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I am Valeria Rebolledo Robert, a dedicated Public Administrator and Higher Education Specialist currently pursuing a Doctorate in Business and Administration in Higher Education at the University of Bath. With a Master's degree from University College London, I specialize in quality assurance in education, policy evaluation, and public administration. My career includes key roles at the University of Cambridge, where I manage postgraduate admissions data and coordinate international research projects. I have also contributed to academic quality assurance at the University of Hertfordshire and the Chilean National Accreditation Commission. My work, including publications on higher education in emerging economies, reflects my commitment to educational excellence and policy advancement.

**Paper****Title:** Are they worth it? An analysis of Chilean accreditation quality reports**Abstract**

External quality assurance (EQA) of higher education has widely grown during the last decades. Nevertheless, there is little evidence on the impacts of the outputs produced by EQA. This study seeks to analyse the Chilean accreditation system, specifically institutional accreditation reports (ARs) issued by the Chilean National Commission of Accreditation (CNA) between 2013-2018. The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the suitability of ARs as a source of valuable information for higher education institutions (HEIs) and students. A mixed method of study, involving statistical and content analysis of the CNA ARs is presented. 17 university ARs were scrutinised, from which 1104 CNA statements were identified and categorised into strengths, weaknesses, mixed judgments and descriptive affirmations. The findings show that the analysed ARs provide rather analytic than descriptive information. Overall, 70% of the judgments were recognised either as strengths or weaknesses. Furthermore, it is shown that there is a high statistical correlation between the contents of the analysed ARs and the final accreditation score given by the CNA. Teaching-learning process, and operational results were the criteria exhibiting more weaknesses. Results of the content analysis shows that performance indicators are the main issue of Chilean HEIs, among which graduation rate was the most problematic one. Other complications were also found, such as inadequate self-evaluation process, and different provision quality. The study also highlighted that the treatment of the judgments varies between ARs, which could affect the remedial measures developed by HEIs.

## I. Introduction

Over the past 30 years, quality assurance (QA) frameworks have been widely adopted globally to assess and enhance higher education quality (Tight, 2012; Bernasconi, 2015). External Quality Assurance (EQA) emerged from new public management policies and neoliberal reforms targeting higher education (Jarvis, 2014). Key drivers include higher education massification, increased providers, diverse quality levels, funding limitations, and the tension between university autonomy and accountability (Espinoza & Gonzales, 2012; Zou et al., 2012). EQA enables governments to evaluate the education sector's capacity to meet societal, economic, and student needs (Hazelkorn et al., 2018).

Broadly speaking, EQA is composed of four main stages. First, a national agency organises EQA processes. Second, an internal self-evaluation is performed by the HEIs. Third, an external examination is carried out to triangulate the self-evaluation with external standards and criteria for quality. Finally, a report is written, which provides the main results of the evaluation (Stensaker, 2000; Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). In Chile, the EQA process began as a pilot scheme in 1998, becoming formalized through Law 20,129 in 2006, which created the legal framework for institutional accreditation through the National Accreditation Commission (CNA).

There has been an international rise in criticism of the output and impact of the EQA. Although there is a consensus that the impacts of EQA are not easy to measure (Harvey, 2018; Kajaste et al., 2015), there is not enough research about the effects of EQA (Stensaker, 2014). Beerkens (2018) explains that despite all the available positive evidence about EQA, a legitimate question remains: "whether graduates now walk out with better knowledge and skills as a result of quality reform" (2018, p. 274). It seems that there is an increasing need to evaluate the work performed by the EQA agencies.

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the suitability of CNA ARs as a source of information for institutions and students. The main research question that guides this study is: Can accreditation reports be suitable as a source of information for institutions and students? To respond to this research question, the study evaluates ARs in terms of the meaningfulness of the information provided, characterises the contents, and finally evaluates the complexity of statements and descriptions.

## II. Literature Review: Outcomes of EQA

Research on EQA has examined various aspects of QA frameworks, yet studies focusing on the specific outputs of QA agencies, such as ARs are limited. This section reviews studies that analysed ARs and their impacts on HEIs across different international contexts and in Chile.

Stensaker (2000) conducted an analysis of 36 ARs from the Swedish QA agency, investigating whether recommendations in these reports could lead to institutional isomorphism. He found that the judgments were often broad, abstract, and lacking specific instructions for implementation, allowing HEIs to individualized strategies, reducing the risk of institutional uniformity. Stensaker (2012) later cautioned that these flexible approaches might lead to results that diverge from the original goals of the ARs.

In Australia, Baird (2007) analysed 26 ARs to assess university governance, finding that ARs contributed to governance standards by institutionalizing best practices as minimum requirements. Shah (2012) used a mixed-methods approach, incorporating interviews and AR analysis, to examine audit cycle impacts from 2001 to 2010, noting improvements in leadership, management, and quality culture development. Burdett and Crossman (2012) reviewed 14 ARs, exploring internationalization approaches in universities. They found ARs identified areas needing improvement, like student engagement and language skills, though interpretations of internationalization varied across institutions. Their study underscores ARs as valuable yet underused resources for research.

In Finland, the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) conducted a meta-evaluation of 19 ARs from 2005 to 2008, assessing the effectiveness of its own work. The study found that while ARs followed a standardized structure, they were tailored to the context of each institution, complicating comparisons. The report called for more critical evaluations of quality assurance systems, echoing Williams and Harvey's (2015) recommendation for increased scrutiny of QA processes.

In Chile, Lemaitre et al. (2012) analysed 10 ARs from two accreditation cycles and found that institutions with longer accreditation periods had more established quality cultures. Interviews with institutional

leaders also suggested that EQA had improved management practices, similar to Shah's (2012) findings. Zapata and Clasing (2016) examined 80 ARs to assess the consistency of evaluation criteria among private quality agencies in Chile. The study revealed significant variations in the depth and quality of evaluations, underscoring the need for greater transparency in the accreditation process.

### III. Chilean EQA system

EQA began in 1998 with voluntary evaluations, formalized by Law 20,129 in 2006, which established state responsibility for quality assurance in higher education. The CNA oversees evaluations at three levels: institutional, undergraduate, and graduate. HEIs undergo assessments on internal consistency and receive accreditation scores from 0 to 7 years. Mandatory areas include institutional management and undergraduate teaching, with additional evaluations upon request. The process includes self-evaluation, peer review, and a CNA Council decision, culminating in a public AR detailing each institution's strengths and weaknesses. The CNA has established specific criteria and standards for both mandatory and optional dimensions (see Table 1) to guide evaluations, ensuring a structured, state-supported accreditation process.

Table 1: Criteria per dimension of accreditation based in CNA (2013)

| Dimension |                                                  |                                                    |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Criteria  | Institutional management                         | Teaching at the undergraduate level                |
|           | 1. Internal self-evaluation                      | 1. Purpose                                         |
|           | 2. University mission and institutional purposes | 2. Design and provision of undergraduate programme |
|           | 3. Organisational structure and governance       | 3. Teaching and learning process                   |
|           | 4. Human resources                               | 4. Teachers and academic resources                 |
|           | 5. Management of resources                       | 5. Students                                        |
|           | 6. Financial resources                           | 6. Research for teaching purposes                  |
|           | 7. Institutional analysis                        |                                                    |

### IV. Methodology

This study assesses the usability of Ars for HEIs and students, focusing on the meaningfulness and evaluative content of ARs. It analysed 17 ARs from university-level accreditation processes conducted between 2013 and 2018, representing 34.6% of the total (see Table 2). Judgments were categorized using Zapata and Clasing's (2016) coding scheme (See Table 3), with descriptive statistics and correlations applied to explore judgment distribution and the relationship between accreditation length and judgments. Content analysis targeted areas showing significant weaknesses to address the research question.

Table 2: Selection of cases

| Group     | Band by year of accreditation | Quality category <sup>1</sup> | N ARs | Years of accreditation | University Name (in Spanish)                          | Abbreviation |
|-----------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Group 0   | Band cero years               | Inadequate                    | 3     | 0                      | Universidad del Pacífico                              | UPAC         |
|           |                               |                               |       | 0                      | Universidad Gabriela Mistral                          | UGM          |
|           |                               |                               |       | 0                      | Universidad SEK                                       | USEK         |
| Group 2-3 | Band 2 to 3 years             | Sufficient                    | 2     | 2                      | Universidad Tecnológica de Chile Inacap               | UINACAP      |
|           |                               |                               |       | 3                      | Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación | UMCE         |
| Group 4-5 | Band 4 to 5 years             | Satisfactory                  | 9     | 4                      | Universidad Adventista de Chile                       | UADC         |

<sup>1</sup> Categorisation of quality in relation to the number of years of accreditation (CNA,2014, p.4)

|           |                   |             |   |   |                                                        |          |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------|---|---|--------------------------------------------------------|----------|
|           |                   |             |   | 4 | Universidad Arturo Prat                                | UPRAT    |
|           |                   |             |   | 4 | Universidad Autónoma De Chile                          | UATONOMA |
|           |                   |             |   | 4 | Universidad de La Serena                               | USERENA  |
|           |                   |             |   | 4 | Universidad de Magallanes                              | UMAG     |
|           |                   |             |   | 4 | Universidad de Playa Ancha de Ciencias de la Educación | UPLA     |
|           |                   |             |   | 5 | Universidad Católica del Maule                         | UCM      |
|           |                   |             |   | 5 | Universidad de Talca                                   | UTALCA   |
|           |                   |             |   | 5 | Universidad de Atacama                                 | UTA      |
| Group 6-7 | Band 6 to 7 years | Outstanding | 3 | 6 | Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso          | PUCV     |
|           |                   |             |   | 6 | Universidad de La Frontera                             | UFRO     |
|           |                   |             |   | 7 | Universidad de Chile                                   | UCH      |

Table 3: Categorisation of accreditation judgments

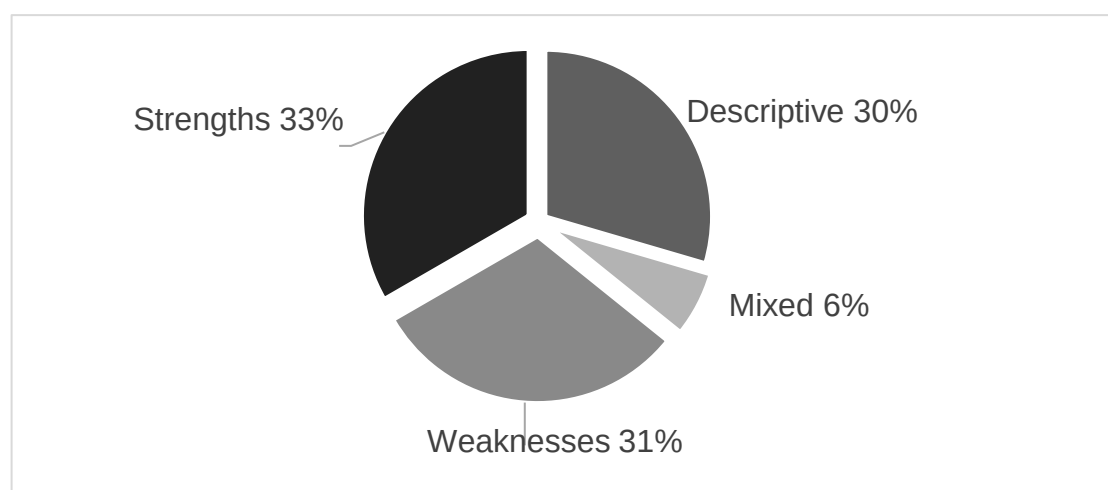
| Categorization         | Examples of judgments                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Descriptive</b>     | <i>"the HEI has a mission", "the institutional purposes are (...)",</i>                                                                  |
| <b>Strength</b>        | <i>"the access system is adequate", "the mechanisms (...) are outstanding"</i>                                                           |
| <b>Weakness</b>        | <i>"the performance indicators don't show adequate results, the graduation rate is very low and decreasing (...).</i>                    |
| <b>Mix composition</b> | <i>"the efforts to address the low performance indicators are correct, however, the performance indicators results are urgent task".</i> |

## V. Quantitative results and discussion

### Descriptive statistic

Overall, descriptions, strengths, and weaknesses are included in approximately 1/3 of the judgements, and the mixed categorisation only provides 6% of the total (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Distribution of judgment classes in percentages

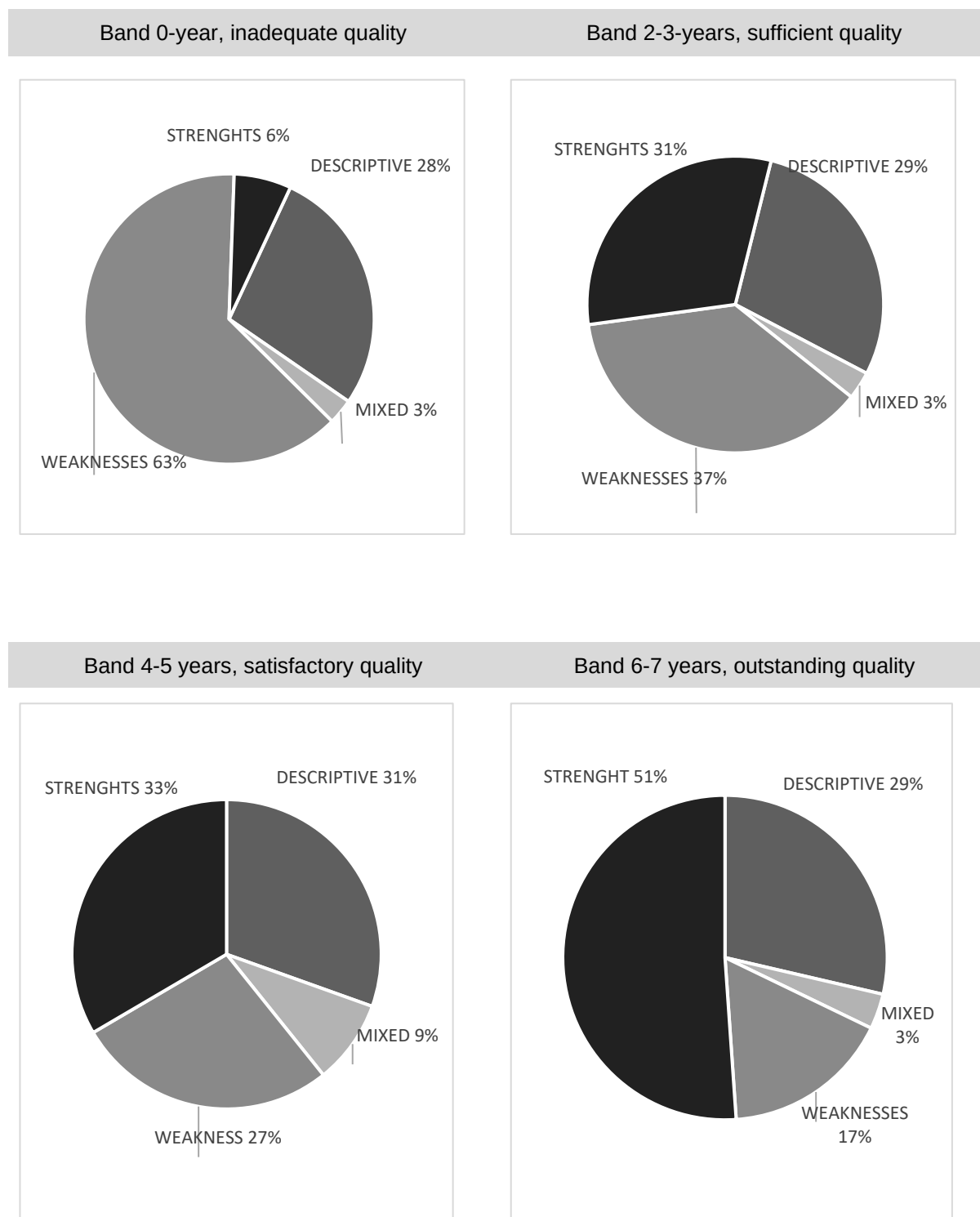


From these results, it is possible to argue that the ARs offer valuable information for HEIs in terms of numbers of judgements. As Figure 1 shows, 70% of the judgement statements are recognised as weaknesses, strengths, or a mixture (weakness + strength). ARs are by no means only descriptive

documents that only reproduce the information provided by HEIs, they provide valuable information, are far more analytical than descriptive.

The distribution of categorized judgments by accreditation level shows distinct patterns: Band 0 has mostly weaknesses (63%) and few strengths (6%), while Band 6-7 features more strengths (51%) and fewer weaknesses (17%). This suggests quantitative coherence between the balance of strengths/weaknesses and accreditation duration.

Figure 2: Distribution of judgment classes by band of years of accreditation



### Distribution of strengths and weaknesses

The analysis reveals similar judgment distribution across dimensions, with institutional management having slightly more statements. Weaknesses concentrate in teaching-learning and operational conditions (20%), while strengths are evenly spread across eighteen criteria. Descriptive judgments (17.7%) primarily focus on teaching-learning and student composition, showing no dominant criterion allocation.

Table 5: Judgments by dimension and criteria

|                                     | Criteria                                        | Strengths  |            | Weaknesses |            | Mixed     |            | Descriptive |            | Total       |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
|                                     |                                                 | N          | %          | N          | %          | N         | %          | N           | %          |             |
| Institutional management            | Internal self-evaluation                        | 14         | 3.8        | 24         | 7.0        | 7         | 10.1       | 17          | 5.2        | 62          |
|                                     | Mission and institutional purpose               | 19         | 5.2        | 9          | 2.6        | 3         | 4.3        | 27          | 8.3        | 58          |
|                                     | Organisational structure and governance         | 28         | 7.6        | 15         | 4.4        | 2         | 2.9        | 18          | 5.5        | 63          |
|                                     | Human resources                                 | 27         | 7.3        | 14         | 4.1        | 2         | 2.9        | 22          | 6.7        | 65          |
|                                     | Material resources                              | 23         | 6.3        | 16         | 4.7        | 5         | 7.2        | 17          | 5.2        | 61          |
|                                     | Financial resources                             | 22         | 6.0        | 23         | 6.7        | 5         | 7.2        | 6           | 1.8        | 56          |
|                                     | Institutional analysis                          | 17         | 4.6        | 15         | 4.4        | 4         | 5.8        | 13          | 4.0        | 49          |
| Teaching at the undergraduate level | Design and provision of undergraduate programme | 21         | 5.7        | 17         | 5.0        | 8         | 11.6       | 25          | 7.7        | 71          |
|                                     | Teachers and academic resources                 | 15         | 4.1        | 26         | 7.6        | 0         | 0.0        | 31          | 9.5        | 72          |
|                                     | Students                                        | 13         | 3.5        | 10         | 2.9        | 5         | 7.2        | 33          | 10.1       | 61          |
|                                     | Research for teaching purposes                  | 11         | 3.0        | 13         | 3.8        | 1         | 1.4        | 17          | 5.2        | 42          |
|                                     | Teaching and learning process                   | 16         | 4.3        | 30         | 8.8        | 3         | 4.3        | 41          | 12.6       | 90          |
|                                     | Purpose                                         | 14         | 3.8        | 5          | 1.5        | 2         | 2.9        | 29          | 8.9        | 50          |
| General evaluation                  | Institutional purposes                          | 32         | 8.7        | 26         | 7.6        | 1         | 1.4        | 9           | 2.8        | 68          |
|                                     | QA policies and mechanisms                      | 33         | 9.0        | 26         | 7.6        | 9         | 13.0       | 10          | 3.1        | 78          |
|                                     | Operational condition and results               | 27         | 7.3        | 40         | 11.7       | 6         | 8.7        | 6           | 1.8        | 79          |
|                                     | Self-regulation                                 | 27         | 7.3        | 24         | 7.0        | 5         | 7.2        | 5           | 1.5        | 61          |
|                                     | Progress since last accreditation.              | 9          | 2.4        | 8          | 2.3        | 1         | 1.4        | 0           | 0.0        | 18          |
| <b>Total</b>                        |                                                 | <b>368</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>341</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>69</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>326</b>  | <b>100</b> | <b>1104</b> |

## Correlation

Statistical correlations between the resulting years of accreditation and numbers of strengths and weaknesses judgements were calculated in order to understand the relationship between these components and evaluate the coherence of the contents of ARs with the results of the accreditations given by CNA.

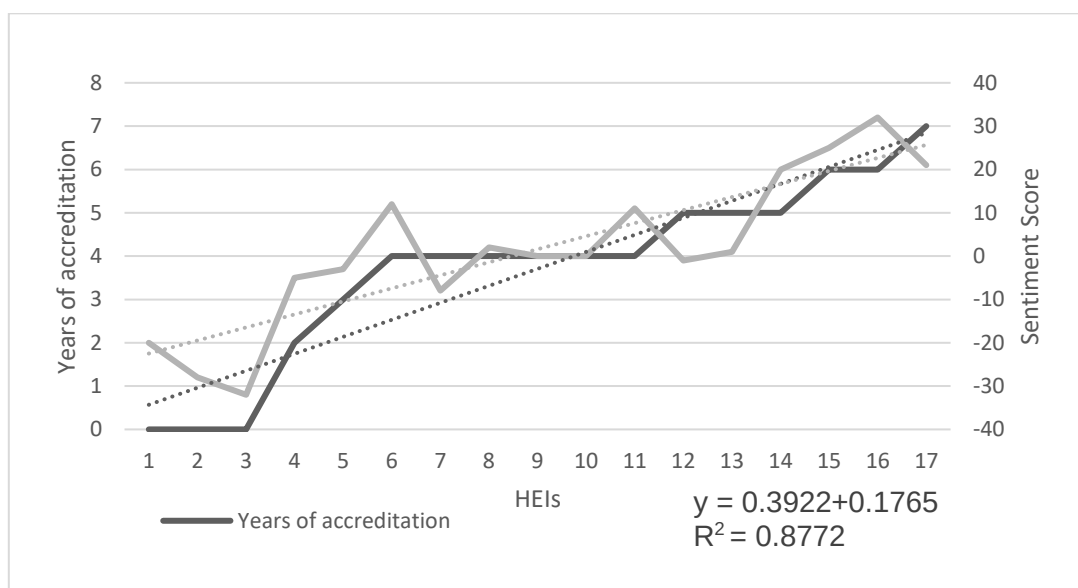
Inspired by the polarity classification used commonly in sentiment analysis, a +1 (positive) was assigned to each of the strength judgements and a -1 (negative) to weakness judgements. These numbers were then added to each AR. As a result, one number (sentiment score) was produced for each AR, which would summarise the total polarity of the AR, that is, how much the AR is positive or negative for the analysed HEI.

For instance, if an AR has 40 strength statements and 30 weakness statements, the sentiment score would be  $+10 = (+1) * 40 + (-1) * 30$ . The mixed and descriptive statements were not considered, due to their nature.

Correlation was then carried out between each sentiment score and the years of accreditation given per HEIs. In this way it is possible to infer the degree of consistency between the number of strength/weakness judgments of each ARs and the resulting number of years of accreditation.

As Figure 6 shows, there is a high level of correlation between the sentiment score and years of accreditation ( $R^2 = 0.8772$ ). That is to say, more years of accreditation mean that ARs have more strengths. This correlation indicated that the degree of consistency and coherence between the ARs and results, is very high, at least in terms of numbers.

Figure 3: Correlation between sentiment score and years of accreditation



## VI. Qualitative results

### Dimension: Institutional management

- Criterion: Self-evaluation process

The analysis of self-assessment and improvement plans in accreditation reports revealed that 8 out of 17 HEIs had overly descriptive, unclear, or insufficiently critical evaluation processes. Five ARs noted

low student participation, while others criticized unrealistic goals, lack of assigned managers, and inadequate financial resources. Many HEIs struggled with effective self-assessment, despite its importance for quality assurance and organizational change. As academic literature (Marti, 2016; CINDA, 2012) emphasizes, self-evaluation should be reflective, open, and critical to inspire meaningful improvements within HEIs.

- Criterion: Human resources

This criterion assesses human resources policies, including recruitment, training, evaluation, and staffing. About one-third of judgments describe policies without evaluation, merely replicating university-provided data. While potentially useful for external stakeholders, the lack of evaluation limits insights on staff adequacy. Strengths noted include adequate staffing, training, and assessment policies, with 8 of 17 reports indicating sufficient academic and administrative staff. Weaknesses were fewer, mostly addressing issues like inadequate promotion or career development policies.

Dimension: Teaching at the undergraduate level

- Criterion: Teaching-learning process

This criterion indicates all the mechanisms related with admission and selection processes, formative models, evaluation procedures and performance indicators and mechanisms (CNA, 2013, p.3) . 13 themes arose from the inductive analysis. Amongst these, performance indicators (PIs), admission processes, and formative model were the most common, as seen in Table 6.

Table 6: Distribution of themes in teaching and learning process criteria

| Theme                               | Categories |            |          |             | Total     | %          |
|-------------------------------------|------------|------------|----------|-------------|-----------|------------|
|                                     | Strengths  | Weaknesses | Mixed    | Descriptive |           |            |
| <i>Performance indicators (PIs)</i> | 4          | 22         | 2        | 14          | 42        | 46.67      |
| <i>Admission process</i>            | 5          | 1          | 0        | 10          | 16        | 17.78      |
| <i>Formative model</i>              | 2          | 3          | 1        | 7           | 13        | 14.44      |
| <i>Curriculum</i>                   | 1          | 2          | 0        | 0           | 3         | 3.33       |
| <i>Applicant's profile</i>          | 1          | 1          | 0        | 1           | 3         | 3.33       |
| <i>PSU score</i>                    | 1          | 0          | 0        | 2           | 3         | 3.33       |
| <i>Accreditation</i>                | 0          | 0          | 0        | 2           | 2         | 2.22       |
| <i>Other</i>                        | 1          | 0          | 0        | 1           | 2         | 2.22       |
| <i>Monitoring of the results</i>    | 0          | 0          | 0        | 2           | 2         | 2.22       |
| <i>Teacher training</i>             | 1          | 0          | 0        | 0           | 1         | 1.11       |
| <i>Academic evaluation</i>          | 0          | 0          | 0        | 1           | 1         | 1.11       |
| <i>Enrolment</i>                    | 0          | 0          | 0        | 1           | 1         | 1.11       |
| <i>Student places available</i>     | 0          | 1          | 0        | 0           | 1         | 1.11       |
| <b>Total</b>                        | <b>16</b>  | <b>30</b>  | <b>3</b> | <b>41</b>   | <b>90</b> | <b>100</b> |

One relevant insight is that the majority of PIs are classified as weaknesses, close to one third as descriptive statements, and only 9% are strengths.

The analysis shows that most performance indicator (PI) judgments in accreditation reports (ARs) are categorized as weaknesses, with only 9% as strengths. Some ARs provide detailed analysis on various PIs (e.g., retention, graduation rates), while others offer limited or purely descriptive data, lacking consistent judgment across institutions. It seems that although performance indicators are a general problem for the HES, CNA does not provide consistent information or judgments for all HEIs. The inconsistency of PIs judgments provided by CNA could have complicated the institutional understanding about what constitutes reasonable and good PIs. With such a diversity of providers, the national agency should deliver better guidance for them. Furthermore, as Stensaker (2000) found in his research, if the guidance provided by the agency is too wide, this could affect the future actions carried out by HEIs. The actions may not be adequate, or not in concordance with the aim defined in the first place by the agency.

Dimension: General evaluation

- Criterion: Operational condition and results

This criterion assesses if institutional conditions (facilities, resources, policies) support the mission and outcomes of HEIs. It contains many statements, with performance indicators (PIs) frequently identified as weaknesses, emphasizing the need for improvement. Facilities and resources also emerged as critical themes, with many judgments highlighting disparities between campuses and, in some cases, noting that poor conditions risk the institution's mission continuity and effectiveness

- Criterion: QA policies and mechanisms

This criterion, per CNA (Law 20129), evaluates HEI quality policies and mechanisms. Analysis reveals diverse themes, with notable variation in QA policy effectiveness across institutions. In seven ARs, CNA observed inconsistencies in policy application across campuses or programs, leading to differing quality levels between faculties or study modalities.

## VII. Conclusions

The study generated a categorisation of the statements. In total, 1104 judgments were identified either as strengths, weaknesses, mixed or descriptive affirmations. Statistical indicators and content analysis were developed to evaluate the complexity of the statements. Overall, 70% of the judgments are recognised as strengths or weaknesses. ARs are therefore more analytic than descriptive, as documents. Furthermore, the correlation performed demonstrated that there is a high level of consistency between the ARs and the accreditation results given by CNA.

The content analysis indicated that the teaching-learning process and operational results criteria had more identified weaknesses. The main problem identified for Chilean HEIs is low student performance, for which graduation rate was the most problematic indicator. Other issues were identified, such as inadequate self-evaluation process, or the different quality of the provision. The study also highlighted that the treatment of the judgments varies between ARs.

ARs evaluated in this research, did provide valuable information for HEIs, although students and families could benefit from the information in ARs, it seems that the prime target audience of the ARs are HEIs. This study suggests several implications for practices and policies. For instance, the CNA could benefit from the systematic type of this research, as it constitutes a meta-evaluation of performance by the agency. This type of analysis identifies the most critical areas faced by HEIs. For example, in the case of inadequate self-evaluation processes, CNA could develop training for HEIs.

The findings offer several opportunities for further research, such as bigger samples or comparative studies could also be developed between HEIs. Finally, more research is needed regarding the impacts of EQA on HEIs. More than 14 years after the creation of CNA, it is necessary to understand whether ARs are helping HEIs to improve the quality of their educational provision, researchers have pointed out this necessity.

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