbloed and Vossensteyn (2004) assert that a market-style approach to higher education is tricky because the services that universities provide “are not sold in a kind of market where supply is meeting demand and prices reflect costs, quality, and scarcity” (2001, p. 129). Frølich et al. (2010) add that performance-based

funding creates budget fluctuations that make long-term planning challenging for universities.

These studies on funding mechanisms and models show a trend of higher education systems moving towards performance rewards. Although it has been claimed that performance funding can motivate lower-performance universities to improve (Hicks, 2011), for some regions (such as Latin America) with high levels of inequality (Lemaitre, 2017), it can contribute to increasing the existing gap among higher education institutions. Given this context, it is necessary to address the more significant challenge regional universities face, given that their contributions to local development are not always consistent with the global landscape's prominent measurement criteria.

## 2.3 Regional universities

It is evident in the literature that the terms “regional universities” and “national universities” (also known as “metropolitan universities”, “top-tier universities”, or “research universities”) are used to denote two different types of universities. However, even though these terms are applied with relative frequency, they are not clearly defined. The complex nature of universities may be responsible for the absence of a concrete definition as organizations, because defining the term “region” is challenging in and of itself. The following section will start by exploring the notion of “region.” It will then discuss the attempts to define regional universities, and finally, it will conclude with a brief description of the contributions and challenges to regional universities.

### 2.3.1 Defining regions

The term “region” can have different meanings, but it is typically used to designate:

- 1) an area or zone of indeterminate size on the surface of the Earth, whose diverse elements form a functional association;
- 2) one such region as part of a system of regions covering the globe;
- 3) a portion of one feature of the Earth, as in a particular climate region or economic region (Gregory, 2009, p. 630).

The two first definitions assume the perspective of physical geography, while the third one uses a human- or social-geography approach. Although it could be assumed that a description based on natural qualities is simple and straightforward, just like in the human/social approach, there is in fact an ongoing discussion that isn't producing any definite answers. To further complexify things, a recent wave of researchers questions the usefulness of the idea of a region and, more generally, the relevance of the notion of "scale."

Notions of regions can assume two different views. The first one views regions as containers in absolute terms. Here, a natural region (landscape unit) represents a "homogeneous territory with a single physiognomy, structure, and physiography" (Campos-Campos et al., 2018, p. 45). The second view portrays regions as interactive containers, where regions are not static but "porous, open and fluid" and shaped by the internal relations of people and nature and the external relations of flows of capital and ideas (Gregory, 2009, p. 637). This view suggests that ideas like region, scale, and even natural landscape are relative and ever-changing. According to Bourdieu (1991, p. 287), adopting a complete naturalist landscape definition is naïve because landscapes are "historical products of social determinants." Consequently, the environment does not determine regionalization; instead, it provides the context in which humans create regions by adapting in different ways to their contextual conditions (Herod, 2011).

The conceptualizing of regions is a helpful exercise, because it provides governments with productive ways for planning their territories' management and decision-making processes. Nevertheless, several authors have argued that scales and regions do not exist in the real world (Herod & Wright, 2002). This discussion thread probably originated in the complexities of defining scales in globalized times. Nowadays, the global and the local boundaries are increasingly blurred, primarily because in global networks, local actions and events have a global impact and vice versa (Ortiz Velosa, 2018). Following this perspective, regions are just heuristic, mental devices that we use to make sense of the world and to organize what exists around us (Haggett, 1990; Herod & Wright, 2002).

Regions can be interpreted as “exemplars to give local substance to generalization, put flesh on the logical structure, provide a specific example to press home an argument” (Herod, 2011, p. 168). In some circumstances, “the region is perceived as representing meaning and practice” (Gregory, 2009, p. 638). Regions are, at the same time, the medium and outcomes of “social practices and relations of power that are operative at multiple spatial and temporal scales, among which the region might serve as a kind of fix” (Gregory, 2009, p. 631). But given that regions can be understood as dynamic containers, it is essential to understand the cultural and political practices that social actors use to produce scale and how “social actors reorganize themselves from one spatial resolution to another” (Herod & Wright, 2002).

### 2.3.2 Regional university definition

There is a lack of consensus about what defines a public regional university. Some authors have suggested using location as the main character to produce a generally applicable definition. Dahllöf (1990) considered a regional university as an institution located in cities that are away from the large population centres, and that is imbued with a local mission or vision. Devlin and McKay (2017, p. 15) supported this approach by distinguishing between metropolitan institutions with no regional campuses, metropolitan institutions with regional campuses, and regionally headquartered universities. According to them, this last group of institutions can legitimately be called regional universities.

Another criterion used to identify regional universities is the scope of their academic offerings. Regional universities mainly focus on undergraduate education, with some offering a limited number of master’s programs and just a few offering doctoral programs, and those, commonly in applied fields. Usually, regional universities concentrate on a few areas of knowledge relevant to their community needs instead of attempting to pursue expertise in a broader range of areas. This contextual relevance builds “trust and respect within regional communities because those communities can see the relevance of the university for their needs” (Wise & Wilkinson, 2016, p. 23)

Some directed attempts have been made to provide a local definition of regional universities. These definitions may not be globally applicable, but they have been helpful when contextualized in particular studies. For instance, when examining higher education in the USA, Zeig (2015, p. 2) proposed that a public regional university must fulfill three criteria: 1) being an institution legally established as a state institution, 2) being an institution legally classified as a university, and 3) being a member of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

Within Latin America (Arenas Charlín, 2015; Flores Franulič & Fleet Oyarce, 2018; Ortiz Velosa, 2018; Vergaño, 2018), Chile and Colombia are the countries that have oriented their efforts the most toward research on this type of university. In the existing literature in Ecuador, the discussion about regional universities is still incipient. This present study helps academics and researchers to problematize how public policy formulation should address regional universities' specific characteristics.

### 2.3.3 The impact of regional universities

The need to improve universities' regional engagement has been addressed in countries such as Australia, Canada, Mexico, and Brazil (Wise & Carrasco Montalvo, 2018). The engagement of regional universities with local actors and stakeholders impacts their regions' cultural, political, social, and productive development (Flores Franulič & Fleet Oyarce, 2018). The contribution of regional universities is complex and multi-dimensional.

It could be argued that regional universities are solely responsible for contributing to their local communities by educating the regional workforce with skills that are relevant for their local contexts. Indeed, it has been recognized that regional universities contribute to regional development by training professionals with relevant knowledge for the critical areas of local development and the regional labour market (Rodríguez-Ponce & Pedraja-Rejas, 2015).

However, regional universities also face several demands related to globalization (Ortiz Velosa, 2018), such as developing new technologies and creating knowledge that is especially relevant for their regions. For Rodríguez-Ponce & Pedraja-Rejas (2015, p. 491), regional universities play a role as fundamental institutions “in creating and disseminating knowledge, an essential source of competitive sales of nations and certainly, of the regions.” In Chile, for instance, regional universities contribute 45% of the country’s scientific production (Flores Franulič & Fleet Oyarce, 2018). Still, for Emery (2018), universities still need to align their missions more accurately with the region’s knowledge infrastructure needs.

Regional universities have been identified as critical institutions for democratizing access to higher education. Although the physical proximity to a university campus is not the primary determinant of higher education participation (Daley & Lancy, 2011), it appears that there is a correlation between higher education success and the proximity of a university location to a main city (Devlin & McKay, 2017). Despite these claims, it has been suggested that regional universities’ presence brings opportunities for increased access to often-marginalized local populations. Nelson et al. (2018) claimed that, unlike metropolitan (national) universities, regional universities have more diversity in their student bodies. Regional university students “are more likely to come from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, the first in their family to undertake tertiary study, female, Indigenous, and entering university for the first time as a mature-aged student” (p. 11).

The increase in participation does not necessarily mean a decrease in the quality of the education offered. Despite the limited scope of the academic offerings of regional universities, they make considerable efforts to become “the best they can be,” offering quality education at a low price point. Zeig (2015) reported that regional universities focus on the quality of the academic offering, the quality of the student body, and the university environment to produce educated professionals capable of working in demanding workplaces. Nelson et al. (2018) agreed with this claim and concluded that

selecting a regional or a national university is not a determinant of students' future opportunities for success.

From an economic perspective, according to Valero and Van Reenen (2019), the financial contribution of regional universities is not only limited to a mechanical impact. This means that a region's economic growth is not only caused by the increase in the population and the increase in consumption by students and staff of goods and services. Instead, universities' most significant contributions to economies are those based on human capital development and the creation of innovation channels.

Nevertheless, empirical studies about the economic influence of regional universities show contradictory results. Emery (2018) studied the economic impact of universities in 10 Canadian provinces. He concluded that by measuring the increase in GDP, productivity, and innovation, research funding does not affect the region's economic development. In contrast, although they did not have enough compelling instrumental variables to establish causality, Valero and Van Reenen (2019) claimed to have found evidence that universities' presence is associated with an increase in regional economic growth. According to their study, "a 10% increase in the number of universities is associated with over 0.4% higher GDP per capita in a region" (p. 66).

#### 2.3.4 The challenges of regional universities

The social contribution of regional universities is based on their contextual relevance. Regardless of being often smaller than their national counterparts, regional universities' impact is critical for the communities they serve (Mahon & Little Bear, 2020). In the Ecuadorian Higher Education System, the principle of relevance has been legally formalized. Under this principle, the country's universities are expected to contribute to local and national development (Art. 107, Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior [The Higher Education Law] (LOES), 2010). The LOES in Ecuador is aimed at encouraging the integration of universities into the country's innovation system.



This focus on integration leads to one of the main challenges facing regional universities: keeping up with the quality of teaching, research, and societal engagement activities while still maintaining their relevance to the contextual needs (Flores Franulič & Fleet Oyarce, 2018). Regional universities are considered to fill the gap between major national research universities and small, highly specialized colleges (Zeig, 2015). It can therefore be argued that matching national and international goals with local relevance is a significant responsibility of regional universities (Wise & Carrasco Montalvo, 2018). According to Ortiz Velosa (2018), this “glocal” (global and local) projection of regional universities requires that governments strengthen and promote the development of regional institutions through clear educational policies that translate into the investment designed to meet specific local needs.

Restrictions in access to financial resources, competition for student enrollment, and increasing demands for accountability have been identified as common challenges for higher education institutions (Zeig, 2015). Besides, given the very nature of regional universities, they face additional challenges, such as location and infrastructure constraints, that threaten their goals and objectives. The geographical remoteness of some regional universities brings other challenges. First, engagement with potential partners and industry actors based in bigger cities can be challenging because of the restrictions on face-to-face communications. However, Wise and Wilkinson (2016) suggested that distances are irrelevant and that regional universities' closeness to local communities could be an advantage instead of a challenge. They argued that the national universities are distant from the regional stakeholders' needs.

Another challenge related to location is the hiring of qualified personnel. The motivation for academics to remain as part of the regional institutions may be low, given the possible lack of professional development and training programs in some regions and the risk of isolation, which could have a limiting effect on research opportunities. On the other hand, Aprile et al. (2020) suggested that despite these limitations, regional universities provide early career academics (ECAs) a chance to build a reputation because, according to their

study, ECAs “found validation for their research aspirations through strong connections to their discipline communities, professional networks, and local, regional communities that existed outside of the university context” (p.10)

The limited access to financial resources is another paramount concern of regional universities. As Zeig (2015) affirmed, public regional universities have been historically represented as being less successful than national universities in securing external resources that supplement government support and tuition revenue. In the Ecuadorian case, after the 2008 reforms to the national constitution of Ecuador (Constitución de La República Del Ecuador, 2008 Art. 356), higher education access became free for undergraduate-level students in the country’s public universities. These changes prohibited public universities from charging enrollment fees, which increased the dependence of regional universities on state funding.

Regarding the infrastructure needs, the Ecuadorian quality assurance policy makes no distinction between higher education institutions’ infrastructure demands. As a consequence, due to the reduced budgets of public regional universities, these institutions struggle to cover the costs associated with the construction, operation, and maintenance of new buildings and research facilities. The limitation of infrastructure and resources also means that there is limited access to academic research databases. In Ecuador, the evaluation model gives a significantly higher value to papers published in journals indexed on *Elsevier’s Scopus* or *Thompson Reuter’s Web of Science* (CACES, 2019b, pp. 88–89). However, since most regional universities do not have a subscription to those databases, researchers in Ecuadorian universities face additional challenges in attempting to access current and relevant knowledge (Muñoz et al., 2018), limiting their contribution to scientific progress. Still, the evaluation model creates precise expectations for all Ecuadorian higher education system researchers.

## 2.4 Summary

This chapter explored the literature about quality assurance in higher education, the governance of higher education, and regional universities. The existing literature shows that quality is a difficult-to-define concept, with authors basing their definitions on two main trends: managerialist and critical perspectives. This chapter also described the evolution and diversity of governance models in higher education and examined the discussion about the influence of accountability practices on the administration of universities. The last section explored the definitions of regional universities and highlighted their contributions and challenges. The next chapter will explain the theoretical framework selected for this study.

## Chapter 3

### 3 Theoretical framework

Using a practice theory approach, this study investigated how regional universities in Ecuador enact the national research quality assurance policy. A practice theory approach centers the unit of analysis on the organizational actors' practices instead of on the actors' subjectivity (Nicolini, 2012), which accounts for the organizational logic of research accountability practices in Ecuadorian public regional universities. Adding conceptual depth to the practice theory perspective, this study incorporated Bourdieu's (1977, 1990b) theoretical toolkit to investigate how accountability mechanisms (such as quality standards, quality evaluation models, and performance outcomes) influence research practices in Ecuadorian higher education. Also, this theoretical framework was used to analyze how research practices are shaped by institutional *habitus* (see section 3.3.2) and by their enactment of the specific rules of the Ecuadorian higher education *field* (see section 3.3.1).

#### 3.1 Policy enactment

In this study, the term “enactment” was deliberately used instead of “implementation”, another term usually associated with policy. Traditionally, policy implementation studies have focused on how faithfully the policy has been followed by policy implementers, showing that they infrequently achieved what was intended by the policymakers (Honig, 2012). This separation between intention and practice opened the door to studies focused on sensemaking and created a new area of research: policy enactment.

Policy enactments refer to how policy actors “deal with the policy based on their sensemaking of the policy intention” (Bergmark & Hansson, 2021). Enactment was also preferred for use in this study because it is focused on the “interaction and inter-connection between diverse actors, texts, talk, technology and objects (artifacts) which constitute ongoing responses to policy” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 3)

This interaction between elements makes policy translation into practice a non-linear process. In higher education, policy translation is negotiated with internal and external stakeholders (Dorner et al., 2022), such as university administrators, external quality agencies, and regulators. These stakeholders shape the availability of resources that can support or constrain the enactment of policy inside higher education institutions.

### 3.2 The rationale for using practice theory

The term “theory” can have different colloquial uses. It could represent something abstract, something possible but unlikely, a general understanding of something, or a tentative explanation (Cohen et al., 2018). In research, the definition of the term is still contested; however, it is generally used to denote "a set of concepts and propositions that pertains to some actual phenomena... [that] can provide an understanding of these phenomena or form the basis for action concerning them" (Given, 2008, p. 876).

The broad spectrum of definitions generates multiple challenges for its application in the educational context, both in developing tools to measure and analyze data and in implementing the particular concepts in theory that is not always free from contradictory meanings (Murphy, 2013). The use of theory in educational research is necessary because it situates the researcher within a specific body of knowledge informing the definition of concepts, identifying relationships, and understanding the origin, nature, and effects of a given phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2018). Researchers use theoretical frameworks as "lenses" to study phenomena that help them reveal meaning and understanding of the studied phenomena (Given, 2008).

Social theories are one of these "lenses" that emerged to reflect human societies' nature. They seek to explain the different social forces that constitute modern societies and make sense of the relationship between human autonomy (agency) and the structural social elements that threaten or facilitate the human ability to act (Delanty, 2009). Social theory can be used in the educational field to learn about pedagogical and curricular practices,

educational identities and subjectivities, inequities, inclusion, and issues of government and administration (Murphy, 2013).

Auguste Comte coined the word "sociology," intending to give social laws the same treatment as natural laws (Grenfell, 2010). This positivistic view was shared by many of the remaining "founding fathers" of sociology (Weber, Durkheim, and Marx) and, by extension, by many British, American, and Australian sociologists who rely on extensive use of statistics to maintain the status of sociology as a "science" (J. Webb et al., 2002).

However, in France, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposed a different approach. Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a French sociologist who has been considered one of the most influential intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century, primarily because of his development of practice theory. As a consummated ethnographer, Bourdieu believed that appreciating, representing, and explaining "real-time practices" was fundamental to understanding human conduct (Nicolini, 2012). His social world theory combines a structural approximation of power relations with a historical perspective of reproduction and change (Sapiro, 2015).

For Bourdieu, a theory is a means for understanding practice (Bathmaker, 2015). Bourdieu's reflection on the concept of practice is based on a double criticism of objectivism and subjectivism. On the one hand, Bourdieu rejected the subjectivist presumption of social phenomenology and the subjectivist belief that the action is produced by the will of a completely conscious subject, capable of projecting itself to the future and anticipating the consequences of its actions (Sapiro, 2015). On the other hand, he also showed his disagreement with the ideas of structuralist objectivism that conceives the social world in terms of an objective and constraining structure, independent of human consciousness, assuming a neutral perspective about people's actions (Jaramillo Marín, 2011). Bourdieu's purpose was to develop a theory of practice "capable of both avoiding the two opposites and overcoming the dichotomy" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 55).

For Bourdieu, objectivism and subjectivism are partial and different perspectives, but not irreconcilable. Both represent two moments of sociological analysis that are in a dialectical relationship. In the objectivist moment, sociology analyzes relative positions and objective relationships between those positions; in the subjectivist moment, it examines agents' perspectives on reality based on their position in the objective social space (Gutiérrez, 2005).

### 3.3 Bourdieu's theoretical concepts

Although Bourdieu never formulated a formal definition of practice, he explained that *habitus* needs to work with *capital* and *field* to produce practice (Nicolini, 2012). He condensed this relation into the following formula:

$$(Habitus \times Capital) + Field = Practice$$

These three concepts are only a part of a more extensive set developed in Bourdieu's theory of practice. For this research, the combination of *field*, *habitus*, and *capital* was employed to explain how policy translates into practices in higher education research activities in the province of Manabí, Ecuador.

#### 3.3.1 Field

The field represents the social context where agents' (individuals, groups, or institutions) interactions occur, positioned hierarchically according to the levels of power they possess (Kalfa & Taksa, 2017). The field has an identity that is perdurable but not immutable: the field's structures determine who the agents are, which, in turn, modify the field's identity through their own social action (Jaramillo Marín, 2011). The field and the agents within the field are mutually and continuously affected. The fields denote arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, status, and competitive positions the actors hold in their struggle to accumulate and control different types of capital (Power, 1999). In these arenas, capital distribution and legitimacy are continuously contested. Practice theory resizes the concept of power, representing it as a

resource and a scheme that operates within a set of relationships of strength, interests, and positions (Jaramillo Marín, 2011).

Fields are not isolated, and they interact with other different fields. For instance, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, pp. 104 -105) argued that, when studying a field, it is necessary to analyze the field's position concerning the field of power. The field of power is a meta-field or a macro-concept; it is a capital configuration that models practices and relationships within specific fields (J. Webb et al., 2002). The type of power an individual wields within a given field depends on their position in the field and the type and the amount of capital that this individual has.

Another critical consideration in studying a field is to map out the objective structure of the relationships between the different positions occupied by the agents who compete for the specific forms of capital existing in the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Postill (2010) compared the field to a game. In this metaphor, players (agents) with enough knowledge of the game rules become skilled players capable of improvising strategies so as to get rewards. This does not imply that fields are static: they are not limited to be the terrain of the game with a rigid set of rules. Instead, fields are very dynamic social spaces, open to negotiations between agents for their and other agents' positions (Bathmaker, 2015). Postill (2010) observed that although agents' negotiation strategies may seem rational, they are only enabled by a proper correspondence between their habitus and the field.

### 3.3.2 Habitus

Habitus refers to how individuals develop a social and personal identity by developing attitudes and dispositions, as well as how individuals engage in social practices within fields (J. Webb et al., 2002). The concept of habitus is a fundamental element of Bourdieu's theory. For him, "conduct is always oriented toward the pursuit of some interest defined generally as whatever matters, which in practice translates almost



inevitably into accumulating power and capital" (Nicolini, 2012, pp. 59–60). This pursuit is mainly governed by habitus; however, there is also space for agency.

Bourdieu uses the concept of habitus to explain the recurrences of behaviour associated with social structures (gender, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, ability, social class, etc.). Habitus is also a product of history, making it a durable element; however, this does not make it immutable (Jaramillo Marín, 2011). Using habitus, Bourdieu seeks to maintain the relevance of individuals' agency without converting social structures into deterministic elements of human behaviour (Power, 1999). Nicolini (2012) explained the non-deterministic nature of habitus, arguing that "agents are continuously engaged in the activity of micro-strategizing permitted by the 'sense of the game' granted them by their habitus" (p. 60).

Formally, habitus has been described by Bourdieu as a property of agents (whether these are individuals, groups, or institutions) that comprise a "structured and structuring structure" (Bourdieu, 1990a). It is considered structured because it is defined by each agent's past and present circumstances. It is structuring because the habitus contributes to shaping agents' present and future practices. It is a structure because it is not random but a systematically ordered series of dispositions that generate perceptions, appreciations, and practices (Grenfell, 2010).

This research aims to investigate how quality assurance processes inform the habitus of universities in Manabí. Quality assurance processes are problematic because they hide a substantial political burden behind their apparent objective character (K. Lynch, 2015). Indeed, the emphasis on accountability, when focused solely on metrics and indicators, could change the researchers' dispositions towards what they do, the way they understand the means to achieve their objectives, and their identity as researchers and faculty members. At the institutional level, the heightened attention to increasing the outcomes of indicators can restrict opportunities for universities' societal engagement at the provincial level and limit their role as regional development entities. At the individual level, researchers can be pushed into practices of "political academic capitalism" (Jessop,

2018), such as publishing in predatory journals, paying for the publication of articles, or orchestrating the publication of pseudo-scientific papers ghostwritten on behalf of the researchers.

### 3.3.3 Capitals

Traditionally, the term “capital” is associated with the economic sphere and monetary exchange. However, Bourdieu's use of the term has a broader scope. By introducing different types of capital (cultural, social, and economic), Bourdieu distinguishes himself from the materialist conception of power and inequality (Grenfell, 2010). For Bourdieu, power and dominance do not derive exclusively from the possession of material resources but also from the acquisition of social and cultural resources.

Capital, in this sense, is "anything that can be exchanged, determining as a consequence a variation in legitimacy and power" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 59). Therefore, capitals are the fields' currency; for a capital to be considered valuable, it must count in terms of collective social value, whether intentionally or not (Grenfell, 2010). Capitals are essential in the fields' constitution. They “make the games of society something other than simple games of chance, offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle” (Bourdieu, 1986). As such, fields are “structured spaces organized around particular types of capital” (Power, 1999, p. 50). Bourdieu (1986) recognized three main types of capital: economic, cultural, and social capital. Capitals require time for accumulation and can produce profit, self-reproduce, and persist as part of the objectivity of things (Bourdieu, 1986). One of the characteristics of the different types of capital is that they are interconvertible, with economic capital being the easiest to convert, accumulate, and transfer (Power, 1999).

Economic capital is the first type. Economic capital can be easily converted into money and institutionalized in property rights (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital is the easiest type to identify since it is commonly associated with power, money, and wealth (Power, 1999). Economic capital significantly impacts access to educational resources (J. Webb et

al., 2002). This impact is particularly noticeable in regional universities because the link between quality assurance and resource allocation policies encloses them in a loop. Due to their limited budget, they cannot make the necessary investment in infrastructure and resources to boost research, resulting in a negative impact on their quality indicators, which in turn results in permanent reductions or cuts in their operating budget.

The second type is cultural capital. Cultural capital (frequently associated with the field of higher education) is a form of value related to attributes, skills, achievements, consumption patterns, and culturally accepted tastes. Academic degrees are a general example of cultural capital in the educational area, but they are not the only cultural capital appearance (Moore, 2012). Cultural capital can manifest itself in three different forms: 1) an embodied state, 2) an objectified state, and 3) an institutionalized state.

In the embodied state, cultural capital is expressed through the agents' way of moving, speaking, and writing, resulting from long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body (Grenfell, 2010). This form of cultural capital presupposes a process of incorporation due to inculcation and assimilation efforts, constituting the personal representation of culture and cultivation, and it cannot be transmitted instantaneously (Bourdieu, 1986).

In an objectified state, cultural capital is visible in the form of cultural goods, such as books, dictionaries, equipment, and instruments, among others (Grenfell, 2010). In this state, cultural capital has several properties defined by the relationship with the embodied form of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Objectified cultural capital can be materially transmitted, but to be purposefully used, the owner must have access to the embodied cultural capital, either personally or by proxy.

The final form of cultural capital is the institutionalized state. In this state, the institutional recognition of agents' cultural capital enables them to overcome the bearers' biological limits. Academic qualifications, such as diplomas, certificates, and success in competencies, and selections (Grenfell, 2010) represent a "certificate of cultural

competence” which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, and legally guaranteed value concerning culture (Bourdieu, 1986).

The type of capital operating in the field of university education is an institutionalized form of cultural capital that has generally been termed "academic capital" (Naidoo, 2004). Olvera García (2009, p. 307) summarizes some of the pertinent “indicators of dominance” described by Bourdieu (1988) in *Homo Academicus* that may be useful for this study:

- Social determinants of the possibilities of access to occupied positions; that is, the inherited economic, political and social capital: social origin (father’s profession, social prestige, geographical origin, and religion of the family of origin).
- Academic determinants, which are the academic retranslation of the precedents (academic capital), the type of education received (public or private, regional or national high school), and academic success (general competency) demonstrated during secondary studies. Higher education institutions attended (country, province, foreign) and degrees obtained.
- Capital of university power; that is, belonging to positions of power, for example: being assigned to the consulting committee of universities, occupation of positions such as director, membership of committees of prestigious competitions.
- Capital of scientific power: the direction of a research organization, a scientific journal, instruction in a research teaching institution, participation in the higher council of scientific research.
- Capital of scientific prestige: scientific distinctions, translations, participation in national and international colloquies.
- Capital of intellectual fame: participation in television, radio, newspapers, weekly, intellectual magazines, publications, membership in the editorial committee of journals.

- Capital of political or economic power: belonging to ministerial cabinets, the teaching-plan commissions, national or international public service awards.
- Political dispositions: participation in colloquiums, subscribing to different requests.

This set of criteria can help analyze the individuals contesting in the field positions, making clear the plurality of perspectives about one person or group.

Through the construction of connections, people can work together to complete things that they could not accomplish individually or that would be very difficult for an individual to achieve. Social capital is the third primary type of capital identified by Bourdieu, and results from relations networks (Power, 1999). It is the sum of the resources that a group or individual has achieved through the possession of a network of institutionalized mutually recognized relationships (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Bourdieu (1986) also recognized that the volume of social capital possessed by agents depends on the size of the connections they have managed to mobilize and the volume of capital that those with whom they are connected possess. The concept of social capital is multidisciplinary and has achieved international reach in academic and policy studies (Field, 2008). This concept could help determine if researchers are focused on a competition motivated by the evaluation model or, on the contrary, on forming collaborative connections needed to meet the requirements of their institutions.

Each individual (or institution) possesses all capital in varied composition and volume. The volume and composition of capitals framed Bourdieu's description of classes in combination with the social mobility trajectory (upward, downward, or stable) (Power, 1999). Bourdieu's concept of capital contributed to this research by providing a framework for identifying which of the different capital types are most appreciated by researchers from universities in Manabí.

The introduction of the research-evaluation model in universities in Manabí has influenced the definition of which practices, informed by specific fields, habitus, and

forms of capital, are considered valuable. This research investigates how these practices have been legitimized and how other forms of practice could be beneficial despite not being recognized as such in Ecuadorian higher education.

### 3.4 Critiques of Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit

Despite being a theory that has been used in multiple knowledge areas and contexts, Bourdieu's theory of practice is not free from criticism. At this point, I want to acknowledge some of the criticisms that have been made of Bourdieu's theory of practice. Knowing these issues is essential to identify possible challenges in researching higher education by applying a practice theory theoretical framework.

The first criticism is directed towards Bourdieu's use of language. Webb et al. (2002, p.78) describe it as “a very difficult language, with very complicated sentences and words taken from their conventional meanings or contexts and used in new ways.” However, Bourdieu’s complicated language was an intentional choice on his part. He described his style as a permanent struggle against ordinary language, arguing that it was necessary to challenge readers with their ideas about the mechanisms that govern human action (Maggio, 2017).

Peterson (Postill, 2010, Ch. 6) mentions that some authors do not consider practice theory a theory but rather view it as a shared conceptual vocabulary, and that, from an anthropological point of view, Bourdieu does not value the symbolic capital (such as kinship ties or deep religious faith) by itself but rather emphasizes its conversion to economic capital. In King’s (2000) criticism of habitus, he writes that if the habitus is determined by the objective conditions that govern the action of the individual’s social position, and the habitus is formed by provisions and categories internalized unconsciously, then social change is impossible. If individuals act under objective conditions, they have no alternative but to reproduce them by repeating the same practices. For his part, Bourdieu argued that action is guided by a practical sense, a sense of direction that gives individuals a “sense of the game”. Habitus allows for an infinite

number of movements without explicitly following a fixed set of rules. The existence of multiple possibilities for action, informed by different sets of rules, rejects sociological determinism and explains how social change is possible (Sapiro, 2015).

### 3.5 Practice theory and higher education

While Bourdieu's work on higher education was primarily focused on the French system, his theoretical toolkit has proved relevant for many other social systems (J. Webb et al., 2002). Bourdieu's concepts in higher education have been used extensively. Scholars worldwide have used them to research "the influence of social and economic capitals, class practices and identity work, the macro and micro, individual action and social formation" (S. Webb et al., 2017, p. 139). For instance, Bathmaker (2015) used Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit to question long-established practices in the higher education field and explore how power and inequalities determine social spaces. She found that in the English higher education system, changes in educational practices are not rejected only when they do not constitute a threat for those holding the most powerful positions on the field.

Bourdieu used a metaphor to compare higher education with a sorting machine. He argued that higher education selects students according to an implicit social classification and then reproduces the same students according to an academic classification, which is very similar to the implicit social classification (Naidoo, 2004). Perhaps, this same analogy can be applied to research practices in universities to understand how the adoption of the Ecuadorian quality assurance policy influences the predisposition of Universities in Manabí to classify a particular practice as "academic" or as "research" and, therefore, to legitimize certain criteria as components what makes a successful researcher in higher education. Research practices influenced by quality assurance policy can benefit privileged groups under the guise of democratized institutional strategies (Naidoo, 2004). The favoured groups are the agents or institutions in possession of the credentials and the capital needed to succeed in attaining an advantageous position in the field of higher education. An example of this is English-language publication's

dominance over research knowledge that marginalizes research in other languages instead of absorbing them (Marginson, 2008).

Although Bourdieu did not initially anticipate the commodification of research and knowledge, he subsequently recognized and criticized the economic field's influence on intellectual activities (Deer, 2003). Bourdieu argued that although university practices are shown as disinterested and non-economic, they can be analyzed as economic practices, given that they are oriented towards a symbolic gain (Naidoo, 2004). Still, analysis of these practices should not be exclusively reduced to the logic of economics.

For Bourdieu, the higher education system acts as a “relay in that it reproduces the principles of social class and other forms of domination under the cloak of academic neutrality” (Naidoo, 2004, p. 460). This means that universities inadvertently contribute to social classification and the normalization of the dominant structures. That said, Bourdieu also observed that education has the potential to be transformative. The reflexive practice in many educational activities builds knowledge-of-the-game rules that can enable researchers and students to “manipulate” the education system in order to introduce transformations, despite higher education's reproductive tendencies (J. Webb et al., 2002).

### 3.6 The contemporary discussion on practice

According to Nicolini (2012), practice-based approaches are appealing because they can “describe important features of the world we inhabit as something that is routinely made and re-made in practice using tools, discourse, and our bodies” (p. 2). Bourdieu is recognized as one of the most influential writers in developing practice theory. However, he is not the only author dedicated to this theoretical approximation which has created a plethora of practice theory versions, denying the possibility of a unified theory of practice. Postill (2010) reported that Schatzki tried to classify practice theorists into four different types: “philosophers (such as Wittgenstein, Dreyfus, or Taylor), social theorists



(Bourdieu, Giddens), cultural theorists (Foucault, Lyotard), and theorists of science and technology (Latour, Rouse, Pickering)” (p. 6).

Despite the abundance of alternatives, Bourdieu's conceptual development is still frequently adopted as a lens used to explore and understand social phenomena. Bourdieu and social theorists Anthony Giddens and Theodore Schatzki have become the leading exponents of modern praxeology (Nicolini, 2012). This section will explore Giddens and Schatzki's viewpoints about practice theory and its implications for social life.

Ortner (1984) observed that the debate of social science switched to focus on a set of issues seen from a new perspective: the bidirectional relationship between human action and “the system”, i.e., how action is carried out (the capacity of humans to perform actions), and the role of agents in social production and reproduction. Schatzki (2001b) called this phenomenon “the practice turn in social theory” and noted that this turn altered the definition of what constituted central social problems, generated new areas of interest, and reinforced the legitimacy of marginal research interests.

As the name suggests, “practice” is the main component of practice-based approaches, although they can have different denominations (for Bourdieu and Schatzki: practice theory, for Giddens: structuration theory). Giddens and Schatzki agree with Bourdieu about the relevance of practice for social life. Giddens (1984) explains that “the basic domain of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered through time and space” (p. 2). Thus, social practices are enduring series of practical activities, where regular activities bring "people into social systems, which are reproduced over time through continued interaction" (Whittington, 2010, p. 110). Schatzki also sees practices as the main constitutive element of social life (Nicolini, 2012). For Schatzki (2001a), the social field is a "field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings" (p. 12).

That humans have the capacity to produce perdurable consequences in social-life structures is another crucial component of practice theory. Giddens's conception of human agency emphasizes the influence of people's activities to produce outcomes. The *structuration* concept combines agency and structure, creating continuity (social reproduction) and structural change (social transformation) opportunities (Whittington, 2010). Schatzki argued that social orders are enacted by practices constituted of bundles of human activity, and Bourdieu used the concept of habitus to denote a generative principle of regulated improvisations (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011) that can introduce changes in the structures of the social fields.

Giddens' structuration theory has several attractive elements for practice researchers. Whittington (2010) highlighted three of them: 'attention to micro-sociological detail; a sensitivity to institutional context; and openness to change' (p. 114). For structuration theory, everyday activities are rich sources of analysis. Nevertheless, these activities are not interesting just of and by themselves, but by how they represent more significant structural principles that can enable or constrain that practice, connecting the micro (conduct) and the macro (institutions).

On the other hand, Schatzki's Practice Turn has informed "researchers of the generative possibilities entailed in adopting a practice lens on social phenomena" (Orlikowski, 2010, p. 25). According to Nicolini (2012), Schatzki has produced one of the most robust practice theory developments over the last two decades. Schatzki suggested that his vision of practice theory is superior to the ones presented by Bourdieu and Giddens. He based this claim on the concept of "practical understanding". Practical understanding explains "the abilities of actors to react appropriately to specific situations. A practical understanding contains the bodily know-how and implicit knowledge to conduct, recognize, and react to other activities." (Loscher et al., 2019, p. 4). Schatzki accused Bourdieu's and Giddens' notion of practice of "being either over-intellectualized (people need to decide at the point of action) or over-determined (some structural principle causally governs people)" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 166).

### 3.7 Summary

In Ecuadorian higher education, the quality assurance policy has established specific guidelines that have shaped research activities within universities. Social practices are durable and reproducible, but they are at the same time defined by context and mutability over time. Using a practice approach in this study reveals how the policy is received, interpreted, and transformed in practices and how these practices have been maintained or transformed over time, and the implications for the specific context of the universities in Manabí.

## Chapter 4

### 4 Methodology

This study aimed to identify how quality assurance policy is enacted by the research offices in the public regional universities in the province of Manabí (Ecuador). This chapter explains the methodological design, the different data sources used, and the strategies used to achieve trustworthiness and appropriate ethical behaviour.

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews and document analysis. These data sources allowed a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and views regarding the translation of quality assurance policy into research practices in the Ecuadorian higher education context. The purpose of using more than one data source was to provide robustness, richness, and depth to this qualitative study (Hernández et al., 2010).

This research adopted a case study approach. Case studies allow researchers to capture unique pieces of information that could be lost in larger-scale data collection. This study used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluation criteria for qualitative research to ensure trustworthiness based on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (details in section 4.5). Section 4.6 explains how I adopted the practices defined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans ([TCPS2] Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018) to address any ethical concerns.

#### 4.1 Qualitative Research

Several schools of thought (empiricism, positivism, etc.) and interpretative frameworks (e.g., ethnography, constructivism) have been developed throughout the history of science, originating different methodologies in the search for knowledge. In the past century, these schools of thought have witnessed the emergence of polarization between the two main approaches to conducting research: the quantitative approach and the qualitative approach (Hernández et al., 2010).

Both approaches use careful and methodical processes used to generate knowledge and they are generally comprised of five similar and interrelated phases (Hernández et al., 2010):

- They are based on the observation and evaluation of phenomena.
- They establish assumptions or ideas as a result of observation and assessment.
- They show the degree to which beliefs or ideas are substantiated.
- They review such assumptions or ideas based on evidence or analysis.
- They propose new observations and evaluations to clarify, modify and support the assumptions and ideas; or generate others.

Both quantitative and qualitative research help explain our world. However, “quantitative research can tell us correlations, how much, whether and ‘what’, whilst qualitative research can tell us the ‘how’ and ‘why’ – the processes involved in understanding and explaining how things occur” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 304). Qualitative research focuses on understanding phenomena at a profound level, exploring them from the participants’ perspectives in a natural environment and context (Hernández et al., 2010). Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding what meaning people attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to generalize the results more widely through statistical analyses, qualitative research provides depth to the data, interpretative richness, contextualization of the environment, subjective detail, and accounts of experiences (Hernández et al., 2010). Qualitative research has been proposed as a promising approach to research social groups that have been traditionally marginalized by established bodies of literature (Hernández et al., 2010).

The enactment of quality assurance policy in Ecuadorian higher education, especially in regional universities, is an unexplored topic. Existing research focuses almost exclusively on measuring and comparing the research outcomes defined by the quality assurance policy. This trend is the consequence of the evaluation model’s pressure on Ecuadorian universities to show that they have a higher compliance level than other universities.

Regional universities cannot escape their obligations to the national accreditation agency. Still, no study has questioned what conditions and challenges they face to fulfill the accreditations processes' requirements. Given the technical nature of the quality assurance instruments in Ecuador, it is understandable that most researchers choose to use quantitative methodologies to do their investigation. Nonetheless, using a qualitative approach reveals a deeper understanding of the policy-enactment process, including the way actors and institutions adapt to the conditions of the quality assurance policy.

#### 4.1.1 Using qualitative research to understand practices

In this study, a qualitative approach was helpful because it uncovered the relations between the structures of policy enactment and the actors' strategies to translate them into research practices. Social practices result from actors' strategies to accomplish their goals (Polkinghorne, 1997). Although scientific positivism is appropriate for studying natural sciences, social practices require a different approach (Brar, 2016). A practice-based approach places practices as the basic units of analysis (Nicolini, 2012). Since practices result from the interaction between agents and structures, studying them requires focusing on participants and their context. Here, a qualitative approach was practical because qualitative research helps reveal the participants' understanding of their experiences.

Qualitative studies are also useful in situations where it is impossible to separate the contextual elements from the phenomenon variables (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In studies focusing on higher education practices, these contextual elements include the institutional culture, administrative hierarchy, and internal and external policy. Given the complexity of research practices, using a positivistic approach to simply quantify and measure will not reveal the intricacies of how these practices are performed. Qualitative studies fit this need because they focus on meaning in context (Pasque & Lechuga, 2017).

## 4.2 Qualitative case study research

The responsibility of researchers does not end in selecting a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approach. They also need to choose a research design. Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 11) define research design as “types of inquiry within qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches that provide specific directions for procedures in a research study”. Case studies are one of the most popular research designs. However, case studies are not limited to qualitative research. The methods and techniques used in case study research are numerous and varied and may include both those that are defined as qualitative as well as those defined as quantitative (Schwandt & Gates, 2017)

Qualitative case studies share some of the characteristics of other forms of qualitative research. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative case studies focus on meaning and understanding. They place the researcher as the primary data-collection and analysis instrument and generate a richly descriptive end product. According to Schwandt and Gates (2017), case studies can have four different purposes and, by extension, four different designs: “(1) description, (2) hypothesis generation or theory development, (3) hypothesis and theory testing, and (4) development of normative theory” (p. 607). Nevertheless, independent of the purpose, what is essential is that the researchers develop an in-depth analysis of the selected case (or cases) by collecting detailed information, using different data-collection procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Swanborn (2010, p. 41) argued that case study as a research strategy allows researchers to “clarify the intricate web of social relations, perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and behaviour” of social processes in little-explored situations.

Qualitative case studies can focus on an individual case (single-case study) or be open to including several cases (multiple-case study). In addition to this initial distinction, Yin and Campbell (2018) added a second one: the number of units of analysis. By using the terms *holistic* to denote a single unit of analysis and *embedded* to indicate multiple units of analysis, they proposed four different cases study designs (see Figure 2): a holistic

single-case design (Type I), an embedded single-case design (Type II), a holistic multiple-case design (Type III), and, finally, an embedded multiple-case design (Type IV).

Holistic single-case designs are used when the case represents either an unusual circumstance or a test of a critical existing theory. Embedded single-case studies allow researchers to gain extensive insights into different parts (units of analysis) of a single case (Yin & Campbell, 2018). Although applying a multiple-case study requires more resources and time, they present advantages unachievable in single case studies. Researchers examine “several cases to understand the similarities and differences between the cases” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 150). As Yin and Campbell explained, this research design gives researchers access to two different possibilities for the study outcomes (2018, p. 106): 1) finding coincidences among them or 2) finding contrasting conditions. This study adopted the holistic multiple-case design (Type III), considering each public university in the province of Manabí as one individual case and defining the research practices as the unit of analysis. The following section provides more details about the relationship between cases and the unit of analysis in this research.



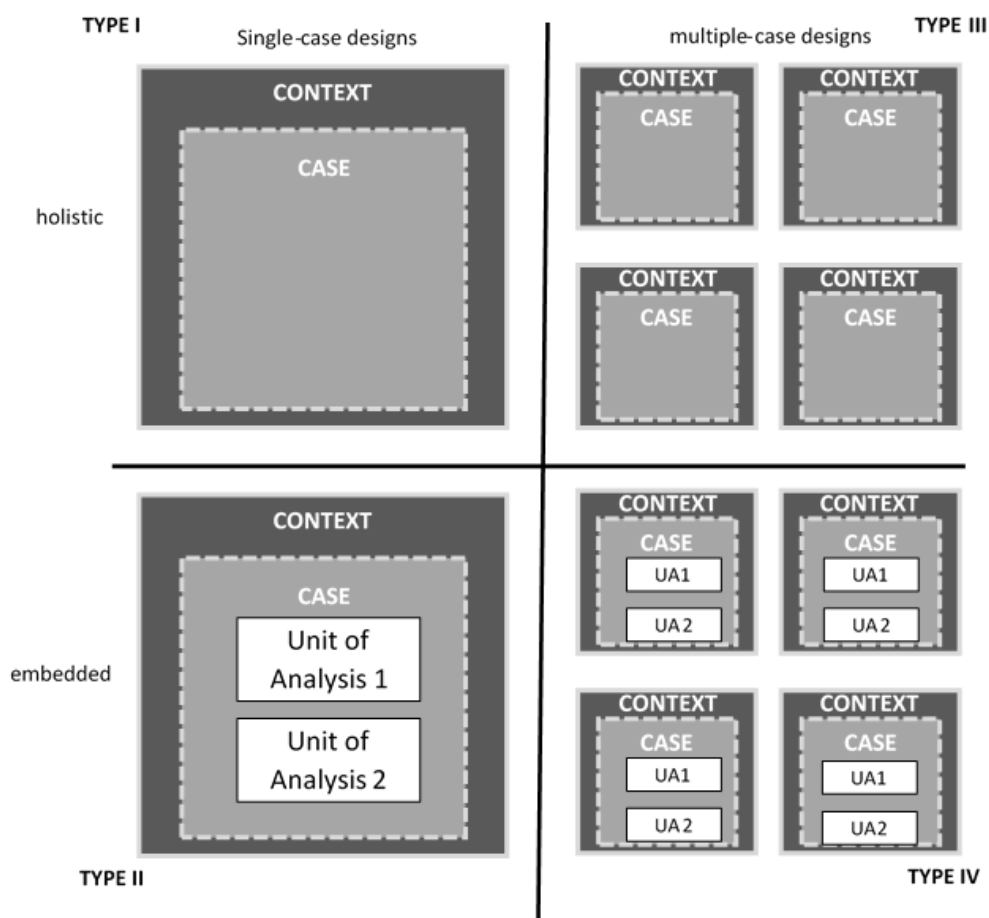


Figure 2. *Case Study designs* (Yin & Campbell, 2018)

#### 4.2.1 Case selection and the unit of analysis

A proper selection of cases is always essential. Defining the object of study (the case) is “the single most defining characteristic of case study research” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 38). However, to select a case, we need to first understand it. The problem is that there is no consensus among the research methodologists about the design and implementation of case studies (Yazan, 2015), even making the definition of what constitutes a “case” contested. Schwandt and Gates (2017) provide a broad definition, arguing that “a case is an instance, incident, or unit of something and can be anything—a person, an organization, an event, a decision, an action, a location like a neighbourhood, or a nation-state” (p. 600).

Based on this definition, some authors use the terms “case” and “unit of analysis” as equivalent terms (see Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). However, the typology of Yin and Campbell (2018) seems to point in a different direction. Their research designs make a clear distinction between the cases and the units of analysis to define the type of case study design. Although Yin and Campbell do not provide a concise definition of a unit of analysis, other authors have tried to clarify the ambiguity in using the concept. The unit of analysis is crucial because it characterizes the case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) but, at the same time, is defined by the research design (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) and the purpose of the study (Grünbaum, 2007).

In this study, a case was defined as the bounded object that outlines the scope of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and the unit of analysis as the “phenomenon for which evidence is collected” (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007, p. 87). Relating these definitions to Yin and Campbell's (2018) holistic multiple-case design for case studies (Type III design), each one of the four public regional universities in the province of Manabí was envisioned as an individual case included in the multiple-case design, while the unit of analysis was the enactment of the quality assurance policy in public regional universities in the province of Manabí (see Figure 3 for a visual representation).

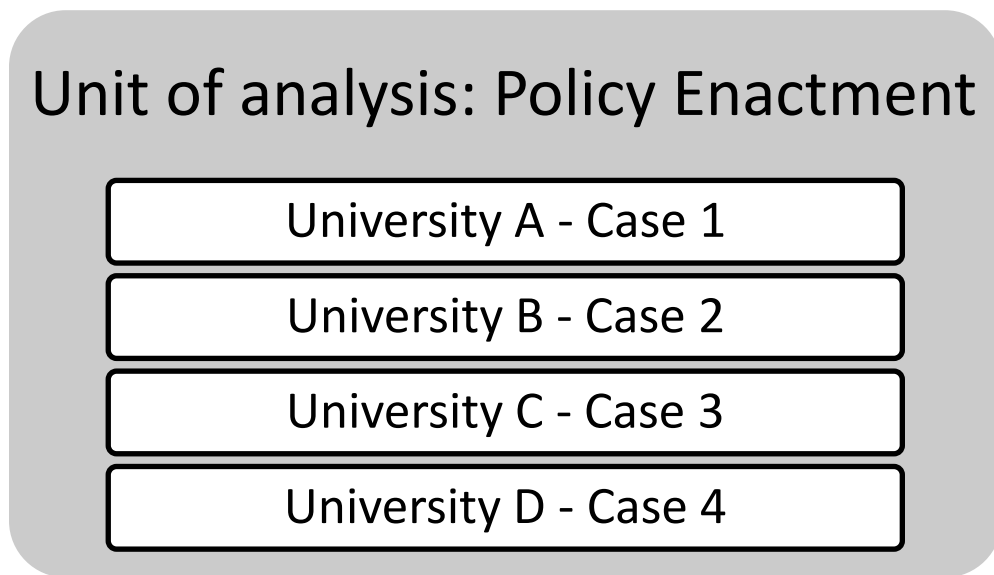


Figure 3. *Relationship between cases and unit of analysis. Based on Yin and Campbell (2018).*

Although there are 24 provinces in Ecuador, this study was limited to the province of Manabí. The reason for this decision was threefold:

- 1) There were limited time and resources available for the study.
- 2) The researcher had a familiarity with some of the universities (which simplified access and availability).
- 3) The context of the province is relatively similar for all universities in the sample.

Cohen et al. (2018) concur with Merriam and Tisdell (2016) on how crucial it is to set boundaries in case studies. They argued that a case study's boundedness defines the research task's complexity, including decisions such as how finite the data-collection will be and the number of participants that could be interviewed. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also asserted that if these decisions are not limited, "the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case" (2016, p. 39).

## 4.2.2 Limitations of a case study approach

The most systematic critique of case studies relies on their definition. There seems to be no consensus when defining what exactly a case study is, and the terms seem to be used in many different ways according to the research, in an approach described by Grünbaum (2007) as one where “anything goes”. Nonetheless, many authors have endeavoured to provide detailed definitions and descriptions of research designs applicable to case studies. For instance, both Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Creswell and Creswell (2018) provide guidelines to identify cases, while authors such as Yin (1994), Yin and Campbell (2018), and Stake (2005) have offered research-design options that have been widely welcomed in the scientific literature. As long as the definition of a case study in an investigation is rigorously established and maintained consistently throughout all stages of the study, this criticism should not represent a real limitation.

Cohen et al. (2018) also recognized that case studies might not be generalizable. This means that any attempt to make generalizations from a case study will be indeterminate, relative, and context-bound (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007). That said, qualitative case study research intends not to generalize but to provide a detailed description of the studied case. Case studies offer researchers the opportunity to capture unique information that could be lost in larger-scale data-collection (e.g., surveys). Besides, the results of case studies can still be transferred (see section 4.5.2 for transferability) to other contexts and situations (Given, 2008).

## 4.3 Participants and sampling

In qualitative case studies, the sample size is not as crucial as in quantitative studies because the researcher doesn't intend to generalize the result to a broader population. However, this does not diminish the importance of adequately selecting participants.

There are two main types of sampling: probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling draws participants randomly from a wider population (Cohen et al., 2018), and is used when the researcher is interested in generalizing the

study results from the sample to the population. In this situation, “since generalization in a statistical sense is not a goal of qualitative research, probabilistic sampling is not necessary or even justifiable in qualitative research” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). On the other hand, in a nonprobability sample, researchers intentionally avoid representing a wider population by targeting a particular group (Cohen et al., 2018). In this type of sampling, the researchers’ intention is not to represent a broader population but the group itself.

In a broader sense, this study adopted a nonprobability sampling approach. This study used a subtype known as purposive or purposeful sampling at a more specific level. Purposive sampling is one of the most selected forms of sampling used in qualitative research. In this type of sampling, there is the assumption that the researcher “wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96).

Consequently, to access what has been defined by Cohen et al. (2018, p. 219) as the “knowledgeable people”, this study recruited nine participants from the four public regional universities in the province of Manabí. In each university, the participants were the research office chair and the evaluation office chair (also known in some institutions as the quality assurance office chair).

The selected participants were in a critical position for this study. They were recognized as intermediaries between the national research quality assurance policy and their institutions. They are also in charge of constructing the internal institutional policy, monitoring research practices, and controlling and executing the self-assessment processes. Their position also situates them at a dominant role in the link between researchers and administrators.

#### 4.4 Data-collection

Having multiple data sources is crucial for qualitative case studies. Using several data sources ensures the object of study “is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety

of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544). For this study, data were collected using semi-structured interviews with university administrators in charge of the quality assurance policy enactment; in addition, several policy documents were analyzed.

#### 4.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Brinkman (2018) suggested that fully structured and unstructured interviews don't exist in the real world. That said, in a completely structured interview, participants could say things relevant to the study that spill beyond the structure (before and after the interview). Besides, predetermined structures reduce the researcher's ability to understand the meanings of the participants' expressions. Moreover, there is at least some structure in the conversation because the interviewer will always have an idea of what to expect (based on their experience, knowledge of the topic, and previous research).

This study used semi-structured interviews as one of the primary data-collection techniques. Semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide, but they gave the interviewer flexibility to introduce additional questions to clarify concepts or obtain more information about the investigated topics (Hernández et al., 2010).

Semi-structured interviews can be powerful tools for gathering data about practices. As Brinkmann (2018) pointed out, when qualitative researchers use semi-structured interviews, they are usually interested in understanding the “how” instead of the “what” about participants' experiences. As Hamel (1998) noted, Bourdieu saw interviews as “exceptional opportunities” for interviewees to construct themselves and their viewpoints about their worlds.

This type of interview also allows researchers to re-order the contents, explore new avenues and undertake further probing (Cohen et al., 2018). Here, the researcher can focus the conversation on the more relevant issues concerning the research project (Brinkmann, 2018). Swanborn (2010) emphasized that interviews are an efficient way to

gather information and provide an opportunity for researchers to access the site and key personnel.

The selection of the participants for this study was explained in Section 4.3. Western University's ethics board approved four interview guides (Appendix C), one for each planned participant group. The interview guides were based on the following themes: quality definition and policy interpretation, organizational challenges and opportunities, research practices, and the relationship between the researchers and the administrators. Due to the sample reduction explained in section 7.4, each participant was asked questions relevant to their different roles and responsibilities based on the existing interview guides.

#### 4.4.2 Document review and analysis

Documents are a valuable source of qualitative data. Because many people and organizations use documents to register their history and present situation, these documents present an opportunity for researchers to situate themselves within the studied group's context (Hernández et al., 2010). Documents are "ready-made sources of data easily accessible" for researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 162). Documents, unlike interviews, are outside of the researcher's influence; however, as Swanborn (2010) suggested, it should be kept in mind that "they can still be biased towards the institutions and persons who constructed them" (p. 73).

This study analyzed several policy documents, including the following:

- 1) The "Policy of Institutional Evaluation of Universities and Polytechnical Schools in the Framework of the System of Assuring the Quality of Higher Education [Política de evaluación institucional para las Universidades y Escuelas Politécnicas en el Sistema de Aseguramiento de la Calidad en la Educación Superior, in Spanish]" (CACES, 2018b). This document presents a historical account of the evaluation of quality in Ecuador and it addresses the central axes of quality assurance.
- 2) The "Model for the External Evaluation of Universities and Polytechnic Schools [Modelo de evaluación externa de Universidades y Escuelas Politécnicas, in

Spanish]" (CACES, 2019b). This document details the specific procedures to calculate the outcomes of the accreditation processes.

- 3) The "Support Guide for External Peers [Guía de Apoyo del par evaluador, in Spanish]" (CACES, 2019a). This document provides additional guidelines for the external peers involved in quality assurance processes. Although it is based on the Model for external evaluation (CACES, 2019b), this document was initially constructed with training purposes in mind. Consequently, it presents a different perspective of the components used to calculate the outcomes of accreditation processes.

In addition to the documents described above, other publicly available institutional documents relevant to this study have been included, such as the funding allocation policy and the regulations for public supply and acquisitions. The participants' knowledge of the internal institutional dynamics provided insight into these sources not contemplated in this research project's planning stage.

#### 4.4.3 Data analysis

The challenge of data analysis is to systematize a large amount of data to answer a research question (Swanborn, 2010). One of the advantages of a case study design is that when researchers gather data from multiple sources, they can converge in the analysis process instead of processing it in their individual silos (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This allows researchers to increase the strength of the results, and to better understand the case by combining the different strands of data. However, the amount of data generated can cause a problem for researchers. Qualitative studies are inherently rich in details and can cause the researchers to "find themselves 'lost' in the data" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554).

To deal with this problem, qualitative researchers are moving from manual coding to the use of qualitative computer software programs for assistance. Using software is a faster and more efficient alternative to storing and locating qualitative data and assigning and organizing codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study used NVivo to code both the selected policy documents and the transcriptions of the interviews. Although NVivo supports auto-coding, the definition of the codes was still performed by the researcher to avoid losing important themes. As Hernández et al. (2010) clarified, the use of software



is in no way a substitute for the in-depth and creative analysis of the researcher; it only makes the researcher's task more manageable.

Even though coding seems like a laborious task in the middle of data-collection and the definition of findings, it helped the researcher in the following ways (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, pp. 7–10): 1) acquiring deep, comprehensive, and thorough insights into the data, 2) making the data accessible and retrievable, 3) sorting and structuring the data, 4) ensuring transparency, 5) ensuring validity, and 6) giving a voice to participants.

There are two main types of coding in qualitative research: inductive and deductive coding. Inductive coding is “entering the analytic enterprise with as open a mind as possible—a 'learn as you go' approach that spontaneously creates original codes the first time data are reviewed” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 40). On the other hand, in deductive coding, “you have a category, and you want to see whether it exists in subsequent data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used a blended approach, given that the two previous approaches are different but not mutually exclusive (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The analysis of the interviews included a verbatim transcription. “Verbatim transcription” means that everything that was heard was transcribed. Although it can be argued that it is impossible to capture everything communicated, this technique helped me capture as much information as possible (Paulus et al., 2015). The analysis of both the interview transcriptions and the relevant policy documents started with a deductive approach that included the theoretical concepts described in Chapter 3. Still, it remained open for an inductive exploration in later coding cycles.

## 4.5 Research study trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an essential concept because “it allows researchers to describe the virtues of qualitative terms outside of the parameters that are typically applied in quantitative research” (Given, 2008, p. 895). Since quantitative terms such as generalizability, internal validity, reliability, and objectivity do not apply to qualitative studies, a reconceptualization of these terms is needed to establish qualitative rigour. This

study used the evaluative criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1988) to ensure the research's trustworthiness. Their criteria involved establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section explains the techniques I used to achieve the criteria in this qualitative research study.

#### 4.5.1 Credibility

Credibility is a crucial component of research. Credibility includes the researcher's ability to capture the real and complete meaning of the participants' experiences and the researcher's capacity to communicate the participants' perspectives (Hernández et al., 2010). I used member-checking as the primary technique to ensure credibility in this study.

Member-checking was applied by involving the participants in the data analysis stage to confirm that the analysis was consistent with their perceptions of the context under study (Given, 2008). Member-checking allows researchers to correct errors and wrong interpretations and provides participants with a chance to assess data's adequacy and to stimulate them to give feedback on particular aspects of the researcher's interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

#### 4.5.2 Transferability

In a statistical sense, generalization is not one of the qualitative research objectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, qualitative researchers must include some transferability techniques in their studies. Transferability means that "the results of the research can be transferred to other contexts and situations beyond the scope of the study context" (Given, 2008, p. 886) in a way that the "relevance of the findings is shared with broader social audiences" (Dahler-Larsen, 2018, p. 1500).

To achieve the transferability criteria, I used the thick description technique. Thick description originated in ethnography and involved describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail so that the conclusions drawn can be evaluated and are transferable to different times, situations, and people (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of a case study

research design is also consistent with this criterion because it allows researchers to capture unique pieces of information that otherwise would be lost in large-scale data-collection and analysis.

### 4.5.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of the findings. The dependability of qualitative studies “recognizes that the research context is evolving and cannot be completely understood a priori as a singular moment in time” (Given, 2008, p. 208). To face this constraint, dependability builds on using relevant methodologies to ensure that the results are linked to the data and are an authentic expression of the participants’ meaning. I worked closely with a supervisory committee during the entire duration of the study. These readers helped me by applying an inquiry-audit technique designed to increase the dependability of the project. An inquiry audit necessitates having at least one independent researcher examining the process and the research study results. The purpose of including additional researchers is to determine whether the interpretations and conclusions are supported by the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher must keep track of all the changes and alterations to the research design as a result of qualitative studies’ changing context (see audit trail in section 4.5.4). The independent researcher also reviewed these changes to evaluate the methodological and theoretical foundations of the changes and the revealed data (Given, 2008).

### 4.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Confirmability ensures that the study’s findings are defined by the data generated by the participants and not by the researcher's motivations, interests, or biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several techniques promote confirmability in qualitative research, but I used an *audit trail*, *triangulation*, and *reflexivity* for this study.

Cohen et al. (2018) asserted that audit trails enable researchers to “address the issue of confirmability of results, in terms of process and product” (p. 271). An audit trail is a

transparent record of the research steps taken from the start of a study to the reporting of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The purpose of using audit trails was to provide a clear description of the research path, including the rationale for any decisions and changes in how data was analyzed and reported.

Triangulation is another technique to increase the trustworthiness of a study. Its popularity is based on the premise that a single method or data-collection technique is not enough to provide an adequate comprehension of a phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Multiple data sources are a distinctive feature of case study research that also enhances data trustworthiness (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This research included the analysis of the quality assurance policy documents and semi-structured interviews with the participants. Both sources were examined simultaneously, using the techniques described in section 4.4.3 so that their results could be contrasted.

The last confirmability technique used in this study was reflexivity. Reflexivity is described as the “qualitative researchers’ engagement of continuous examination and explanation of how they have influenced a research project” (Given, 2008, p. 747). Hernández et al. (2010) also suggested that researchers need to be conscious of how they can influence and be influenced by the participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose a brief report in manuscripts and other publications, including the researchers’ preconceptions, values, beliefs, and positionality that can influence the research process.

## 4.6 Ethical considerations

Ethics practices are generally defined as "norms of conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2012, p. 64). Brinkman (2018) has observed some researchers’ tendency to consider qualitative studies inherently ethical, or at least more ethical than quantitative studies (this view is referred to as “qualitative ethicism”). That said, he warns about how some characteristics of qualitative studies, such as the asymmetrical power relations, the unidirectional dialogue, and, in the case of interviews, the interviewer’s monopoly of the interpretation, may

cause shortcomings if researchers fail to address the inherent power plays of qualitative research and the cultural contexts of the study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005).

To address these concerns, this study followed the protocols defined in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* ([TCPS2] Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). According to the TCPS2, applying three core principles (respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice) allows researchers to balance serving the legitimate requirements of research and providing appropriate protection for participants.

Following the approval of Western University's ethics board, I proceeded to contact the participant institutions. In the researcher's experience with Ecuadorian higher education, and after reviewing the four public regional universities' organizational charts in Manabí Province, none of them had an ethics board for non-medical research. This was confirmed with the universities, and the permission of the highest authority—the university rector (president)—was received in the form of a letter before the data collection was carried out.

After access to the institutions was gained, study participants received a letter of information and consent (LOI/C) explaining the potential benefits and any possible risks derived from this study. The letter also included information about the study's purpose, strategies to ensure confidentiality, the procedure for the participants' voluntary withdrawal from the study, and the investigator's contact information to answer any questions the participants may have had.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the interviews occurred virtually through video conferences. The time and place were set according to the participants' availability. Data gathered in the interviews, and the document revision was stored in an encrypted and password-protected laptop computer. Participants' direct identifiers were removed from the resulting data and replaced with a code to ensure confidentiality. All digital backups were saved on dedicated external USB storage devices. Both the USB

devices and any hard copies generated as a backup were stored securely in the researcher's home office. As requested in Western's NMREB (Non-Medical Research Ethics Board): Confidentiality and Data Security Guidelines, this study's information will be retained for seven (7) years from collection. After that period, all the information will be securely destroyed following Western University's recommended practices for destroying data and/or data devices.

## 4.7 Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological design and explained the procedures for participant recruitment, data collection and analysis. In addition, this section explains the techniques used to achieve trustworthiness. The next chapter describes in detail the results of the data coding.

## Chapter 5

### 5 Findings

This chapter has two sections: The first includes a summary of the participants' demographics, and the second illustrates the results of the data coding.

#### 5.1 Participants' demographics

This section offers some details about the nine administrators selected for this study. Table 6 shows their gender, age group, and years of experience in their administrative position. The information in Table 6 is organized by participant groups instead of individuals. The data was aggregated to avoid including any directly or indirectly identifiable information that could threaten the anonymity of participants.

All the participants were administrators directly involved in enacting the national research quality assurance policy within their institutions. They oversaw either the research office or the quality assurance office in their respective universities. The roles, functions and responsibilities of the positions occupied by the participants have been described in section 1.3.

Table 6: *Participants' demographics*

<b>Participant Group</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Time in role (Range)</b>
Research office	3	2	41-65	Four months – 12 years
Quality assurance office	3	1	31-65	Three months – Five years

The final sample was composed of nine individuals, six self-identified as women and three self-identified as men. Their academic backgrounds were diverse, and included expertise in agriculture, education, business administration, telecommunications, marketing, and forestry sciences.

## 5.2 Overview of the key analytical themes

As explained in Section 4.4.3, the analysis of the interviews and the policy documents used two different types of coding (deductive and inductive) combined in a blended approach. The first coding cycle of the transcripts followed a deductive coding approach based on the theoretical framework defined in Chapter 3. In this type of coding, the researcher starts the process with existing categories and then looks at the data to see if the reports from the participants fit the previously defined topics. The answers of the participants were coded into the following themes:

- 1) *The “capitals” of quality assurance in Ecuadorian higher education.* This theme describes the different forms of “currency” that actors (both the institutions and individuals) in the Ecuadorian higher education field consider valuable. Using Bourdieu’s (1986) definition of capitals, this code is not limited to economic capital but also includes cultural and social capital.
- 2) *The ‘field’ of research in Ecuadorian higher education in the context of quality assurance.* This theme describes how quality assurance and higher education regulations shape the social context of research where actors interact in Ecuadorian higher education. This code also elaborates on the demands of quality assurance to the universities in Manabí and how the existing regulations affect professors’ motivation to do research.
- 3) *The ‘habitus’ of Manabí Universities.* In this theme, participants talk about the culture around quality in the universities in Manabí, the difficulties caused by the regulations for workload, and the different strategies they have adopted to face external examination.

After completing the deductive coding, I conducted a second coding cycle following an inductive approach. Using this approach, researchers identify themes that emerge as they read to extract meaning from the data. The inductive analysis produced these additional themes:



- 4) *The Regional Role of the Universities in Manabí.* This theme focuses on the local contributions of Manabí and their regional relevance. Participants emphasized the need for Manabí Universities to respond to the local needs, improving the quality of life of the impoverished communities surrounding these institutions.
- 5) *The challenge of measuring research performance.* In this theme, participants reflected on the use of publications as the primary form of research performance metric. They also detailed how using performance metrics to define budget allocation affects the universities' ability to conduct research.
- 6) *Criticisms of quality assurance practices in Ecuadorian higher education.* Although some participants recognize the benefits of the quality assurance regulations for organizational performance, other participants warn about various negative consequences of these policies, such as the increased workload, the limited number of journals in which to publish, and the lack of responsiveness in the policy development and review process. Participants expressed concern that their suggestions for improvement were not incorporated into the quality assurance policy.
- 7) *The definition of quality in Manabí universities.* Defining quality is a challenging task, and this difficulty is particularly noticeable in the vast number of approaches that different authors have developed to explain quality as a concept (see Section 2.1). In this theme, participants described the meaning of quality for their respective institutions.

The following sections will elaborate on each of the different themes defined in the first rounds of coding.

## 5.2.1 The ‘capitals’ of quality assurance in Ecuadorian higher education

Using a Bourdieusian (1986) theoretical lens for studying capitals, this section describes the various social and cultural “currencies” shaped by the quality assurance policy in the field of Ecuadorian higher education.

### 5.2.1.1 Cultural capital

Participants identified three main topics when discussing the dominant forms of cultural capital in academia. This section shows how regional universities in Manabí have reacted to the importance of PhD degrees in the quality assurance policy. In addition, participants noted that foreign professors seem to have an advantage when facing the requirements of the quality assurance policy. Lastly, according to participants, the performance of researchers could be affected by their employment status (tenure versus yearly contract).

#### *The research production of PhD professors (researchers)*

The quality assurance policy has always included an indicator that measures the number of PhD professors a university must have enrolled. In the evaluation model used by CACES (2015, p. 12) in 2015, a PhD degree was worth 60% more than a master's degree when calculating the indicator's outcome. The most recent version of the evaluation model (CACES, 2019b) attributes even more value to PhD degrees (80% more than master's degrees), increasing the expectations for universities in Ecuador.

Universities only had two alternatives to respond to the demands of the quality assurance policy: supporting their professors in pursuing a PhD degree or hiring new professors with an already completed one. Unfortunately, the first option would require a few years to attain, pushing universities to hire new professors instead. Participant 5 explains: “[S]ome universities, especially in Quito and Guayaquil, started hiring many researchers with not just a huge, but an enormous amount of publications. They arrived and just started publishing with the institution's name, which gave these universities an

advantage”. Clearly, the economic power and the privileged location of national universities make it easier for them to attract and retain qualified faculty.

Even with limited resources, universities in Manabí started planning and investing to allow their professors to obtain PhD degrees in different countries. Having faculty who hold a PhD is vital for the institutions because “PhDs are usually more analytical, more focused on research and details” (Participant 8). This focus on hiring PhD professors who will engage in research comes with new hopes of universities to increase their number of publications: “[S]ome professors in our university are completing their PhD, that will increase research inside the classrooms and the number of publications in our university” (Participant 1). Participant 5 provided a concrete example of how the PhD training is changing the research performance of their faculty: “[H]e [one of the professors of their university] is enrolled in a PhD program. Obviously, that helps a lot because he receives a series of guidelines from his supervisor... [T]his has allowed him to open his horizons because he was not producing five years ago”. Some participants supported the influence of PhD professors in the current research production of universities. Participant 7 pointed out that in this relationship: “We have more than 200 [exact number changed to protect participant identity] professors with a PhD degree in our university. This explains the [high] number of research projects and publications we have”. Participant 3 suggested that professors with a PhD degree are leading research practices: “PhDs are leading research groups, that’s how research production is internally regulated in our university”. Participants seem to generally have higher expectations from professors with a PhD degree.

There was only one contrasting view in the participant pool. For Participant 6, performance is not determined by a professor's degree, as they exemplified: “[Y]ou can see the quality of the research projects proposed for funding. Some teams are composed exclusively of PhDs, but sometimes their degrees are not reflected in the quality of the project. On the other hand, I’ve seen projects with master’s and contract faculty, and the quality is superior”.

### *Foreign versus local researchers*

The pressure of the quality assurance policy to increase the number of professors with a PhD degree in the universities of Manabí motivated universities to look for new professors outside Ecuador's borders. Participant 5 explained: “[S]ince 2012, and about two years before the national evaluation process of 2015, it became widely popular to hire Cuban professors in the universities of Manabí”. It should be noted that the origins of this trend in hiring foreign professors coincide with the dates of the implementation of the institutional evaluation models

There is still debate inside the academic community about whether universities should hire foreign professors, motivated mainly by the limited number of positions available. Participant 2 attributes this strategy to the urgency created by the quality assurance policy: “[F]or some people this is bad, for others it is good, hiring foreign PhDs. The quality assurance policy directly influenced this. We had an evaluation model that measured the number of PhDs, and we couldn't just make them appear. We needed to import them to comply [with the quality assurance policy]”. In addition to the policy's pressure, the main advantages of foreign professors over local ones are that they seemed to rely on their previous academic experience and backgrounds. Participant 1 shared that their university has professors from Cuba and Venezuela that show an outstanding research performance (judged by the number of publications). Their performance results from being “trained in universities in countries where research is well developed”. Participant 4 echoed this claim and added that “foreigners have had it easier [to comply with the quality assurance policy] so far. Why? because they were already trained when they arrived here”. For the universities in Manabí, it can be argued that foreign professors provided an effective short-term solution to increase their faculty quality indicators. The long-term effects of these hiring strategies are yet to be determined.

### *Tenured vs. contract faculty (lecturers)*

The last determinant element of cultural capital for research practices is the possession of a tenured position. On the one hand, doing research helps professors gain status and higher incomes: “[P]rofessors with publications and research experience have the chance of moving to different tenure-track positions and earning a higher salary” (Participant 7). On the other hand, despite the apparent individual benefits, reaching job stability causes professors to relax in their efforts to do research. Participant 1 pointed out that: “because they have reached job stability [tenured professors], they start to forget their mission as professors, which is to foster research by themselves and with the students”. Participant 6 argued: “In this university, there has always been a difference between tenured and under contract faculty. The contract faculty works more than the tenured ones. Why? It’s a matter of survival, I could say”. Apparently, contracted professors need to do extra work to complete the tasks and responsibilities that tenured professors refuse to do.

#### 5.2.1.2 Economic capital

Universities in Manabí have limited resources, and they face constant budgetary constraints that affect research processes and outcomes. Some projects have been delayed or even stopped as a consequence of this lack of funding: “[W]e did not have any resources [in 2019 and 2020], our research projects had to remain on hold, nothing was done” (Participant 1); “[L]ast year we made some adjustments to the research budget and because of the lack of resources we had to close a few projects” (Participant 4).

There seems to be an explicit dependency on the government for funding research initiatives inside the universities of Manabí. Participant 1 asserted that the current levels of funding are insufficient: “[W]e are quite limited by the budget reductions to all universities”. Participant 5 added that their university struggles to provide proper funding for all active projects: “[W]ith the budget we get, it is hard to distribute it among all [research] projects”. For Participant 4, an alternative is to move from government funding to another form of external financing: “[W]e need to start thinking about looking for

resources from other institutions, non-governmental institutions, external organizations”. Participant 7 reflected on a disadvantage of regional universities in the province: “[I]t is hard to get external funding if your institution does not have a large trajectory in research”. These claims emphasize the need to consider universities’ size, age, and context to define quality outcomes and funding allocation.

As explained in section 5.2.5, the existing research allocation policy (CES, 2019) could be increasing the financial challenges of universities in the province: “[F]or the past years, if we talk about the universities in general, there has been a policy, I could say, that has prevented resources to come for the development of research”. Participant 7 illustrated how different the regional and national universities’ budgets are: “We have quite a limited budget. Our budget is one-third of the budget of other universities [national universities] in the country”. On the other hand, Participant 4 expressed that “there are a few policies that need to be changed, but our universities also need to learn how to manage their resources”, showing some self-criticism and partially attributing the economic difficulties to the way resources are distributed inside the universities.

Lastly, the lack of resources is impacting the development of research infrastructure. For the participants, infrastructure is a fundamental component of doing research. According to Participant 5, universities need resources to “build laboratories, build a series of research spaces on moving forward”. The same participant also pointed out that infrastructure is vital to provide visibility to research outcomes through publications: “the moment I want to publish in Q1 [quartile 1], we need the results endorsed by a certified laboratory. If they are not endorsed, they will definitely not receive our publication in Q1. And that is visibility”. Unfortunately, with the limited budget of regional universities in Manabí, they are not able to build infrastructure like the national universities do. Participant 8 provides an example: “[T]he laboratory that UNIV38 [comparing to a national university] is built for 500 students, and we need the same lab for 150 students. The lab and the conditions are the same, but our money is not enough; we are halfway there”. Even when the cost of building one laboratory for the two universities in the

participant's example is the same, the percentage of their budget needed for the construction is significantly higher for regional universities because of their reduced funding.

### 5.2.1.3 Social capital

According to the participants, at the individual level, the most representative elements of social capital are the relationships researchers have with the industry, their alma mater, or their countries of origin, in the case of foreign professors. Additionally, at an institutional level, the participants argued in favour of developing strategic inter-institutional partnerships.

Making connections with Ecuador's industry and business sector seems to be complicated. About this difficulty, Participant 5 said: “[T]here is apathy from the government and the business sector when we try to engage them in research. Unfortunately, they don't accept easily”. Under these conditions, researchers in the universities of Manabí use their ties with industry to produce research outcomes and to secure external funding for research initiatives: “We have colleagues that had a successful performance in the institutions they worked before coming to the university. That [experience] has enabled them to position themselves with certain sectors” (Participant 3). These researchers can also make progress without depending exclusively on the government funding: “...[T]hey have this strength, unlike other professors who always depend on the institutional infrastructure and funding allocation” (Participant 3). The quality assurance policy favours universities with a larger number of full-time professors, which can be good because professors can spend more time working with students and doing research. However, on the other hand, apparently, full-time professors lose their ties with the industrial sector, resulting in fewer opportunities to capture external funding.

Keeping communication and collaboration with their alma mater or country of origin is another source of opportunity. For participant 9, “the involvement of researchers with

other universities gives them a wider discretion”. Focused on research outcomes, Participant 6 strongly argues: “[T]he results show me that we have about eight professors on the top levels [in terms of the number of publications], and six of them are foreigners. We have analyzed this, and [the advantage they have] is their relationship with their countries of origin or the scientific community”. Participant 6 even provides a concrete example of how international relations can be used for institutional purposes. When setting the goals of the yearly research plan, they included publications in SCOPUS indexed journals as a primary target of their institutional research performance evaluation:

“When we talked about SCOPUS, people got nervous. I suggested one [paper] by each faculty. One of the professors in natural sciences said to me: [...] ‘what are you asking? One? We don’t have the resources to do that!’. I told him: Doctor, you have friends abroad, don’t you? We need to use those allies. They can help us. If we don’t have a wide experience, [we need to ask for help from] our allies, our friends. He told me: ‘I have friends in Brazil’. Well, let’s start with Brazil, and Brazil has a SCOPUS-indexed journal. Let’s start there”. (Participant 6)

Regional universities rely on inter-institutional partnerships to get funding and boost research outcomes. Participant 4 stated that “another way to secure resources is through strategic partnerships”. For Participant 9, collaboration and inter-institutional partnerships should be mandatory for research projects: “[H]ow can a project be approved if it is not part of a network?”. Participant 4 sees collaboration as a significant opportunity for higher education institutions: “We have an opportunity working with external organizations. We need to develop a culture of project development in collaboration with [external] organizations, consortia, or other universities”. The universities' efforts have already shown results: “We are working internationally with NGOs” (Participant 8). Participant 7 reported some numbers to support the benefits of external cooperation: “We currently have around 24 externally funded projects. This result attests to the efforts we have made to connect with other institutions and seek external resources”. Continuing



with this topic, the quality assurance policy was accused of obstructing the collaboration among the universities in the province. For participant 9, thanks to the policy, universities in Manabí “are fighting against each other”, and the evaluation model needs to “make a significant leap, I mean, stop measuring a particular university, and start measuring globally the universities of Manabí and how they have strategically partnered for the development of the province”. According to the participants, regional universities in Manabí have traditionally collaborated with each other. However, this is changing due to the implementation of the quality assurance policy.

### 5.2.2 The ‘field’ of Ecuadorian higher education research in the quality assurance context

The quality assurance policy sets the rules for developing research in Ecuadorian higher education. The introduction of the evaluation model made universities react by creating their own internal policies. When asked how much national policy influences internal policy development, Participant 1 said: “[Y]es, it had some influence. We worked on increasing those [external evaluation] scores because, to be honest, they were pretty low. Then we created policies with that purpose”. On the other hand, Participant 7 answered: “We have never used the quality assurance policy as a reference [for internal policy construction]. Our goal was always to pursue quality and do things properly. We have relied on our research experience”. Participant 5 added: “[T]he evaluation model was of secondary importance for us because we had a clear idea that we needed to implement our internal quality management system”. These last two participants showed how other universities have chosen to develop internal policies based on their experience.

Nonetheless, despite creating new policies based on their knowledge, universities still need to incorporate the evaluation model in their day-to-day practices. Participant 4 explained: “[W]e must do it. We give priority to that [the national quality assurance policy] regardless of other initiatives we are also working on”. Although Participant 5 claimed the quality assurance policy as not being of a strong influence, they recognize that they still need to follow CACES regulations: “[W]e obviously need to measure

research according to their formula, the guidelines of CACES”. The universities in Manabí need to follow these guidelines because they can affect their funding. After all, as explained in section 5.2.5, the outcomes of the quality assurance processes are linked to the funding allocation regulation.

According to participants, the main benefit quality assurance has brought for universities is related to planning. Participant 6 explained: “[Q]uality assurance compels us to be more disciplined, have more defined goals and activities, and monitor our action plans”. Participant 8 concluded: “[P]olicy has helped us to have better planning”.

Quality assurance policy has not been static in the last several years. Changes in regulations mean changes in the “rules of the game” for universities. There are some complaints about sudden changes in the evaluation model: “Changes happen so fast, I mean, we start working in one way, and six months later, the evaluation model is out, and it’s difficult to translate those policies inside the university” (Participant 8). Participant 3 warns about the possible consequences: “[I]f the rules are not clear from the beginning, I think universities are harmed”. As a response, universities are trying to anticipate the changes in the regulations: “[I]f we have based our work on the evaluation model, with the latest changes it had, I’m sure our evaluation would be bad” (Participant 7). Universities are trying to be more proactive, but it should be the responsibility of CACES to set clear and stable rules to help them achieve their quality goals.

Policy demands are putting a lot of pressure on universities. Even though the universities recognize a positive influence of the evaluation model, they feel the focus of the evaluations is creating a contested scenario between CACES and the higher education institutions. Participant 8 compared external evaluations with lawsuits: “They ask for countless documents, and as in a legal case, if you leave a gap, they will use it to attack you [the university]”; “[CACES] pressures us to produce pieces of evidence [reports, minutes] of all the processes that we are executing” (Participant 1). The policy also creates different expectations for professors. For instance, according to the quality assurance policy, every professor at the universities in Manabí needs to produce research

outcomes. Participant 2 argues in favour of letting professors dedicate themselves to the activities they feel more comfortable with: “We have groups of professors that have expressed they do not want to do research. I should not have to force them to do research because they could dedicate their time to teaching”. This finding is consistent with the claims of participants in Section 5.2.7, where they demanded more autonomy for researchers.

Adding to this, the quality assurance policy is changing the motivation of professors to do research. According to Participant 1, a professor’s motivation “is not to do appropriate research originating from their teaching activities, but to comply with the policy”. The demands of the quality assurance policy cause some rejection: “[T]he only thing it [the external evaluation model] has done is to add more pressure for professors to publish” (Participant 5). “Something that bothers researchers is asking them to do something because CACES is requesting it” (Participant 8). Instead of pursuing their intellectual curiosity or finding solutions to social problems, researchers find themselves cornered to produce outcomes just to comply with the evaluation model.

Another big concern is the contradiction between the quality assurance policy that demands fast outcomes and greater fluidity in the processes and the bureaucratic procedures. There seems to be a disconnection between the Ecuadorian institutions in charge of procurement and intellectual property that slow down the progress of research practices in Ecuadorian higher education. “It is very complicated to buy goods and equipment through the government procurement system” (Participant 7). The Ecuadorian Procurement System is centralized, regulated by the National System of Government Procurement Act (Registro Oficial Ecuador, 2021), and managed by the SERCOP [National Service of Government Procurement]. The SERCOP links together the contracting public institutions and the qualified bidders, which aims to guarantee that the contracting processes are efficient and objective.

However, in reality, the work of the SERCOP has been criticized because it can cause delays in the execution of research activities. Participant 3 provided an example: “[A]ll

the government procurement requirements are too cumbersome. So far, we are in August, and we haven't executed [research activities] because of a new process implemented by SERCOP". Apparently, this is a recurring problem, causing universities to readapt their processes. Participant 6 described a typical timeline for research acquisitions:

"[G]overnment procurement has caused us many problems. You lose the first quarter; you always lose it. The process starts in the second [quarter]. Just by mid-June or July, you take the first steps. You get the items in August". All the public universities in Manabí conduct research on crops, livestock, and forestry. Timing is essential for these types of research projects. Having these kinds of bureaucratic obstacles can seriously jeopardize their research results.

Unfortunately, problems do not end with procurement. Even when results have been produced, universities face additional challenges to protect the intellectual property of their research outcomes: "[W]e have a national organization [SENADI, National Service of Intellectual Property] that does not facilitate our work on copyrighting products or services derived from research activities" (Participant 3). Participants noted that higher education institutions in Ecuador need to align their efforts to promptly address the challenges related to the protection of their intellectual property.

### 5.2.3 The "habitus" of Manabí Universities

#### *Quality culture*

Creating an organizational culture around the notion of quality is one of the objectives of quality assurance administrators. Some universities claim they already have achieved that, and others say they are still working on it. Participant 1 explained that they are focusing their efforts on "making quality a culture inside the institution. That way, it will not be necessary to perform excessively frequent internal evaluations or wait for CACES to be accredited". Participant 3 highlighted that the "development of a quality culture among the faculty" is one of the most significant achievements within their institution. Participant 1 said: "[O]ur methodology to develop a quality culture inside our institution

is the periodic self-assessment of all processes... We run internal evaluations every three months, which allowed us to obtain the accreditation in the external evaluation of 2019". This participant highlighted the importance of running regular self-assessment exercises to maintain the quality assurance processes up to date.

### ***Workload distribution***

According to participants, there is not enough time dedicated to research activities: "[W]e need to recognize that a big problem in the higher education system is the workload distribution" (Participant 8). Professors struggle to include research among their long list of responsibilities: "I believe all universities have problems with the workload. Professors are 'suffocated' because they have to balance their time among teaching, research, social engagement, and administrative tasks" (Participant 3). This limitation on their assigned workload had pushed some professors to pursue their research interests outside of their working hours: "We had professors who did research before but outside of their working hours, just because they liked, or they wanted to do it" (Participant 2). Participant 9 shared the testimony of one of their professors: "I haven't continued [doing research] because of the institutional conditions. I have too much of a workload dedicated to teaching that is impossible for me". But what is limiting the ability of universities to allocate enough time to research activities is not a lack of will. Participant 4 recognized the possible benefits of having professors dedicated to research: "[W]e don't have 'pure researchers". We have professors who do research, and we could benefit more from their work if they could dedicate themselves to research". Participant 8 detailed their experience visiting foreign universities: "I've seen that in foreign universities, the number of hours dedicated to teaching is very low. The professors only have one class or one subject with only one classroom, but in Ecuador it is very different". This comment reflects the participants' call for greater autonomy for researchers to pursue their intellectual interests.

Ecuadorian universities are interested in giving professors more time to do research. Still, they are constrained by the existing regulations: "[R]esearchers have limited time to do

research... Researchers would like to have more time to do research, but the university needs to comply with the national regulations for workload distribution” (Participant 3). For instance, the Regulation for Professors’ Career and Pay Scales (Reglamento de Carrera y Escalafon Del Profesor de Educacion Superior, 2019 art. 4) sets to 24 the number of classroom hours professors could be assigned weekly, leaving only 16 hours for the remaining activities (lecture preparation, individual and group tutoring, marking and grading), let alone doing research.

### *Strategies*

Universities have developed different strategies to cope with the requirements of the quality assurance policy. The first one is a permanent revision of their internal regulations: “[W]e get together three hours every week to discuss the institutional research policies and research processes, and we update those processes from our research practices” (Participant 3). The results of these revisions sometimes lead to additional pressure for the researchers. Participant 1 provided specific details: “We increased the percentage of the research component [in the professors’ performance assessment] from 20% to 40%, that is the maximum allowed in the regulation. With this change, we are trying to promote research among all professors, tenured or contract”. This shows how some universities give research a heavier weight in performance evaluations.

In addition, they are using the order of authorship to define the value of a publication for the internal performance evaluation: “100 points for the first author of a certain book or paper, 75 for the second author, the third author 55 and I believe it is 45 for the fourth author because the policy only allows four authors per publication”. The evaluation model (CACES, 2019b, p. 88, footnote 63) suggests that any publication allowing more than four authors with affiliation with an Ecuadorian university should be questioned, marking the journal as a possible predatory journal. This could limit the work of large research groups and the disposition of institutions to engage in more extensive and complex research projects.

Other participants acknowledged technology as valuable to help the universities score higher in the evaluation processes: “[W]e created a computer system to manage research. In this computer system, we can record and monitor research projects, and researchers can report on their activities and publications. With this system, it is easy for us to create reports” (Participant 7). Lastly, for Participant 2, universities need to be more flexible with the professors’ schedules: “[W]e need to relax the control over the researchers, relax in the sense of not setting a schedule over their research activities”. Participant 2 also provided an example:

To comply with working regulations, we usually say to researchers: ok, you have two hours to do research on Monday, 4 hours on Tuesday, on Wednesday you have one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon. Then, researchers cannot do research in one hour, they cannot do research in two hours, and maybe they cannot do research at 10 am when someone is coming, and someone else is leaving. (Participant 2).

Under these conditions, doing research is a challenging task for the professors in the universities of Manabí. Despite the efforts of universities to incorporate technological solutions, it is necessary to adapt the quality assurance policy to the specific challenges of regional universities. A change in the policy could allow universities to effectively manage their faculty and help them produce reliable and relevant research outcomes.

#### 5.2.4 The regional role of the universities in Manabí

Universities in Ecuador are expected to be relevant within their regional and national contexts. The principle of relevance is defined in the Ecuadorian Higher Education Act as to how universities “respond to the expectations and needs of society...To this end, higher education institutions will integrate their teaching, research, and engagement with society to the demands for academic programs; to the need for local, regional, and national development...” (Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior (LOES) [Higher Education Act], 2010 Art. 170). When asked about the definition of quality for their institutions, most participants related quality to local impact and relevance. Participant 4 explained: “From a conceptual standpoint, research can only be successful when it solves

a community problem”. Participants in this study demonstrated a high degree of awareness regarding the importance of the link between their universities and their local communities.

For the participants, it is crucial to influence their immediate context through research. Participant 5 claimed: “[R]esearch projects should provide a solution to local problems necessarily”. Participant 4 added that “research must be predisposed to actually solve the social problems, to improve their quality of life”. Participant 6 agreed with this last claim and highlighted that universities “must change the current state of local communities”. And Participant 7 suggested that “generally speaking, we value any research initiative that contributes to science, and contributes to solving the problems of our community”. More focused on the funding of research, Participant 6 stated that “research must be [contextually] relevant. If the research initiatives are not relevant, the university will not invest in them because they will not generate a benefit for society”. For these participants, the impact on local communities defines the value of research initiatives, which must guide the predisposition of universities to allocate funds for their execution.

Public universities in Manabí are concerned about contributing to their local communities and how those communities perceive them. For Participant 2, universities must measure “the level of satisfaction local communities have about the work [in terms of research] our professors are doing”. Participant 5 highlighted how vital the communities are for universities: “[W]e see successful results when the community or the research location receives the benefits of research, and we see the results on the field”. Participant 9 concluded that “we’d like people to clearly understand that our university’s administration and research are aimed at our province’s development”. The participants’ comments emphasize the importance of producing research outcomes that directly impact the local communities. However, as discussed below, quality assurance policy measures use a different metric to measure research success, namely publications.

Although the participants recognized the importance of publishing books and papers, some participants questioned the excessive focus of the quality assurance model on



increasing the number of publications. Interviewees highlighted how crucial it is to change from knowledge production to knowledge mobilization. For example, the national quality assurance policy attaches considerable importance to publishing papers in journals indexed on SCOPUS or Web of Science. The participants recognized that publishing in such journals is essential. However, this should not be the sole purpose of research: "[U]niversities should actually solve social problems and go beyond scientific papers" (Participant 4). Participant 6 added: "[A] paper is good for a scientific level, for those like us who have access to scientific papers or are linked to academia, but the farmer on the field won't have access to that paper". Participant 8 considered that "successful research projects need to produce an impact. I am not just talking about generating scientific publications, I'm talking about producing improvements [in the research locations]". Participant 9 used wordplay to highlight the significance of interacting with the communities; they said: "[W]e need to publish, of course, it is an outcome. However, that should not be the fundamental part. [...] Our former rector [president of the university] used to say: 'They take me to the SKY [wordplay, SKY translates very similar to SciELO (a database of journals) in Spanish. The word for sky in Spanish is "Cielo"]', but I'm not solving anything on the field". There was also some self-criticism too on some participants. They recognized that they were making "big efforts to strengthen the integration of research and the engagement with society to deal with knowledge mobilization and impact evaluation in a better way" (Participant 3). Despite their progress in research production, they still need to engage in a meaningful "search for societal needs to address them directly" (Participant 2). Participant 4 recognized that they are "missing a better relationship with external organizations to understand the demands of society so that we can act on those demands from the academia". From these responses, it could be argued that articulating an understanding of the current needs of their communities is a common goal of regional universities in Manabí.

Lastly, it was observed that it is impossible to achieve local impact without the appropriate funding. According to Participant 5, the requirements of the quality assurance model are not aligned with the resources available for research in universities: "[T]hey

say: you need to have research projects, papers, and books. The thing is that these requirements need to be tied with a proper budget that allows us to showcase our research and achieve local impact”. The research initiatives in Manabí universities seem strongly constrained by the limited resources available for research and the way research performance is measured in the quality assurance policy. The following section will explore the way universities have reacted to the research performance measure indicators.

### 5.2.5 The challenge of measuring research performance

Given the diversity of the academic offering and the research priorities of Manabí universities, measuring their performance is a complex task. These regional universities are strongly committed to their local communities; however, the evaluation criteria try to make them respond to globally standardized research outcomes (such as different forms of peer-reviewed publications). Regarding the relevance of publications, Participant 4 commented: “It shouldn’t be only publications, but how much impact research is generating in the immediate context”. Participant 2 also explained: “[A]s with everything, we need to start with something. So far, what’s been measured is how much I’m producing [number of publications], but not the impact I’m generating in the local context”. Participants seem to reject publishing as the primary form of performance measurement and argue that their context requires more flexible and customized evaluation methods.

According to the participants, a change is needed. They argue that publishing should be seen as an intermediate step and not the final research goal within their institutions. Participant 3 extended on this claim: “[T]he evaluation model has pushed us to assess the impact based on the number of publications... the outcomes are focused on publishing papers and books. Still, they don’t measure the impact on the productive sector, or any other sector relevant for the academic domains of the university”. Participant 6 provided an example: “[W]e performed control of [agricultural] plagues and diseases, and we

could publish this in quartile<sup>2</sup> 1 of natural sciences. We value it because it is in quartile 1, but we would give it more value if that result were in the community”. The participants were of one mind in the belief that research without proper knowledge mobilization is less relevant, given the mission and vision of the universities in the province.

Furthermore, participants reported some contradictions in how quality assurance processes measure research performance. The Higher Education Act in Ecuador requires universities to integrate their three “substantive functions”, but the evaluation model assesses them separately. This separation causes internal competition among the different areas of the universities to produce and gather evidence of their work. “On the one hand, they ask us for integration [speaking about CACES], but on the other hand, everyone [speaking about the internal areas of the university] is constantly fighting against each other to show ‘information sources’ [pieces of evidence, according to CACES] to fulfill their indicators” (Participant 3). Universities are reacting, including clauses in professors' contracts to force them to publish: “[C]ontracted instructors need to publish a paper [for each term they are hired]” (Participant 1). It could be argued that universities expect all their professors to publish individually. Participant 1 expanded on this idea: “There are some instructors who deliver the same paper [to the quality assurance office], there are four of them, and with that, they have already complied. That’s one article for four people. It would be ideal one paper for each”. This pressure, motivated by the quality

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<sup>2</sup> SCOPUS and Web of Science organize and rank journals using quartiles. According to their Journal Impact Factor (JIF), a journal could be placed into Q1 (quartile 1), Q2 (Quartile 2), Q3 (quartile 3) or Q4 (quartile 4) in their respective field. Being in Q1 means that a “journal’s impact factor is within the top 25 % of the JIF distribution of a certain category, and quartile 4 (Q4) means it is within the lowest 25% of the JIF distribution” (Liu et al., 2016, p. 1274)

assurance process, and enforced through faculty contracts, could potentially threaten collaborative work.

### ***Working with performance-based research funding***

Quality assurance influences research practices in Ecuadorian universities in different ways. One of them is linking the quality assurance processes' outcomes to funding allocation, as determined by the Higher Education Council in the Resource Allocation Regulation (CES, 2013, 2019). Participants recognized that this link between research results and resource allocation is causing budgetary restraints that threaten new and ongoing research projects and initiatives. Participant 5 contrasted their university with one of the top-ranked universities in the country, pointing out that “we have around 5,000 students and we receive a budget of around 11 million dollars per year. Just to have something to compare with, the ESPOL [Coastal Polytechnic Superior School, Spanish acronym] has 10,000 students and a budget of 80 million dollars; therefore, we should receive a larger budget”. These budgetary restraints caused by the performance-based funding approach are a common trend within the universities in Manabí. Participant 2 shared that “resources are scarce... Instead of increasing our budget, it [performance-based funding] reduces it, and this is the experience within public universities”.

Participant 3 provided an example to show how the policy affects universities' budgets: “Budget cuts to universities have caused that internally less budget is assigned [for research]. The budget decreases on a year-to-year basis. [...] In 2009, we had a budget of US\$150,000; right now, we have a budget of around US\$66,000”. Instead of helping universities in Manabí to grow, the link between the quality assurance policy and the resource allocation regulation could be increasing the disparities in the funding and research production between well-funded, high-reputation national universities and young, community-oriented regional universities in the country.

CACES has the exact expectations from all higher education institutions in Ecuador. However, under a performance-based funding model, their circumstances are not always comparable, and they face evaluation processes with different challenges. Participant 5

thought it was unfair to compare “a university of 5,000 students against a university of 30,000 students with totally different budgets. If there are 200 professors here and 5,000 professors there, it is logical that the scientific production will be completely different. The larger quantity is likely to have the greatest impact and a better valuation”. For Participant 9, it is necessary to adapt the evaluation model to assess the work of the universities outside their boundaries. They claimed: “we should be measured according to our context. Things are going to change when the external evaluators (from CACES) come with indicators about our territory, from the sustainable development goals and how the university is contributing to them”. Although the quality assurance policy tries to compensate for the size (in the number of students or professors), it looks like the age and context of the universities are also essential elements that need to be recognized when developing policy. Not identifying these elements could put regional universities in a disadvantaged position.

### 5.2.6 Criticisms to quality assurance practices in Ecuadorian higher education

Although some participants recognized that introducing the quality assurance policy has helped universities consolidate their organizational processes, other participants made several critiques. According to the participants, the most prevalent ones are the increased workload, the limited number of journals researchers can access to publish their work, and the marginalization of regional universities in policy development.

#### *Increased workload*

As a result of the quality assurance policy, professors in Manabí universities face constant pressure to produce and organize documental evidence of their research and teaching activities. Participant 1 warned about the increased workload resulting from quality assurance: “We are very stressed. The information CACES requires is not just two or three spreadsheets; it is a huge amount of information they are asking for. We need to collect, organize, and systematize what’s relevant to upload to the [CACES] system”. These demands even became the focus of research in Participant 9’s university:

“[A] research project was developed about the level of stress quality assurance processes create on the professors”. Participant 5 observes that the additional workload is not a recent problem: “I have been involved in these evaluations for the last five years, and the evaluations have been purely documental”. Evaluations have produced a negative response in the faculty: “professors complain about an excessive focus on writing reports and filling spreadsheets” (Participant 9) and “they [CACES] pressured us to associate quality with including stamps and organizing documents” (Participant 5). As explained in section 5.2.4, regional universities in Manabí are more concerned about generating a positive impact on their communities than producing documents and reports. According to the participants of these universities, the policy should focus on their local contributions.

### *The selection of journals to publish*

The quality assurance policy makes considerable discrimination about the value a publication receives, depending on which database the selected journal is indexed: “[W]e are limited. We need to publish in indexed journals. In the journals defined by CACES because otherwise, they will not value them [for evaluations purposes]” (Participant 1).

This discrimination was both praised and criticized by the participants. For example, Participant 7 argued that the policy should make a more substantial distinction among papers: “[P]ublications should be individually valued by their level, by the journal level. For example, a publication in the top decile should be valued as such”. On the other hand, Participant 3 considers that with the access restrictions to the journals selected by CACES, universities in Manabí should focus on regional journals:

There is a plus [additional value] for publications on journals with an impact factor. We don't completely disagree because we should gain visibility [for their research] with those publications. However, we also value regional publications because we look to make the research results available for our immediate audience, and honestly, not even we as a university have access to those journals you need to pay to read. (Participant 3)

Participant 3 also warned about predatory journals gaining ground in the research practices of the universities in the province: “[T]hey [CACES] pushed us to increase the number of publications. We published, and sometimes it is easy to fall victim to quick-paced publishing processes without a real peer review. They fooled us ...some colleagues fell for these predatory journals”. However, this is not the only problem. Participant 8 explained: There are examples of journals with proper peer review processes not indexed on CACES-defined databases excluded from the results: “[T]hey are not valued. We have to follow the policy guidelines; we can’t go against them” (Participant 8). These responses show that the quality assurance policy strongly constrains the publishing of research produced in Manabí regional universities. More importantly, it is unclear how the CACES journal database is defined, which increases the uncertainty for researchers when selecting journals in which to publish.

### *Silencing the voice of regional universities*

Because of their regional orientation, participants recognized that the universities in Manabí usually perform excellently in the “social engagement” evaluation. Although research and social engagement are intimately related and dependent on each other, participants argued that CACES does not value the contribution of community-focused research initiatives. “Our university has a 100% rate of compliance in social engagement. ...We believe that we have somehow contributed to social engagement's success. Unfortunately, our contribution is not valued [by CACES]” (Participant 3). Participants reiterated their claim for a change in how research performance is measured, and they have expressed the need for a shift in CACES.

Some participants expressed strong concern about their voices not being heard by the regulatory agency: “They called us to ask us what should be included in the evaluation model. We even reached an agreement with all the participants in that session. When we got to see the evaluation model, our suggestions were ignored” (Participant 3). The problem they think is that some universities have more power to define what’s valuable for the Ecuadorian research field: “[W]hen the quality assurance policy is defined from

only one perspective, and they do not take other perspectives into account, the result will not be the most appropriate” (Participant 5). In this participant’s view, quality assurance policy should be constructed by taking into account the different realities of the universities in the country.

In addition, the evaluation model is perceived as restrictive by the participants. Participant 5 argued against using the same set of criteria for all universities in the country: “[A]ll universities are measured with a ‘one size fits all’ approach, demanding a standardized value that obviously we are not in the capacity to achieve”. For Participant 8, external evaluators need to understand that each university can implement quality assurance in their own particular way: “[T]hey [external peer reviewers] don’t have an open mind for things working differently inside our institution”. Participant 9 agreed with this claim and added that “technicians selected by them [CACES] need to understand how universities can contribute to their territories”. Participant 3 shared their experience with external evaluators and their specific requirements regarding documentation: “[H]e said: ‘well, you do a lot but deliver so little [in terms of documental evidence]’. I explained to him that we didn’t have the evaluation model. We didn’t know how they would request the information, and we had to take a guess”. The rules of the evaluation processes can change even when data have been already collected, causing uncertainty for universities about their evaluation outcomes.

The purpose of CACES has also been questioned. Participant 5 pointed out that “ensuring quality is not only about demanding outcomes but maybe implementing a unit inside CACES dedicated to supporting the implementation of the quality assurance policy [inside the universities]”. The participants proposed that the role of CACES should transform itself from controlling and measuring to providing support and guidance.

### 5.2.7 The definition of quality in Manabí universities

The general definition of quality for the universities of Manabí seems to be defined by knowledge production, mobilization, and dissemination. Participant 2 explained: “When



we talk about quality, we talk about a process or activity having certain attributes or [meeting certain] criteria. In research, quality is oriented not only to produce knowledge but also to mobilize that knowledge through teaching in higher education”. Participant 7 echoes this definition and the dissemination component: “[F]irst, research needs to produce new knowledge. Then, that knowledge needs to be applied, and it needs to be disseminated”. This three-step process is always oriented towards the immediate context, producing the knowledge based on the community's needs, mobilizing the knowledge to the students inside the classrooms, and disseminating the knowledge in journals with a regional academic audience.

Participants also identified several critical components to achieving quality in higher education research. According to Participant 3, the most important one is “human talent”. In the Ecuadorian higher education context, the term ‘human talent’ [in Spanish ‘talento humano’. Also translated as “human resources” or “human capital”] refers to the group of workers or collaborators in a specific organization, their academic qualifications, and their work experience. Participant 3 explained: “[W]e need to consider several factors. The first one is human talent; we should have qualified human talent with expertise in research practices”. For participant 5, however, proper funding is crucial: “the quality of research depends... depends a lot on the budget the institution has”. Participant 3 complemented this definition, arguing that human talent requires proper infrastructure to produce outcomes: “...also infrastructure. The scientific infrastructure available for researchers to deliver reliable results”. The last essential component, according to Participant 9, is time. This participant critiqued the excessive focus of quality assurance processes on administrative processes: “For quality, time is a relevant performance indicator; we cannot be wasting time with administrative tasks”. Participants highlighted the need for adequate training, access to research facilities, and flexibility to organize their schedules to produce quality research outcomes.

When providing more specific details about their definition of quality, some of the participants provided a description consistent with the requirements of the quality

assurance policy. For example, Participant 1 cited CACES: “CACES motivates us to improve research quality by publishing in global impact journals [*SCOUPS* and *Web of Science*]”. Participant 5 also argued in favour of publishing as a form of quality: “When we talk about the quality of research, we talk about how institutional research outcomes are made more visible”. Lastly, Participant 7 stressed the importance of research outcomes and provided a list of examples consistent with the evaluation model (CACES, 2019b): “ [The] quality of research refers to research properly conducted. It needs to have a methodology that enables us to produce reliable outcomes. By outcomes, I mean publications, papers, books, book chapters, conference presentations, theses” (Participant 7). These participants articulated in their accounts some of the definitions of research outcomes of the quality assurance policy.

Consistent with their regional role, some participants related the definition of quality inside their institutions with impact and local relevance (for more on this, see section 5.2.4). For Participant 9, the quality of research “...is not just about if I was able to disseminate the results on a SciELO [regional database] journal”. Participant 8 added: “[S]uccessful research projects need to produce an impact. I am not just talking about generating scientific publications, but the impact of improving [the local context of the university] through research activities”. The discussion of “quality as local impact” included some more participants. When asked to conceptualize quality, Participant 6 said: “[T]he principle of quality has a direct connection with answering local, regional and national needs of society”. Participant 9 tried to instrumentalize quality: “[Q]uality in research is basically measuring the contribution [of the university] made through management to local development”. Participant 4 expressed that quality depends on the “efficacy in the management of resources to develop research and generate an impact on society”, relating management and resources to quality. For Participant 5, “the greater the impact, the more optimal and appropriate is the quality of research”. Unsurprisingly, impacting the local context seems to be a widely adopted quality indicator for the regional universities included in this study.

Last of all, ISO was identified as the industrial quality assurance approach universities are trying to incorporate into their practices. Participant 8 describes their university's efforts: "We are looking for ISO certifications for our labs or something we have expertise in the university". Participant 3 suggested that ISO could be an opportunity for their university to showcase its commitment to achieving quality: "[Ou]r university is trying to obtain an ISO certification. This shows our commitment with excellence, with quality". Similarly, Participant 5 shared the plans of their university to achieve an ISO certification in the short term: "[W]e intend to obtain the ISO 21001-2018 next year. This standard was specifically designed for educational institutions". Clearly, regional universities in Manabí are exploring alternative approaches to quality, trying to be ready to comply with future requirements of the regulatory agency.

### 5.3 Summary

This chapter delineated the research findings based on the participants' perspective and their experience translating the quality assurance policy into research practices inside their institutions.

The data collected show that the participants have a high degree of awareness of how vital the link between their higher education institutions and their local communities is. This link has caused participants to question the quality assurance policy's current definitions and measurement tools, hoping for their contribution to regional development to be considered in future policy reforms. The introduction of the quality assurance policy pushed universities to adapt their organizational structures and processes to comply with the policy requirements. This organizational change has created new challenges for researchers, affected by increased workload and time constraints that they need to compensate for by doing work outside their original schedules. Universities have reacted to these challenges by linking an author's position in a publication with the internal performance evaluation and by developing information systems to help administrators organize documental evidence required by CACES in the *in situ* visit. However, these

strategies do little to solve the contradiction between the policy expectations and the purpose of regional universities in Manabí.

## Chapter 6

### 6 Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how regional universities in Ecuador enact the national research quality assurance policy. Using a case study approach in four regional universities in the Manabí Province, this study analyzed the translation of the quality assurance policy into research practices, based on document analysis and the participants' experiences. This chapter includes a discussion of the findings related to the literature and the connections of this study to the concepts of practice theory.

The findings (Chapter 5) of this study show seven key analytical themes as a result of the interviews and document analysis: 1) the capitals of quality assurance in Ecuadorian higher education, 2) the field of Ecuadorian higher education in the quality assurance context, (3) the habitus of Manabí universities, 4) Manabí universities' regional role, 5) the challenge of measuring research performance, 6) the criticism towards quality assurance practices, and 7) the definition of quality in Manabí universities. These themes show three global actors in the regional universities' quality assurance processes: the universities working with their communities for local development and the quality assurance regulator shaping the universities' research practices through their policy. Figure 4 gives a visual representation of the relationship between actors. It should be noted that according to the interviewees in this study, the relationship with CACES is mostly unidirectional: the suggestions of the regional universities are not usually considered when developing or reforming the quality assurance policy (see Section 5.2.6). On the other hand, the participants in this study acknowledged that the relationship with the communities is bidirectional, given that universities aim to solve local problems through research practices. At the same time, they are strongly concerned about the communities' perception (see Section 5.2.4).

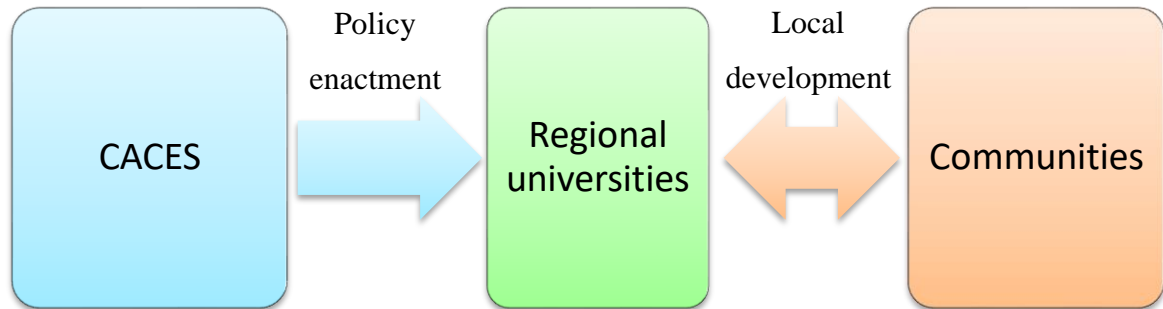


Figure 4. *The relationship between actors in the Ecuadorian higher education*

This study is focused on research practices. Studying practices is important because they “can help us make sense of work, organizations, and other social phenomena” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 213). In the context of quality assurance in the regional universities of Manabí, research practices are expressed in different ways. To better understand research practices, this section includes a discussion of about three main parts: 1) Regional universities and the challenges of managerialism, 2) a discussion of the concept of quality under a quality assurance regime, and (3) research project’s life cycle as the most representative example of research practices in the universities of the province. All three parts were examined considering the existing literature and the theoretical concepts of Bourdieu’s practice theory.

## 6.1 Regional universities’ definition in Manabí

There is currently no universal definition of a regional university, and it is unlikely there will be one. The challenge of finding a globally accepted definition of a regional university lies in the diversity of higher education institutions and contexts. Despite these challenges, several authors—Charlín (2010); Dahllöf (1990); Devlin & McKay 2017; Franulič & Oyarce (2018); Velosa (2018); Vergaño (2018); Wise & Wilkinson (2016); Zeig (2015)—have already attempted to develop a definition that can fit different

locations and cases. In this section, I try to provide one applicable to the Ecuadorian context based on the responses of the participants and the existing literature.

During the interviews, only one of the participants referred to their institution as a “regional university”. However, all the participants acknowledged a bidirectional relationship between the universities and their local communities. They also claimed that universities in Manabí have set goals oriented towards local development, so as to maintain this relationship. These findings suggest that the definition of regional universities in Manabí is based on a combination of Dahllöf’s (1990) and Wise & Wilkinson’s (2016) definitions. These universities have a regional mission and vision with a symbiotic relationship with their local communities. They are not regional because of geographical considerations, but they become regional thanks to their engagement with their local context.

### 6.1.1 Regional universities: challenges of managerialism

Regional universities are crucial for the development of their local communities. Literature shows that the engagement of regional universities with their communities impacts their regional development (Flores Franulič & Fleet Oyarce, 2018; Rodríguez-Ponce & Pedraja-Rejas, 2015). The words of the university administrators interviewed in this study reflect a high degree of awareness regarding the link between universities and their local contexts. Participants understand that the role of regional universities in Manabí is not limited to producing knowledge or educating the workforce but also to becoming relevant development actors for their regions. As relevant actors, these universities aim to be recognized as “useful assets and strategic players in the successful economic growth and development of their home regions” (Kempton et al., 2021, p. 18). However, the quality assurance policy threatens the synergetic relationship between the regional universities and their local communities by pushing them to adopt business measures of productivity objectives (K. Lynch, 2015).

Existing literature has made clear that administrators and researchers have a tendency not to resist managerialist pressures with the hope of improving their working conditions or just maintaining their jobs (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Kalfa & Taksa, 2017; Leathwood & Read, 2013; Nickson, 2014). The reality inside the regional universities in Manabí is no different. Participants argued that they do not have an option, and they need to follow the policy guidelines if they want their universities to remain operational and funded.

The inclusion of managerialism (See section 2.2.2.1) in Ecuadorian higher education has changed universities' management and culture (Giroto et al., 2013). This change is evident when analyzing the role of research offices inside the participating institutions. According to their internal constitutions, research offices are responsible for developing research policy and promoting research activities both with internal and external actors (see Section 1.3). The interview results show that the inclusion of the quality assurance policy has transformed the role of research offices to become mini-versions of the regulatory agency operating inside the universities to achieve compliance with the policy requirements. With the exception of one of the participants, all administrators recognized that their internal regulations are developed to match the goals and performance indicators of the quality assurance policy, showing that national funding and regulations heavily influence the internal management of universities (Kempton et al., 2021) and the field of higher education in Ecuador.

### **6.1.2 Policy, standards, and the diversity of regional universities**

Universities in Manabí share a similar context and a strong regional orientation. However, even inside the same province, not all universities have the same conditions and characteristics (age, number of students, budget). Using the same set of standards for every university, CACES operates under the assumption that the Ecuadorian higher education institutions are homogeneous. This assumption shows that policymakers “fail to recognize the significant diversity of university types” (Kempton et al., 2021, p. 64) and the diverse missions and visions of Ecuadorian universities (Véliz Briones, 2018).



The participants' responses show that CACES's quality assurance policy has a significant influence on defining Ecuador's higher education and research fields. Although the quality assurance policy is presented as a suggestion of an ideal scenario for the operation of universities in the country, the reality in practice is quite different. Given their relationship with other policies and regulations in Ecuador, universities must rigidly follow the policy guidelines to keep their institutions operational within the higher education system.

Unsurprisingly, CACES is trying to make every university in the country follow the same guidelines because higher education policy is "often based on national rather than regional needs" (Kempton et al., 2021, p. 64). Forcing the universities to use the same set of quantitative standards to measure research helps CACES provide comparable reports on the "performance" of universities. However, it limits the ability of universities to establish their own objectives creatively and to capitalize on their potential for local contribution, influencing their habitus in the process. The participants' responses suggest that the policy influence puts universities in constant conflict. They must choose between expanding their knowledge frontiers by pursuing their intellectual curiosity or focusing on the research agenda defined by the government, based on national needs (Jarvis, 2014).

CACES policy fails to recognize the individual efforts of the universities in Manabí because measuring the local contribution of research is contextually based, and it cannot be achieved using the current set of standards. Understanding the impact of research in the local communities of Manabí requires the development of qualitative standards and training the external peers to incorporate the mission, vision, and goals of the universities in their assessments.

The use of external peers selected from within the universities creates an additional layer of complexity when defining the outcomes of the quality assurance processes. The selection of peers does not discriminate between regional and national universities. The peers have their own set of predispositions (habitus) when performing an assessment,

showing that the enactment of the quality assurance policy depends on the interpretation of additional actors. Participants shared that sometimes their peers' expectations are entirely different from the expectations of the administrators inside the regional universities of Manabí.

### ***Policies and the evaluation of research in Ecuadorian higher education***

Globally, studies about the impact of quality assurance in higher education tend to focus more on teaching and learning than on research (Williams & Harvey, 2016). The trend can be seen in Ecuador as well, but existing research shows that research evaluation in Ecuador is strongly focused on producing peer-reviewed publications. The Ecuadorian evaluation model follows the logic that by the faculties simply producing a higher volume of publications, the teaching in a higher education institution will automatically improve (Cabezas Guerra et al., 2019). According to CACES (2019b, p. 29), teaching integrates the necessary disciplines, knowledge, and theoretical frameworks for research development. At the same time, teaching receives feedback from research outcomes which in turn strengthen the curriculum. In contrast, Villavicencio (2014) conducted a literature review that showed that the correlation between research productivity and teaching quality is not significant. Research and teaching appear to be more independent activities than ones joined at the hip.

CACES (2019b) defines research as a “creative, systematic and systemic work, based on epistemological debates, which enhances scientific knowledge and ancestral and intercultural knowledge, generating pertinent responses to the environment's needs” (p.29). The evaluation of research in Ecuador is focused on analyzing the planning and execution of the scientific production of universities aiming for their internationalization. According to the evaluation model, the primary outcome of all research processes is the publication of books and peer-reviewed papers. Publications are classified and valued in the model according to their impact on the scientific community (CACES, 2019b): papers published in journals indexed on *Elsevier's Scopus* or *Thompson Reuter's Web of Science* (WOS) databases are defined as "global impact publications", whereas papers published

in databases such as *Latindex*, *Scielo*, and *Proquest* are considered as “regional impact publications”.

This part of the evaluation model uses the impact factor to give more value to global impact publications (when calculating the outcomes of the indicator), producing two main consequences:

- 1) a language gap limitation for many Latin American researchers, given the increase in the dominance of English-speaking universities. and
- 2) an obsessive race to publish on *Scopus* or *WOS*, where researchers are incentivized by quantity instead of quality. On this last point, Cabezas et al. (2019) observe that despite the increase in the number of published papers in *Scopus* (from 498 in 2009 to 2,249 in 2016), the pressure for increasing the numbers has caused most of these new publications to end up in lower quartile journals, decreasing their chances to be considered in international academic discussions. Stefos and Restrepo Echavarría (2017) agree with this claim. They add that the evaluation criteria promote the creation of “closed knowledge” for many Ecuadorian academics who do not have active subscriptions to *Scopus* or *WOS*.

## 6.2 The quality concept under a quality assurance regime

### 6.2.1 The difficulty of defining quality

The definition of quality is always prone to controversy, and choosing one of its definitions over another influences policy enactment in the universities of Manabí. Quality is relative by nature, having a different meaning for different people or organizations (González & Espinoza, 2018; Harvey & Green, 1993). The participants highlighted the complex nature of quality with their heterogeneous responses when asked for a definition of quality. The results of this study indicate that the understanding of the concept of quality for the participants has two different trends: 1) a group has adopted the definitions of the policy, focusing quality on research outcomes, 2) a more critical group that reflected on the tensions between quality improvement and compliance.

### 6.2.2 Quality as research outcomes

The declared purpose of the policy is to move universities into a permanent quality improvement cycle (CACES, 2019b; LOES [Higher Education Act], 2010), meaning that universities must perennially aim to become a better version of themselves. However, there is a contradiction between the policy's intention and its actual effects. In practice, the policy is not motivating universities to improve in the consecution of their own goals. Instead, the universities see the policy as an inflexible, quantitative compliance instrument (Williams, 2016) focused on regulation and control instead of improvement and enhancement (Elassy, 2015; Mussawy & Rossman, 2020). CACES' one-size-fits-all approach works under the assumption that universities in Ecuador are all homogeneous, threatening the diversity of higher education institutions in Ecuador by not considering their political, economic, and social context (Welzant et al., 2015).

It is not surprising that policy influences higher education in Ecuador because fields are spaces organized about particular types of capital (Power, 1999), and the policy sets the rules of the game for universities in the system. The policy has been very influential at an institutional and individual level. Higher education institutions have modified their organizational structures at the institutional level, including quality assurance internal offices in charge of controlling and monitoring the advances of compliance with the policy requirements. At the individual level, the findings of this study show that, when asked about how they define quality, some participants paraphrased the definitions of the policy, associating quality with research outcomes, specifically with publications on global impact journals. These results prove that the policy has transformed publications into a highly valued form of capital for university researchers and administrators.

Bourdieu (1986) claimed that capitals are an essential component of the field's constitution. Participants' responses show that publications influence the recruitment, permanence, and tenure track of researchers in Ecuador. Researchers with specialized forms of cultural and social capital (such as postgraduate studies abroad or international experience) have higher chances of achieving long-term contracts, tenured positions, and

better-paid administrative positions. This finding reflects previous studies that have noted that capitals determine legitimacy and power in the fields (Nicolini, 2012), with policy, in this case, endorsing a collective social value to publications (Grenfell, 2010).

Considering publications as an essential research outcome is not a bad thing in itself. Most of the participants recognized the importance of publishing papers and books to disseminate the results of their research. Still, most of their responses also suggest concern about the production of papers becoming the primary goal of research initiatives because of the pressure of the quality assurance requirements. Therefore, the problem arises when the policy uses quantity to measure success. Sornoza (2020) used scientometric indicators to analyze the scientific production of Manabí universities showing that although the policy increased the number of papers since its introduction, it did not improve the ratio of cited papers in the regional universities in the province compared to their national counterparts. Based on the literature and results of this study, it is evident that CACES need to incorporate different metrics in the policy to address the relevance of the research outcomes and to value the various forms of interventions of Manabí universities in their local communities.

### 6.2.3 Quality tensions: improvement versus compliance

“Policy enactment” and “policy implementation” are two terms sometimes used interchangeably. However, when used in policy research, making a distinction is necessary because using one over the other changes the perspective of the analysis and results in a study. Traditionally, implementation studies have focused on how faithfully the implementers have followed the policy (Honig, 2012) following a top-down perspective (Williams, 2016). On the other hand, in enactment studies, researchers investigate the way actors “deal with the policy based on their sensemaking of the policy intention” (Bergmark & Hansson, 2021, p. 449).

This distinction is significant in this study because the participants’ responses show a tension between the policy intention and the perception of policy actors inside the

universities. The policy text highlights the purpose of continuous quality improvement, suggesting that the policy follows the logic of several quality approaches identified in the literature. For example, the 2010 version of the LOES defined quality as a constant and systematic search for excellence based on several components, including permanent improvement.

On the one hand, this definition refers to the adoption of a “quality as excellence” approach with the idea of quality as the achievement of minimum standards (De Vincenzi, 2018). Selecting this approach is problematic because, in the Ecuadorian case, quality is portrayed as “something special” (Harvey & Green, 1993) or the “gold standard” (Goff, 2017). Having exceptional universities implies that there must be others without this feature, introducing a notion of competition among universities and researchers, menacing the collaboration of academic communities.

The second noticeable approach in the quality definition of the policy text is ‘quality as transformation’. Permanent improvement involves cycles of transition from a current state to a new enhanced one (Harvey, 2006a) and the policy actor’s ability to make critical decisions about their transformation (De Vincenzi, 2018). The participants contested the transformational purpose of policy in research practices. First, they claimed that their institutions do not have a tangible representation in the policy construction and reforms due to the control of the State through the quality assurance policy. The findings of this study reveal that the regulatory agency often overlooks the suggestions and recommendations of regional universities. CACES has entirely chosen the set of standards used in the quality assurance exercises based on the context of the most powerful, resourceful national universities.

The participants also questioned the ability of policy to induce permanent improvement. They argued that what is measured in the policy is not the capacity of universities to produce impactful research but the ability of universities to generate documental evidence focused exclusively on compliance. “Compliance” was a recurrent term used by participants during the interviews. The findings of this study suggest that regional

universities in Ecuador are responding to policy requirements by adopting a new approach: “quality as compliance”. Kim’s (2018) study about quality assurance processes at an Ontario (Canada) university reported that “quality assurance creates more of a demonstration of compliance to procedural obligations than a deeper commitment to what it intends to achieve” (p. 126), which suggests that the challenges of quality assurance policy enactment are not exclusive to the context of the regional universities in Ecuador.

Under a quality-as-compliance approach, the universities in Manabí informally define compliance with the policy as the primary goal instead of as means to develop a quality culture inside their organizations. Therefore, they dedicate time and resources exclusively to increasing their evaluation outcomes without a genuine scientific purpose. Participants agreed with the claim that quantity does not equal quality in the Ecuadorian research context. Their responses show concern because they feel that trying to publish exclusively in global impact journals moves their research results away from the local producers, an important target for the knowledge produced inside these regional universities.

The analysis of the participants’ responses reveals that the real approach to quality is highly influenced by managerialism and NPM. The way policy has reshaped the higher education field in Ecuador shows that CACES has introduced a “hard form” of managerialism (Trow, 1994) where quality assurance is not just an important component of the higher education sector but a dominant force inside the field. The participants’ critiques of the quality assurance processes express their concern that the need for research to prove its worth through economic efficiency and performance indicators (Jarvis, 2014) is not compatible with the inherent social purpose of higher education (Giroto et al., 2013).

## 6.3 Research practices: the life cycle of research projects

As stated in the chapter on methodology, the units of analysis of this study are the research practices in the universities of Manabí. Using a practice theory approach, the focus of the investigation moves from the actor's subjectivity to the actor's organizational practices (Nicolini, 2012). The analysis of the interviews shows that research projects are the clearest example of research practices in the participant universities. Research projects are also essential components of the quality assurance policy in Ecuador (CACES, 2019b). Alongside publications, research projects represent the main form of measurement of research performance for the universities in the country. The quality assessment of research projects is divided into three stages: planning, execution, and outcomes. This section provides practical examples of each stage and their relationship with the literature and the theoretical framework of this work. Bourdieu never offered a formal definition of practice, but he operationalized practices as the conjunction of habitus, capitals, and field. Following the same logic, those three main concepts will guide the discussion in an attempt to understand how accountability mechanisms (such as quality standards, quality evaluation models, and performance outcomes) influence research practices in Ecuadorian higher education.

### 6.3.1 The planning of research projects

Universities have several responsibilities (Rodríguez-Ponce & Pedraja-Rejas, 2015), but teaching and research are two fundamental activities (Davidovitch & Iram, 2015). The purpose of doing research has been evolving since the beginning of the higher education sector, but the access to public funding introduced new accountability and performance measures for universities (Austin & Jones, 2018).

Access to public funding is crucial for the growth of universities, especially in Ecuador. Public universities in the country do not charge tuition fees, and they are almost exclusively dependent on government funding. The reliance on the government does not necessarily mean that research inside the universities of Manabí is adequately funded.



The participants claimed that the demands of the quality assurance policy force them to make critical decisions about how they allocate their scarce resources.

According to Article 36 of the LOES (2010), universities in Ecuador must invest at least 6% of their budget to fund research initiatives, acquire research infrastructure, publish on indexed journals and to assign PhD scholarships for their professors. In developed countries, or even for the national universities of Ecuador, 6% of their budget represents enough money to cover most of their research needs; however, for the small regional universities of Manabí, the reality is entirely different. For instance, at the time of data collection, one of the participant universities had a budget of approximately 11 million US dollars for that year. Using the formula of the LOES (2010), that university was supposed to cover all their research expenses with US\$ 660,000. Still, one of the administrators participating in this study shared that their actual budget for that year was around US\$ 66,000. Consequentially, regional universities in the country have become more selective in the research projects that they internally fund. Influenced by this managerialist approach, they are developing quantitative instruments to approve and fund research proposals based on the potential capacity of projects to produce measurable and quantifiable outcomes.

Under these conditions, the outcomes of the projects (papers, books, book chapters) become the main objective of research projects. This focus on outcomes reinforces the presence of publication as one of the most valued forms of capital inside the higher education field. Inevitably, the universities in Manabí are now obsessed with the international research rankings. However, it is not the same as a university with a good position in the rankings because they do research as a university that does research just to be part of the rankings. The former showcases universities' will to solve the needs of society, while the latter is a reaction to the "accountability" (Hubbell, 2007) concerns of universities. The participants strongly criticized knowledge production as becoming a goal instead of a means to achieve knowledge mobilization.

Given the previous discussion, it is reasonable to suggest that the quality assurance policy influences the *field* of Ecuadorian higher education. The policy not only allows universities to access and remain part of the higher education system in the country but its performance outcomes are linked to future funding (CES, 2013) for research within universities. Using the university mentioned above as an example, they will not be able to achieve their goals for the year. Their performance will be labelled as deficient, meaning that the university's overall budget could be reduced even further. Having even less money in the following year, they will need to reduce the scope of their research, and they will not be able to produce the global impact research required by the policy. One of the alternatives for these universities is to reallocate funds from teaching and management lines, but this goes against CACES' (2019b) own definition of quality as an umbrella component of all activities inside the universities. Although Villavicencio (2014) reported there is no real correlation between research and teaching, when it comes to funding, taking money from one of those activities to allocate it to another could significantly affect their quality.

### 6.3.2 The execution of research projects

Research projects are a fundamental part of the national quality assurance regulation. Since the policy introduction, regional public universities in Manabí have prioritized research projects in their internal planning and evaluation processes. This study shows that despite CACES and the regional universities of Manabí seeing research projects as one of the most critical research initiatives, research projects are impacted by many other regulations that create challenges for their execution. The previous section detailed some challenges of research projects in their initial stage. Moreover, the difficulties in carrying out research in Ecuadorian higher education continue in their execution phase.

Research projects that receive funding keep operating under constrained conditions. The last section explained that the quality assurance policy regulation is linked to funding policy. Still, research practices in Ecuador are dependent on other policy bodies, such as procurement and intellectual property. This finding is not surprising because prior studies

have noted that social fields are not isolated but interact with other fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Naidoo, 2004; Rawolle & Lingard, 2008).

The data-collection showed that the problems in the execution of research projects include (but are not limited to) the timing in the availability of funds, and difficulties with the acquisitions of equipment or supplies. Projects approved for internal funding struggle to receive the money they need for the planned research activities on time. The administrators and researchers in the participant universities have reacted, adapting their schedules to the state's expected delays in money allocation. However, this delay is dangerous because the dominant type of research in the regional universities of Manabí is related to productive time-sensitive activities (such as crops and forestry).

Regarding the difficulties with procurement, the centralized government procurement system in Ecuador (SERCOP) creates more problems than benefits for regional universities. The acquisition of supplies and equipment involves a high bureaucratic burden that manifests as an increased workload for administrators and researchers in the universities. Despite their efforts to compensate for the delays by creatively using their social capital connections, researchers are frequently stressed about losing their projects or not producing outcomes because of the inappropriate speed of the supply chain.

### 6.3.3 The outcomes of research projects

The administrators in the Manabí universities had two perspectives when questioned about what makes a research project successful. The first one was represented by a group that adopted the definition of the quality assurance policy (section 6.2.2) and associated research success with the standards of the policy. This means that publications arise again as one of the most valuable currencies in the Ecuadorian higher education field.

Nevertheless, all participants, including those who embraced the policy definition, supported the need to include the impact of research projects on the local communities as a measure of the success of research projects. For them, all research initiatives must be oriented to improve the conditions of the research locations. This need to address the

local needs through research is a manifestation of the habitus of regional universities. Despite being pushed by the policy to pursue “globally standardized types of knowledge” (such as publishing in international impact journals), they have the disposition to maintain their intellectual autonomy (Altbach, 2008; Cabezas Guerra et al., 2019).

Relating the participants’ responses to the policy text, it is safe to argue that the contradiction in the policy measurements relies on its focus on knowledge production instead of knowledge mobilization. By defining publications as the main results of research projects, the policy motivates little effort in determining the relevance and usefulness of research produced by the universities in Manabí.

For the participants, compliance with the quality standards is a time- and resource-demanding task that, in the end, will not result in a more significant contribution to their local communities. In addition, the different outcomes included in the policy (such as patents and publications) require extensive validation, sometimes depending on other governmental organizations and the obtention of hard-to-acquire pieces of evidence. One example is that the registration of patents derived from research projects depends on the bureaucratic processes of SENADI, which according to the participants, is complex and time-consuming. In response, universities had to allocate time for their staff and researchers to deal with these tedious processes exclusively. Another example of hard-to-obtain evidence is the need of book authors to include “two reports from peer reviewers for each book” (CACES, 2019a) to validate the book as a research outcome, which is difficult because these reports are not commonly available under a blind review process, a widespread method of review of the prestigious publications.

For regionally oriented universities, the outcomes defined by CACES are important because they showcase the research production of the universities. Still, they believe that with the focus on increasing the number of publications, researchers are more concerned about getting institutional recognition as individuals instead of pursuing a sense of community that traditionally characterized academia (Aprile et al., 2020). This finding is

consistent with the literature (Davies & Thomas, 2002; Sosa, 2016), which suggests that the inclusion of managerial and accountability instruments (such as quality assurance) fails to produce the expected results and instead creates an increased sense of competitiveness among and within universities.

The competition to climb positions in the international research rankings increases the gap between low-funded regional universities and their national peers. Thanks to the link between the quality and funding policy, the regional universities will receive financial punishments for not being able to meet the expectations of CACES, repeating the pattern in future years. Likewise, the gap between researchers inside the regional universities is not easy to reduce. The results show that those professors in possession of higher amounts of cultural and social capital are more proficient in obtaining grants and producing publications. Still, all professors are expected to generate these research outcomes.

## 6.4 Summary

This chapter presented the connections between the participants' responses to the interviews, the policy texts, the existing literature, and Bourdieu's practice theory. The discussion was organized around three themes: regional universities in Manabí, the concept of quality and the life cycle of research projects. In the first section, I provided the first formal definition of regional universities applicable to the Ecuadorian context and explored the challenges of managerialism for their administration. The second section analyzed how the concept of quality has been characterized by the policy texts and the participants' experiences, showing that the existing regulations have a strong focus on compliance, causing tensions between the policy intention and the perception of policy actors inside the universities. This chapter also identifies the influence of accountability in the life cycle of research projects planned and executed by Manabí universities. The next chapter provides concise responses to the research questions that guided this study and pinpoints alternatives for future studies.

## 7 Conclusion

This chapter includes an overview of the thesis and addresses the research questions that guided this study. Moreover, it highlights the study's contributions while addressing its implications and recommendations for policy and practice. The chapter concludes with the recognition of possible limitations and the identification of opportunities for future research.

### 7.1 Thesis overview

The origins of quality assurance in Ecuador can be traced back to 1995, when the National Council of Universities and Polytechnic Schools (CONUEP) identified the critical aspects affecting higher education institutions in Ecuador. However, quality became relevant for universities when the National Constitution reform of 2008 introduced it as a guiding principle of Ecuadorian higher education. These changes to the constitution opened the door to the first large-scale quality assurance evaluation process carried out by CONEA in 2009. As a result of this process, several universities were closed, while another group was demanded to improve their compliance to remain part of the system.

The introduction of the LOES (210) set the foundations for the current quality assurance evaluation practices in the country with the creation of CEAACES (renamed to CACES in the 2018 reform of the LOES). CACES is responsible for developing the evaluation model (including the quality standards) for higher education institutions as part of the accreditation and evaluation processes. CACES evaluation model is organized around four main components: teaching, social engagement, institutional conditions, and research. This study aimed to investigate how regional universities enact the research component of the national quality assurance policy.

The present work was also aimed to fill a gap in the research regarding regional universities and quality assurance processes. These universities are usually marginalized in the existing literature that favours the “successful” national universities. By focusing

on regional universities, I was able to expose their challenges when coping with the managerialist requirements of the quality assurance instruments.

For this study, I used Bourdieu's theory of practice. This theoretical approach allowed me to map out the capitals of the Ecuadorian higher education field and the predispositions and strategies of universities to face the rules set by the policy in the field. The data sources for this research were the policy documents related to quality assurance, other related policy texts (such as funding allocation policy), semi-structured interviews with administrators in charge of the policy enactment in the four public regional universities of Manabí and the universities' internal quality policy.

The findings of the study show the influence of the policy in shaping the field of research in the Ecuadorian higher education, the tensions between the policy text definition of quality and the perception of the administrators, as well as the challenges and opportunities of the introduction of quality assurance processes for the regional universities in the province.

## 7.2 Addressing the research questions

Previous chapters include detailed discussions regarding the research questions that guided this research. However, in this section, I will provide a concise answer to those questions based on the findings of this study.

*R1: How do administrators in charge of adopting the quality assurance policy in the regional universities of Manabí make sense of research quality as stated in the policy?*

There is a disagreement between the policy text and the participants' perspectives regarding the definition of quality and the approach used to translate policy into research practices. When contrasted with the literature, the policy text includes two approaches to quality: quality as excellence and quality as transformation. In comparison, the participants' responses contend with the approaches stated by CACES.

The approaches to quality implicit in the policy text do not match the current research practices outlined in the participants' responses. In practice, the accountability measures introduced in the Ecuadorian higher education system are perceived by the institutional policy actors as guided by compliance and the need for researchers and institutions to prove their value following a value-for-money perspective. This distinction was possible thanks to an enactment framework to analyze not the quantitative effects of the policy compliance, but the way university administrators make sense of the policy in their day-to-day practices.

*R2: How has the Ecuadorian quality assurance policy influenced research practices in the universities of Manabí?*

As expected, the quality assurance policy has shaped the field of research in Ecuadorian higher education. This result is not surprising, given that the literature shows that researchers accept the conditions of this type of managerialist instrument to improve their working conditions or to preserve their jobs. On the administrators' side, they follow the quality assurance policy to protect their institutions from being closed or running out of money. Despite their efforts, the funding of research is still at risk because of the limitations of regional universities to reach the standards of CACES, primarily based on the conditions of more powerful and resourceful universities.

Surprisingly, regional universities in Manabí maintain a critical posture against how the evaluation model measures research performance. The disposition of orienting their research activities towards a local impact is a manifestation of their habitus that is strongly constrained by the rules of the game established by CACES.

The policy has undoubtedly transformed publications into Ecuador's most important research capital. Regional universities in Manabí face the challenge of producing global-impact publications under several restrictions (budget, infrastructure), in some cases aggravated by the link of the quality assurance policy with funding. These universities reacted by searching for new professors with a significant accumulation of cultural and



social capital to cope with the urgent demands of the policy under the threat of imminent closure. The results show that foreign professors with solid relations with their alma maters are more proficient in obtaining external grants and producing publications.

*R3: What are the challenges and opportunities derived from the enactment of the Ecuadorian quality assurance policy?*

The participants recognized that the inclusion of the quality assurance policy brought two main benefits for the universities of Manabí: improved planning processes and more organization. With the creation of internal departments (quality assurance offices) dedicated to monitoring and communicating the policy reforms, the universities of Manabí are matching their timelines with CACES scheduled assessments. Having concrete pieces of evidence and defined deadlines has allowed these universities to follow up their research activities more efficiently.

In contrast, all this additional work to produce evidence creates challenges and an increased workload for researchers and administrators. This added accountability is causing rejection from the researchers in the universities. The administrators' responses show that researchers dislike the idea of producing publications to comply with the policy instead of pursuing their intellectual curiosity. The findings of this study raise some questions about the real purpose of science in the regional universities of Manabí under the requirements of the quality assurance policy.

Additional challenges for the regional universities in Manabí include working with limited funding, facing bureaucratic burdens (both internally and with other governmental organizations), and being marginalized in the construction and reform of the policy standards.

### 7.3 Research contributions and recommendations for policy and practice

This work has made conceptual and theoretical contributions to the existing literature on regional universities and quality assurance in higher education. In terms of the conceptual contribution, it provides one of the first definitions of regional universities applicable to the Ecuadorian higher education context. In addition, this study brought to light the contradictions between the definitions of quality in the policy text and the practical view of the policy actors in charge of its enactment. Based on the findings, I can suggest that CACES needs to adopt a fitness-for-purpose approach to quality (Harvey & Green, 1993; Welzant et al., 2015), making distinctions about the type and purpose of the university. Furthermore, the core of the quality assurance evaluations must migrate from measuring the compliance of the evidence of the quality standards to measuring how each university achieves its institutional mission, vision and goals. CACES should define different quality standards for research-intensive universities and universities focused on teaching and training. This approach will allow CACES to recognize and support the diversity of higher education institutions in Ecuadorian higher education.

The theoretical contribution of this research is the use of Bourdieu's practice theory in the deductive data analysis to identify the critical components of research practices in Ecuadorian higher education. Since the existing literature about quality assurance in Ecuador is primarily quantitative in nature, this study constitutes the first attempt to map out the capitals of the Ecuadorian higher education field, the predispositions and strategies of universities to face the rules set by the policy, and some of the existing structural constraints in the field. By identifying these key components, this work provides insights into the often-overlooked mechanisms of policy translation into research practices by the administrators in Manabí universities. Unlike previous quantitative studies interested in determining how well a particular university performed in the quality assessments, this study investigated how the administrators received the policy and delivered it to the researchers in the participant institutions. Examining the

policy translation unveiled the challenges and problems of conducting research in Ecuador under a quality assurance regime.

The findings of this study show that the Ecuadorian government is using the inherent accountability of the quality assurance policy as a form of control that threatens the ability of universities to research, to pursue intellectual curiosity instead of attaining immediate and measurable results. Now, the regulatory agency needs to move away from controlling and measuring to focus on guidance and support. CACES' attempt to establish a uniform definition of quality in Ecuador helped to provide a reliable diagnosis of the real status of the higher education system. However, developing a quality culture inside the universities will not be possible without CACES using its resources to co-build quality with the Ecuadorian higher education institutions.

Finally, research project outcomes need to include some measure of their impact on local communities. Local impact is a powerful driver in the universities' research planning and execution. The policy should move from measuring knowledge production to measuring knowledge mobilization. It should not have publications as an outcome but as a means to transfer that knowledge to the different stakeholders inside and outside academia.

## 7.4 Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, the recruitment of participants and the data collection took place during the worst part of the COVID-19 pandemic. The original study design contemplated the recruitment of researchers from the participant universities. However, the study was adjusted to focus on the administrators' experience due to the uncertainty produced by the pandemic and the travel restrictions in force at that time. Nevertheless, the data obtained was still rich and informative because the selected participants worked closely with the researchers and received reports of their outcomes.

The restrictions also made it difficult to establish an initial connection with the participants. In my experience, in the Ecuadorian context, it is easier to establish rapport with the participants in face-to-face interactions. Despite having to use virtual

communication channels, the participants were eager to share their experiences, but it will remain uncertain if in-person interviews could have produced even richer data.

The restrictions mentioned above did not allow me to use observational techniques to investigate the research practices of the participant universities. Using observational techniques could have enabled me to identify habitus components that escape the participants' awareness. However, my previous participation as an insider enriched the interviews by looking for elements that otherwise could be elusive for researchers without contextual knowledge about the research practices in Ecuador.

The participants of this study were selected using purposive sampling. The use of purposive sampling could be observed as a limitation because the researcher is responsible for establishing the selection criteria. However, the focus of this study is the processes by which institutional actors translate policy to practice, and these participants represented the "knowledgeable people" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 219). The study design originally planned the participation of 16 participants based on their administrative roles. The sample was reduced to nine participants, mainly because some participants oversaw more than one role simultaneously. A sample of nine participants may not sound representative at first look; however, the participants included the research chair and the quality assurance chair of the universities, prominent actors in charge of the construction of internal policy and the monitoring of research activities.

Using a case study approach means that the findings of this study are bounded to the context of the universities in the province of Manabí. The results of this study may be transferable to other regional universities in the coastal region. However, the cultural diversity of Ecuador could play a significant role in the way policy is enacted in the regional universities of provinces in the highlands or close to the Amazon rainforest.

The researchers' involuntary subjective bias could be perceived as a potential limitation in a qualitative study. Also, my previous experience of several years as a researcher and a policy implementer in one of the participant universities could have initially biased me

towards accepting the quality assurance policy without questioning its purpose or methods. Fortunately, continuous reflexivity (see Section 1.4) and member-checking, thick description, inquiry audit, and triangulation techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) during the entire study length helped me reduce any possible impact of these limitations.

## 7.5 Opportunities for future studies

This final section identifies opportunities for future research on quality assurance enactment. The most obvious suggestion is to include the perspective of more policy stakeholders. These stakeholders could include policymakers, researchers, program coordinators, students, community leaders, and local producers. Including different points of view will further validate the results of this study.

Comparative studies are a great source of opportunities to reach more transferrable conclusions. This type of study could compare regional and national universities, regional universities in different provinces, and regional universities in Ecuador with regional universities in other Latin American countries. Using a comparative approach could enlighten readers about the trends of the region.

On a more specific level, CACES (2019a) argues that selecting the databases for publications (*SCOPUS* and *Web of Science*) is based on what is historically most used by Ecuadorian researchers. However, there is a lack of transparency, and CACES does not make the data of previous accreditation processes publicly available to support its claim. Even if the aggregated data back the claims, it would be necessary to analyze the actual contribution of regional universities to these databases, given that most participants mentioned that the subscription cost is prohibitive for their institutions.

Finally, new research could examine the influence of the quality assurance policy on the autonomy of Ecuadorian universities. The focus on autonomy will reveal more detailed information about the types of governance dominant in the universities in Ecuador under a quality assurance regime.

## 7.6 Summary

This concluding chapter offered a summary of the findings, explained how the study answered the research questions, highlighted the conceptual and theoretical contributions made by this research, acknowledged its limitations, and offered new avenues for future investigation. I hope this work offers new perspectives and promotes in-depth discussions to improve higher education in the universities of Manabí.

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## Appendixes

### Appendix A: Western's Ethics Approval



**Date:** 18 May 2021

**To:** Dr. Augusto Riveros Barrera

**Project ID:** 118636

**Study Title:** The Enactment of Quality Assurance Policies in Ecuadorian Higher Education: A Case Study in the Public Universities in the Province of Manabi (Ecuador)

**Short Title:** Quality Assurance Policy enactment in the Public Regional Universities of Manabi

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** June 4 2021

**Date Approval Issued:** 18/May/2021 16:44

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 18/May/2022

Dear Dr. Augusto Riveros Barrera

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. **All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.**

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
4. Interview_guides_ENG	Interview Guide		1
4. Interview_guides_SPA	Translated Documents		1
1. Recruitment_Email_ENG	Recruitment Materials	09/May/2021	2
2. LOIC_ENG	Written Consent/Assent	09/May/2021	2
2. LOIC_SPA	Translated Documents	09/May/2021	2
1. Recruitment_Email_SPA	Translated Documents	09/May/2021	2

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson , Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

**Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).**

## Appendix B: Letter of information and Consent Form



### **Letter of Information and Consent**

**Project Title**

The Enactment of Quality Assurance Policies in Ecuadorian Higher Education: A Case Study in the Province of Manabí

**Document Title**

Letter of Information and Consent

**Principal Investigator**

Dr. Augusto Riveros Barrera, Ph.D.  
Faculty of Education, Western University

**Co-Investigator**

Diego Sornoza Parrales, Ph.D. Candidate,  
Faculty of Education, Western University

**1. Invitation to Participate**

You are being invited to participate in this research study about the implementation of the Quality Assurance Policy in research practices in Regional Public Universities in the Province of Manabí.

**2. Why is this study being done?**

In order to evaluate the performance of its higher education institutions, the Ecuadorian higher education system has adopted research quality assurance policies. Despite their widespread use, little is known about the ways in which these policies have been adopted at the institutional level. This study aims to investigate the implementation of the Research Quality Assurance Policy in the Public Regional Universities of Manabí. In particular, this research seeks to investigate how administrators and staff understand the policy and how the policy influences research practices in the participating institutions

**3. How long will you be in this study?**

Your participation in the study will consist of one interview that will take approximately 60 minutes. Providing (optional) feedback on the transcribed interview may require 45 additional minutes of your time.

#### **4. What are the study procedures?**

After agreeing to participate in this study, you will be required to attend an interview for approximately 60 minutes. With your consent, only the audio of the interview will be recorded; no video or pictures will be taken during the interview. The interview will take place using videoconference software (Zoom) at a time and date convenient for you. The audio from the interview will be transcribed verbatim by the co-investigator. About four weeks from the interview date, you will receive the transcribed interview. This will allow you to provide any feedback you consider necessary. Providing feedback will require around 45 minutes of your time.

#### **5. What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study. However, you will be free to stop the interview or withdraw your participation from the study at any point.

#### **6. What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

Through your participation on this study, you may be able to reflect on your professional practice. In addition to this, the information gathered may provide benefits to society as a whole, including a better understanding of how Quality Assurance Policy is influencing Research Practices on the Public Regional Universities in the Province of Manabí. In the long term, this study's results could provide input to administrators and policymakers to better fit the quality assurance policy and the local needs of regional universities.

#### **7. Can participants choose to leave the study?**

You can withdraw from the study at any point. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request (e.g., by phone, in writing, etc.) withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher know, and your information will be eliminated from our records and destroyed. Once the study has been published, we will not be able to remove your information.

#### **8. How will participants' information be kept confidential?**

Data gathered in the interviews will be stored in an encrypted and password-protected laptop computer. Participant's direct identifiers will be removed from the resulting data and replaced with a code to ensure confidentiality. Any digital backups will be saved on dedicated encrypted external USB storage devices. Both the USB devices and any hard copies generated as a backup will be stored in a

safe box in the personal office at the co-investigator's home. Following the Faculty Colective Agreement requirements, this study's information will be retained for seven (7) years from the date of study completion. After that period, all the information will be securely destroyed. If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used.

Representatives of Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

**9. Are participants compensated for being in this study?**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

**10. What are the rights of participants?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate, you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or leave the study at any time, it will have no effect on your employment status. You do not waive any legal right by consenting to this study.

**11. Whom do participants contact for questions?**

If you have questions about this research study, please contact:

**Principal Investigator**

Dr. Augusto Riveros Barrera, Ph.D.  
Faculty of Education, Western University  
[REDACTED]

**Co-Investigator**

Diego Sornoza Parrales, Ph.D. Candidate  
Faculty of Education, Western University  
[REDACTED]

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact the Office of Human Research Ethics [REDACTED], email: [REDACTED]. This office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**

# Western

## Consent Form

**Project Title**

The Enactment of Quality Assurance Policies in Ecuadorian Higher Education: A Case Study in the Province of Manabí

**Document Title**

Letter of Information and Consent

**Principal Investigator**

Dr. Augusto Riveros Barrera, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Education  
Western University

**Co-Investigator**

Diego Sornoza Parrales,  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Faculty of Education, Western  
University

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me, and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

**YES**  **NO**

I agree to be audio-recorded in this research.

**YES**  **NO**


I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research.

**YES**  **NO**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name of  
Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date (DD-MM-YYYY)

**Please scan and email the signed form back to** 

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name of Person  
Obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date (DD-MM-YYYY)

## Appendix C: Interview guides

# Western

## Interview Guides

### Project Title

The Enactment of Quality Assurance Policies in Ecuadorian Higher Education: A Case Study in the Province of Manabí

### Document Title

Interview Guides

### Principal Investigator

Dr. Augusto Riveros Barrera, Ph.D.  
Faculty of Education, Western  
University

### Co-Investigator

Diego Sornoza Parrales, Ph.D.  
Candidate,  
Faculty of Education, Western  
University

### Introduction (for all participants)

- Welcome the participant.
- Provide the participant with a brief description of the study's purpose.
- Remind the participant that they have given their consent to record the audio of the interview.

### Participants Demographics (for all participants)

<b>Gender:</b>	<b>Age group:</b>	<b>Ethnicity*:</b>
Male <input type="checkbox"/>	21-30 <input type="checkbox"/>	Indigenous <input type="checkbox"/>
Female <input type="checkbox"/>	31-40 <input type="checkbox"/>	Afro-Ecuadorian <input type="checkbox"/>
Other <input type="checkbox"/>	41-50 <input type="checkbox"/>	Montubio <input type="checkbox"/>
Non-binary <input type="checkbox"/>	51-65 <input type="checkbox"/>	Mestizo <input type="checkbox"/>
	Over 65 <input type="checkbox"/>	White <input type="checkbox"/>
		Other <input type="checkbox"/>

\*Based on INEC (Ecuadorian National Institute of Statistics and Census)

### **Interview Guide for the Research Office Chair**

1. How do you characterize the quality of research?
2. How do you define successful research?
3. How is research success measured in your institution?
4. What are the research outcomes that your institutions value?
5. How do you handle research outcomes not included in the QA (Quality Assurance) Policy?
6. How do you think the Policy's goal fits your institutional mission and vision?
7. What are some of the successes of your institution concerning research?
8. What are some of the challenges your institution has faced while implementing the quality assurance policy?
9. Do you think the implementation of the QA Policy has been successful in your institution? Why?
10. Has your institution faced any resistance to the QA Policy? What types? From Who (groups, not individual names, please)?
11. How do you understand your role in helping researchers to develop their activities?
12. Do you think implementing the QA Policy has impacted researchers' performance? Why or why not?
13. Do you find you have made any adjustments in how you work with researchers because of the QA policy? If so, in what ways and how have you been able to make necessary changes?
14. Is there a specific group of researchers that benefit from the QA Policy?
15. What type of incentives do the researchers receive for their compliance with the QA Policy? Any incentives for outcomes outside the Policy?

### **Interview Guide for the Quality Assurance Office Chair**

1. How do you characterize the quality of research?
2. How do you define successful research?
3. How is research success measured in your institution?
4. What are the research outcomes that your institutions value?
5. How do you handle research outcomes not included in the QA Policy?
6. What are some of the challenges your institution has faced while implementing the quality assurance policy?
7. Do you think the implementation of the QA Policy has been successful in your institution? Why?
8. Has your institution faced any resistance to the QA Policy? What types? From Who (groups, not individual names, please)?
9. Have there been any unintended benefits of the QA Policy implementation in your institution?

10. Have there been any unintended negative consequences of the QA Policy implementation in your institution?
11. How do you understand your role in helping researchers to develop their activities?
12. Do you think implementing the QA Policy has impacted researchers' performance? Why or why not?
13. How have researchers been involved in the internal Policy construction?
14. What would you like to see change in your university concerning research (e.g. relationship with researchers and expectations of researchers)?

### **Interview Guide for the Research Projects Coordinator**

1. How do you characterize the quality of research?
2. How do you define a successful research project?
3. How is research success measured in your institution?
4. What are the research outcomes that your institutions value?
5. How do you handle research outcomes not included in the QA Policy?
6. What are some of the challenges your institution has faced while implementing the quality assurance policy?
7. Do you think the implementation of the QA Policy has been successful in your institution? Why?
8. Have there been any unintended benefits of the QA Policy implementation in your institution?
9. Have there been any unintended negative consequences of the QA Policy implementation in your institution?
10. Has your institution faced any resistance to the QA Policy? What types? From Who (groups, not individual names, please)?
11. In your opinion, what is the goal of the Q. A. Policy regarding research?
12. How do you understand your role in helping researchers to develop their activities?
13. Do you think implementing the QA Policy has impacted researchers' performance? Why or why not?
14. Is there a specific group of researchers that benefit from the QA Policy?
15. What would you like to see change in your university concerning research (e.g. relationship with researchers and expectations of researchers)?

### **Interview Guide for the Publications Coordinator**

1. How do you characterize the quality of research?
2. How do you define successful research?
3. How is research success measured in your institution?



4. What are the research outcomes that your institutions value?
5. How do you handle research outcomes not included in the QA Policy?
6. Do you think the implementation of the QA Policy has been successful in your institution? Why?
7. Have there been any unintended benefits of the QA Policy implementation in your institution?
8. Have there been any unintended negative consequences of the QA Policy implementation in your institution?
9. What are some of the challenges your institution has faced while implementing the quality assurance policy?
10. Has your institution faced any resistance to the QA Policy? What types? From Who (groups, not individual names, please)?
11. How do you understand your role in helping researchers to develop their activities?
12. In your opinion, what is the goal of the Q. A. Policy regarding research?
13. Do you think implementing the QA Policy has impacted researchers' performance? Why or why not?
14. Is there a specific group of researchers that benefit from the QA Policy?
15. What would you like to see change in your university concerning research (e.g. relationship with researchers and expectations of researchers)?

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Diego Sornoza Parrales

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** Universidad Estatal del Sur de Manabí  
Jipijapa, Manabí, Ecuador  
2003-2008, Computers and networks engineer

Universidad Estatal del Sur de Manabí  
Jipijapa, Manabí, Ecuador  
2005-2010, Economist

Universidad Estatal del Sur de Manabí  
Jipijapa, Manabí, Ecuador  
2011-2013, Master's in Educational Management

Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education  
Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico  
2013-2014, Master's in Information Technology Management.

**Honours and Awards:** SENESCYT Scholarship for Graduate Studies Abroad  
Open Call 2012 – Second Phase

SENESCYT Scholarship for Graduate Studies Abroad  
Open Call 2016

SENESCYT Accredited Researcher  
Record No. REG-INV-16-01687

**Related Work Experience** Research Assistant  
The University of Western Ontario  
2018-2022

Professor  
Universidad Estatal del Sur de Manabí  
2016-2022

### **Publications:** **Refereed Journal Articles**

Sornoza, D., Sornoza, G., Parrales, M., & Guaranda, V. (2019). "Public service motivation, a literature analysis of China and Ecuador". *Revista ESPACIOS*. ISSN, 798, 1015.

Sornoza, D. (forthcoming). "Consequences of Quality Assurance Policy in the Academic Production of Manabí Universities: a scientometric analysis". *Revista Científica y Arbitrada de Ciencias Sociales y Trabajo Social: Tejedora*.

### **Book Review**

Sornoza, D. (2020). [Review of the book *University and society: Interdependencias and exchange* by Kövér, A., & Franger, G.] *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, (194).