



**Quality assurance policies in Peruvian higher
education:**

**The Institutional Licensing Model and its implications for
institutional management in public universities**

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List of acronyms

BQC	Basic Quality Conditions
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
ILM	Institutional Licensing Model
MINEDU	Ministry of Education
SUNEDU	National Superintendency of Higher Education
SINEACE	National Accreditation System of Higher Education
PNAC	National Policy of Quality Assurance
PM	Process Management
QA	Quality Assurance
QAM	Quality Assurance Mechanism
QAS	Quality Assurance System

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Abstract

This research explored the implications of Institutional Licensing, a mandatory quality assurance mechanism applied since 2016, in the understanding, commitments and practices of institutional management in Peruvian public universities, but also analyzed to what extent this mechanism helped to laid solid foundations for a better educational quality. By using a qualitative methodology focused on in-depth interviews with administrative staff from universities, this document aimed to contribute with the knowledge on the implications of quality assurance mechanisms.

Findings revealed that although Licensing was initially perceived as a control mechanism, the implementation of it gradually propelled an identification with the value of quality in institutions, despite the limitations in its design and implementation. However, even with the progress in management practices oriented towards quality, there are still meaningful challenges for the sustainability of these changes, especially with limited resources and normative changes. This suggests the need for a quality assurance approach that converges with the diverse needs of the public higher education institutions.

Relevance to Development studies

This study is relevant for development studies as it adds to further understanding of how the institutional management of this group of institutions faced and committed with a new quality assurance mechanism of big scope, considering particular struggles because of their public nature. Given the fact that public higher education is relevant from socio-economic and equalitarian viewpoints, an understanding of this is important to propel continuous improvement towards quality in higher education institutions. Besides, by exploring behind the curtains of the compliance process, this research not only contributes academically, but also provides further insights into the higher education field to policy practitioners and university staff that could allow them to promote different strategies for sustainable and continuous commitment towards quality education.

Keywords

Higher education, public universities, quality assurance, institutional management

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Nature of the problem

The adoption of neoliberal policies like deregulation and privatization in the late nineties caused significant changes in how the Peruvian state managed the provision of services. In the higher education field this phenomenon led to the approval of an inadequate self-regulated institutional framework. In addition to an increasing and diversified demand for education, this led to remarkable changes in the constituency of the higher education system (Benites, 2021, p. 3). From a sector mostly constituted by public universities in charge of the provision of educational services it shifted towards one with the predominance of the private supply, because of an increasing number of private lucrative entities. Although the higher education system increased in size and coverage, also did the concerns regarding quality, as there were no suitable mechanisms of assessment and control (British Council, 2016, p. 7).

In this scenario the Peruvian government began a new process of university reform in the attempt to work towards assuring quality in higher education (ibid, 2016, p. 7). The Congress launched the University Law 30220 in 2014 which became the milestone of the reform. This new regulatory framework sought to correct the inadequate provision of higher education by reorganizing and regulating the Peruvian universities with a new set of rules and actors in the attempt to promote and achieve quality education in higher education. So, two were the main changes that this regulation brought: the Ministry of Education (MINEDU) became the rector in matters of higher education and the National Superintendency of Higher Education (SUNEDU) was created, an autonomous public entity with the task of overseeing and maneuvering the functioning of universities through the Licensing Process.

According to the University Law and framed in the Quality Assurance National Policy, Licensing was a mandatory regulatory mechanism with the objective of guaranteeing the compliance of universities with a minimum level of quality in the provision of the higher education service (Ley Universitaria, 2014, p. 22). Formally introduced in 2015 through the “Licensing Model” (LM), it consisted of eight Basic Quality Conditions (BQC) which covered the more essential elements that constitute the higher educational service: curricula, teaching staff, infrastructure, research and innovation, complementary services, among others (SUNEDU, 2015, p. 27).

The application of this quality-based policy in Peru indeed generated positive systemic changes as it expelled from the educational market universities that did not properly meet the new requirements of the model. By 2021 almost fifty universities, mostly private, were denied the license and stopped offering educational services (Torres, 2024, n.p.). In that regard, Licensing became the most relevant tool of the National Policy of Quality Assurance, as it was an important first step in the reconfiguration of the university system that aimed to protect individuals and society from poor educational services (SUNEDU, 2015, p. 5).

However, the implementation of Licensing represented a major challenge for the Peruvian universities as it implied an adaptation towards the several requirements of the Basic Quality Conditions (BQC). Even private universities which had full disposal of their autonomy faced struggles in the process, particularly to attend management shortages in Conditions IV and V, related to guarantee adequate lines of research and teaching staff respectively (RPP, 2017, n.p.). For public universities, the scenario was more demanding since they use and depend on resources provided by the state. This means that they are held accountable by it, but also by society to provide results within a limited time and compromising lesser quantity of economic resources (Murillo, 2019, n.p.). A negative result of the process, this is a license denied, would mean an inefficient and highly costly public investment with strong social repercussions.

To face this new panorama, the management of public universities required the deployment of institutional capacities to overcome challenges that could emerge in the way. In this regard, university management, a composition of different mechanisms of planning, leadership, and control among others, was put to the test to guarantee their commitment and compromise towards quality, but also to safeguard the university's functioning. The availability of resources in public universities, but mostly their capacity of management is key to the achievement of institutional purposes in relation to public value and quality, but also to have meaningful progress in the education system (Bendezú et al., 2023, p. 357; PuntoEdu, 2017, n.p.), something yearned for as the University Reform came in.

By 2024 all forty-nine public universities obtained their licenses that guaranteed their existence. However, there is little exploration on how management conducted the process of compliance, especially considering how heterogeneous this group of institutions is. A glimpse into this process could be extracted from data on how long their processes lasted. In 2016, the first year of the implementation of the Licensing Model, out of twenty public universities that had to present their request of license none of them passed the assessment

that year. The first public university, Universidad Nacional Agraria la Molina, obtained the license in March 2017, almost three months ahead of the agreed date, and the scenario was similar for the rest of the public universities as their processes took longer than what was indicated in the instructions of the model.

Besides the dates of License Resolutions, it is unexplored how Institutional Licensing influenced public universities' perceptions on the importance and commitment towards quality assurance. But it is also uncharted how they adapted their institutional management practices to achieve an appropriate commitment that could also lay the foundations for continuous efforts towards better quality. The implementation of quality assurance policies like Institutional Licensing, though having a clear purpose towards the improvement of quality could also bring challenges and difficulties that are still unknown, particularly in the public sector.

1.2 Justification

Currently public universities represent almost half the institutions of the Peruvian higher education system, with around 370,000 students, representing 25% of the total enrollment (MINEDU, 2023, p. 15). From a more societal point of view, public universities and the services they offer play an important role in the democratization of higher education, as they give the opportunity to thousands of students to access higher education with more affordable conditions, especially in a country of high disparities where only 3 out of 10 graduates from basic education can access higher education (MINEDU, 2020, p. 27), and where for some regions the unique offer of higher educational services comes from public institutions (PUCP, 2021, n.p.).

Public universities are important in the improvement of education; nevertheless, they have historically faced management deficiencies like resource allocation, strategic planning, or lack of managerial leadership, which tend to undermine their efforts to add to the value chain of university education (Bendezú et al., 2023, n.p.; Fernández, 2008, p.7). The undertaking of a University Reform and the implementation of Institutional Licensing in the country certainly represented a new panorama for public universities. This scenario required adjustments and commitments on an institutional level, to a new quality assurance mechanism that aimed to contribute with the guarantee of quality.

Different studies have been done in relation to these events. Benavides et al. (2019, p. 1027) conducted a descriptive study which identified that institutional relationships

between the market, the state and universities led to a market-based approach that guided the policy process on the University Reform in Peru. Meanwhile, Stuart (2022, p. 39) with a historical analysis approach found that actions deployed from MINEDU, and its former ministers had repercussions in shaping the policy process and work towards strengthening the regulatory framework. On a different level the World Bank (2020, p. 39) did a report on the overall Peruvian Quality Assurance System, highlighting the importance of its mechanisms, but also precisising the lack of articulation between them in the quest for higher more quality.

These studies, although exploring the reorganization of the quality assurance system and the context in which it took place, are mostly focused on a systemic level. Nonetheless, there is still a gap in relation to in-depth studies that pay attention to universities as main actors in the Licensing process. Particularly in the exploration on how university management oversaw compliance with a new compulsory quality assurance mechanism, but also how perceptions of university staff were influenced as they tend to shape the degree of commitment towards quality. Although academic debates recognize the positive effects of quality assurance mechanism regarding educational outcomes and changes in institutional management (Harvey, 2006 in Lemaitre et al., 2012, p. 24), they also highlight how these policy mechanisms might tend to create challenges and struggles, particularly for public universities, in their attempt to deal with the requirements of quality assessment (Taousanidis & Antoniadou, 2010, p. 90; Recendez Guerrero, 2011, p. 10).

In this regard, this study attempts to do a further exploration on how Licensing influenced institutional practices, as well as the understanding and commitment towards quality assurance from the point of view of public universities. This approximation could be helpful in the attempt to endorse or contest the continuous use of standardized quality frameworks or to migrate towards more flexible ones considering that the Licensing Model was the first process of systemic institutional quality assurance. As highlighted by Newton (2010, p. 52) more empirical research regarding the perceptions of systems of quality in institutions and staff in higher education is needed to have a better and deeper understanding on how quality systems and quality policies are experienced.

1.3 Research questions

Following the problematization presented in the introduction chapter the research question is the following:

Main question:

How did the Institutional Licensing, as a mechanism of quality assurance, influence the understandings, commitments, and practices of institutional management in Peruvian public universities to meet the Basic Quality Conditions (BQC) and sustain efforts towards quality?

Sub-questions:

1. How has the understanding and commitment of institutional management towards quality assurance in public universities been influenced by Institutional Licensing?
2. How did the institutional management of public universities navigate the Institutional Licensing process?
3. To what extent did Institutional Licensing help to laid foundations in the institutional management of public universities for continued efforts towards quality?

The remainder of the present research has six parts. Chapter 2 contains a literature review that discusses the conceptual framework related to institutional management, quality assurance, and the relationship between both in public universities. Meanwhile, Chapter 3 gives a portrayal of the state of quality in the Peruvian Higher education system and presents the Institutional Licensing Model. Chapter 4 develops the methodological part of the research. While Chapter 5 presents the findings from the qualitative methods used, Chapter 6 brings in the discussion by applying the lenses of the conceptual framework. Lastly, Chapter 7 provides the conclusion and recommendations of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature review

The purpose of this chapter is to give a further depiction on the main concepts related to the research topic: quality assurance and institutional management in higher education, and an exploration on the relation between them, with a particular focus on public universities.

2.1 Conceptual framework

2.1.1 Institutional management in higher education

Management is a concept that emerged in the private sector and business field as a need for institutions to conduct decision-making processes that help them to reach their goals effectively. According to Rodríguez et al. (2016, p. 65), there is a consensus on the universal way of realizing management which mainly involves the following functions: planning, organization, execution, command, and control. This concept made its way into different arenas, and it became relevant in higher education, particularly in the discussion on how to

oversee institutions. As Ali et al. pointed out it can be understood as “an effort to apply various principles and functions of management in the management of education in tertiary institutions” (2020, p. 457).

Universities as institutions need elements that allow them to integrate but also coordinate all the activities they oversee, especially in a scenario of increasing demand for educational services, a shortcut in financial resources and increasing expectations from different stakeholders within and outside universities (UNESCO, 1996, p. 74).

In the process of literature review, it was noted that the term *university management* was used as a similar concept that refers to *institutional management* (Cejas & Alfonso, 2012, n.p.). While the second is a general term, the first one refers to institutional management done in universities. However, in this research both concepts are used interchangeably, having clarified this, an exploration of this concept is provided.

UNESCO (1996, p. 82) refers to institutional management in universities as “a concept that includes the following functions: planning, organization, leadership, control and development”, this approximation highly resembles the general definition of what constitutes management as a solely concept. A deeper understanding of *university management* recognizes it as an inherent feature of universities that consist on a balanced functioning of an institution with its environment by a complete integration of its processes (academic, research, university extension, financial, strategic, among others) and the use of mechanisms that allows a coherent and articulated operation to achieve core and missional purposes (Lemaitre et al., 2012; Galarza & Almuñías, 2007 in Rodríguez et al., 2016, p. 65). Some authors precise that those missional purposes in the Latin American context constitute the continuous improvement of education and research (Cejas & Alfonso, 2012, n.p.).

Institutional management is the central axe in the functioning of universities as it provides support to fulfill their main objectives, but it is also an important change tool (UNESCO, 1996, p. 73; Quispe-Aquise et al., 2023, p. 594). However, universities are entities with diverse features, which demand flexibility and a constant process of construction and perfectioning of institutional management principles to provide integral, permanent, and systematic solutions to the diverse challenges that could emerge depending on their context (Cejas & Alfonso, 2012, n.p; Ali et al., 2020, p. 457).

In relation to flexibility and dynamization of management, some authors suggest that on a systemic level it could be more convenient to only define a basic structure and parameters for the management of universities, so they can have a proper alignment of their

functioning towards national goals of higher education and a proper use of their scarce resources (Rock & Rojas, 2012, p. 184). And specifically in relation to the management of resources Recendez and Rodríguez (2011, p. 5) highlighted the relevance of promoting policies that allow the diversification of the gathering of resources, which in simple words meant improving one of the dimensions of institutional management of universities which is the capacity to capture funds to raise their availability of income.

Since the challenges faced by universities increased and changed, the handling of them became a more complex issue, and quality became an important feature that added pressure and demanded more effective management from universities. As Kevans exposed, institutional management became a key aspect for the educational process so the achievement of quality standards could be guaranteed (2020, p. 158). Not only maintaining but also improving quality was an additional task that institutional managers had to be responsible for (Chukwunenye, 2004, p. 52). This scenario was even more demanding in the public sphere, where universities use and depend on resources provided by the state, which means that they are held accountable by society to provide results within a limited time and compromising the less quantity of economic resources (Murillo, 2019, n.p.).

2.1.2 Quality assurance in higher education

To talk about quality assurance in higher education, it is also important to have a brief understanding of how quality came to be a critical issue in this field.

A brief exploration of the quality issue

The debates around quality in the higher education realm began in the mid-eighties in Western European countries, where governments changed their perception on how to control and maneuver their higher education systems. These changes in the way universities were governed were explained by Neave (1998, p. 269), through the concept of the “evaluative state” where the state changed its traditional “controller” role through regulation, to an “evaluative” and oversight role, where evaluation of quality became a key element to assess the commitment of institutions to regulatory frameworks and defined policy objectives. This shift in the policy field meant that the public sector welcomed the application of managerial strategies and techniques from the private sector (Musselin and Teixeira, 2014 in Benavides et al., 2019, p. 1016).

In addition to these changes, greater processes like marketization, massification and internationalization generated changes not only between the higher education institutions

and the government, but also with society, as there was a recognition of their key role in developing skilled humans and creating knowledge (Jones, 2013, p. 195). This led to the outside world to also putting their eyes onto quality (Newton, 2010, p.14; Penington, 1998, p.1). As emphasized by Newton (2010, p. 16) this increasing interest led to quality and quality standards being a ubiquitous issue globally. So, given the fact that quality was acknowledged as a key objective in higher education, particularly in universities, this raised the need to understand its nature and conceptual constituency.

Among all the diverse approximations to quality in higher education that different authors provided, this can be presented as a concept: complex to define, unclear, hard to articulate, slippery, multidimensional, and stakeholder-relative, since it is perceived and understood in different ways by different groups of people (Brockhoff et al., 2015, p.3; Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 10; Lemaitre et al., 2012, p. 25; Taousanidis & Antoniadou, 2010, p. 88), but also hard to apply to the educational context since it was taken from the entrepreneurial and industry fields (Newton, 2010, p. 52; Nicholson, 2011, p. 4). However, as Harvey and Green (1993, p. 29) stated, the fact that there are no right or wrong answers when defining quality in higher education does not absolve interest groups, like governments or universities, from the responsibility to maintain and enhance quality. And this idea is particularly relevant when discussing quality assurance.

Quality assurance in higher education

As the emergence and relevance of quality was a matter of discussion so were the debates on how to address the demands to ensure quality. The spread of the “new public managerialism” implied the change in the role of the government from being a promoter to become a controller. by introducing “the application of private-sector management strategies and techniques to the public sector” (Musselin and Teixeira, 2014 in Benavides et al., 2019, p. 1016). This brought a series of administrative changes in the ways countries oversaw their public services.

For higher education this meant a change from addressing policy issues to the management of issues that were more focused on accountability, this scenario made quality assurance a central tool of control (Taousanidis & Antoniadou, 2010, p. 88). Conceptions of quality assurance mostly emerged in Western Europe and USA, and those were the basis and main point of reference of the implementation of these models around the world, hence the low level of variance identified in the methods adopted by different agencies (Harvey & Williams, 2010, p. 24).

Quality assurance is defined as the set of “policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced” (Woodhouse, 1999 in Nicholson, 2011, p. 6). It can also be seen in a relational way as a continuous collaboration of higher education institutions with the state in an attempt to achieve an optimal development, of every institution but also as a system which satisfies the diverse needs of society (Espinoza, 2010, p. 9). Both these conceptions highlight not only the commitment to quality education, but also the compromise and involvement of the state and the universities to respond to the needs of society. However, some authors point out that these views on quality assurance tend to propel a strong focus on features like efficacy, efficiency, control, and applicability, but forget that education is not a field where everything can necessarily be measurable or programmable (Taousanidis & Antoniadou, 2010, p. 89).

The ways in which quality assurance are deployed depend on the purposes they respond to, and precisely this discussion became even more relevant than having a clear definition. Nicholson (2011, p. 6) highlighted two intentions of quality assurance, pervasive in the literature body: to ensure accountability and to bring improvement or enhancement. Accountability is usually related to external, but central stakeholders like the government or related agencies, in that sense it requires the use of metrics, or indicators to collect data and provide evidence. Mechanisms like accreditation, licensing, assessment, and audit, combined or alone, are relevant to monitor and preserve quality under this view (Espinoza, 2010, p. 10). Quality enhancement on the other hand is more related to the internal dynamics within an institution and examples of this perspective refer to educational processes like designing a curricula or student learning; and are more propelled by universities and academics (EUA, 2007, p 6; Newton, 2010, p. 51).

Most of the time accountability was prioritized by governments and the way the mechanisms were applied did not necessarily create further commitment towards continuous improvement. This resulted in a weak bond between policies of quality and the creation of innovative approaches of internal educational processes, which led to a perpetuation of the idea of accountability and enhancement being exclusive elements when indeed they work aligned (Nicholson, 2011, p. 8). Harvey and Williams (2010, p. 24) referred that until the early 2010 there was a “clear tension between quality assurance as a bureaucratic and administrative task and the improvement of the quality of academic endeavors” and the regimes of quality assurance were only in rarely occasions able to oversee them.

The predominance of the accountability approach was supported by the idea that quality assessment could guarantee the survival of the institution and became a valuable tool

to give legitimation to institutions (Manatos & Sarrico, 2023, p. 268). In addition to that, it also reinforced the idea of efficiency and adequate use of resources as it was also seen as a process of optimization with the objective of having “more for less” (Hogget, 1991 in Taousanidis & Antoniadou, 2010, p. 92) and the idea of effectiveness because it provided “a minimum standard of teaching and learning of students” Davidson et al. (2020, p. 1005).

An example of the implementation of quality assurance in Latin America in Chile. This case is usually pointed out as one of the countries who adopted higher education quality assurance earlier in the LA region in the beginning of the ninety’s decade. A diagnose realized by the World Bank in 2015 recognized strengths of the Chilean system but it also identified several shortcomings in the way quality assurance processes were implemented through the years.

One of the weaknesses was the high disconnect between licensing and accreditation, two of the main mechanisms of the quality assurance system. The lack of coordination and articulation of the actors in charge undermined the attempts to consolidate the quality assurance system, but also generated confusion regarding the system, its rules, and the actors in charge. The Licensing mechanism is recognized as an important “basic mechanism of entrance” into the higher education system that provides legitimacy, although features like the long duration of the process and the unlimited validity were not helpful to achieve the guarantee of quality of higher educational Chilean institutions (Banco Mundial, 2015, p. 22).

Since higher education is “entering an era in which a more nuanced understanding of what quality assurance and quality processes can or cannot do prevails” (Stensaker, 2008, p. 4), this implies a certain level of flexibility on the way quality assurance mechanisms are defined and deployed, especially to guarantee the existence of “a symbiotic relationship between internal and external procedures” (EUA, 2007, p. 82; Dano and Stensaker, 2007 in Harvey & Williams, 2010, p. 8). In that regard, there is a necessity from quality assurance frameworks to respond to the different realities and institutional dynamics. And this should address both predominant intentions of quality assurance: accountability and improvement-enhancement in such a way that goes beyond the predominance of one of the purposes but also to work sustainably towards quality.

2.1.3 Quality Assurance and Institutional Management

As mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter, quality assurance gained more relevance in the attempt to address the quality issue in higher education institutions, in that regard it also became a relevant factor in the way universities are structured and managed.

The application of different mechanisms demanded adjustments and changes in their policies and processes as well as daily practices to ensure their institutional compromise towards quality.

In some cases, the regulatory mandates brought by quality assurance mechanisms were perceived as being fundamental to support educational progress in the higher education system. That is the case of Asencio et al. (2019 in Gómez et al., 2024, p. 267) who considered Licensing a direct and effective mechanism to guarantee basic quality standards in higher education institutions, that also ended up strengthening the missional and core values of the institutions, like research and academic training. Nonetheless, there were also cases where concern might arise among institutions, especially in relation to methodologies of quality assurance not being a truthful representation of their true qualities and institutional efforts they made, devaluing their educational offer (Taousanidis & Antoniadou, 2010, p. 90).

When referring to the outcomes of quality assurance practices, Stensaker et al. (2011, p. 465) referred that the “impact of external quality assurance is much related to structural, organizational and managerial processes within higher education institutions”, but stressing that there was no clear evidence of improvements in the core aspects of universities related to teaching-learning process or the management of quality. This critique is related to what was highlighted by Rojas and Asdrubal (2016, p. 182) when referring that quality assurance mechanisms were becoming an end in itself, causing universities to adequate their ways of management without guaranteeing the expression of quality on the processes.

Further exploration into the observable outcomes indicates that quality assurance mechanisms contributed to the improvement of institutional management by creating and institutionalizing units and professional teams within the universities (Stensaker, 2008, pp. 4-6). These changes led to the elaboration of better documents of institutional diagnosis, planning tools, better information management and a more critical posture regarding mission and institutional values and the way they ended up being applied. (Rojas & Asdrubal, 2016, p. 182). Meanwhile a study conducted in universities from Germany, Finland and Romania found that despite their differences, a key common feature on their path for the construction of a more solid and coherent quality assurance policy for their institutions was the establishment of internal quality assurance mechanisms in strong alignment with external quality assurance mechanisms (Bejan et al., 2015, p. 367).

Part of these observable outcomes is also related to how certain university stakeholders and relations between them were influenced by the implementation of these mechanisms, which led to a redefinition of dynamics, roles, and responsibilities. On the one

hand researchers identified changes in power structures within higher education institutions. Quality assurance processes generated an increase in the institutional leadership and centralization of decision-making processes, but also in the participation of more stakeholders like students on internal management processes, as well as better cooperation between academic and directive staff, which is in alignment with a better clarification of responsibilities (Stensaker, 2008, pp. 4-6). A related discussed aspect was the support of authorities and directives in universities, according to Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018, p. 260) the presence of support from higher management levels in quality assurance procedures could be positively correlated to a perception of effectiveness of these mechanisms.

Another relevant stakeholder in the universities are quality managers, referred also as quality assurance officials in charge of the conduction and implementation of quality assurance processes. Although a better clarity of their functions is increasingly achieved, they usually face an “awkward position of having to justify their approaches and methods” (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018, p. 260) to obtain the attention and support of the rest of the university community in quality assurance matters. Their position allow them to have a more critical and strategic view on the procedures related to quality assurance, that is why they highlight that these are most beneficially when “they are (a) embedded in a comprehensive strategy with higher management and the QA unit working closely together, and (b) when they are also accepted as both a valuable contribution to the particular HEI’s evidence-based management agenda and as an indispensable part of the HEI’s research outputs.” (Ibid, 2018, p. 260)

However, some authors also criticized that quality assurance mechanisms lack a clear identification of a problem, and just end up providing unclear recommendations that lack the consideration of a follow-up assessment (Taousanidis & Antoniadou, 2010, p. 89) that could guarantee sustainability. In this regard the perception is that rather than working on the improving of quality these mechanisms tend to “classify, judge and to put HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) into competition with one another” (Ibid., 2010, p. 89).

To specify how quality assurance had effects on certain contexts, two studies done in the Latin American region are presented. In 2010, CINDA (2010 in Lemaitre et al., 2012, p. 31) conducted a study, with a mixed-methods approach, to explore how the effects of quality assurance were perceived in higher education institutions in seven countries that already applied QA processes (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Spain, and Portugal). The participants of the study include administrative and teaching staff, authorities, students, graduates as well as policy makers.

The main results of the study highlighted that higher education institutions acknowledged the importance of QA as a regulatory mechanism that is effective, however in cases where the capacity to regulate is weak incentives are needed. In addition, even though QA mechanisms might be seen as risks to the institution's autonomy, universities ended up accepting them and adapting their organizational structures. From this, two main perspectives stood out, one of them related to the feeling of an increased centralization of decision-making processes when managing the university, which generates an encounter between an increasing managerial approach (because of more professional managers taking the lead) at the expense of academic relevance within the institution. Another perspective, and clearly more positive, was related to the rise and re-consideration of teaching as a missional function of the university, which led to the emergence of new ways of hiring and assessing academic staff, but also to the improvement of information systems which were helpful in the decision-making process of institutions, although in this case the clarity of the objective of the information was an important feature so it could be properly used by the different institutional stakeholders.

In Argentina, a study done by Marquina et al. (2022, p. 127) explored the implications of quality assurance processes based on perception from professionals of the higher education realm. For the last twenty-five years three levels of implementation of quality assurance agenda were identified: public policy, intermediate level, and institutional level. Different from what the literature portrays for “developed countries” were tensions arose regarding the role definition that came with complying with an external quality assurance model, the authors conclude that in Argentina the emergence of a professional managerialism allowed to have a proper way to respond to this external QA schemes. In addition to that they identified a recognition of new roles that emerged in the process, different from traditional profiles like “academic staff” or “administrative staff, and the lack of tension between university stakeholders which can be understood either as lack of interest or lack of delegation of functions.

The two main conclusions that depict are that on the one hand, the practices of quality assurance tend to integrate into processes and results and to generate a symbiosis that ends up in institutional improvement. On the other hand, these practices might turn into a rutinary learning process of procedures and a sort of “blurring of frontiers” of administrative and academic tasks.

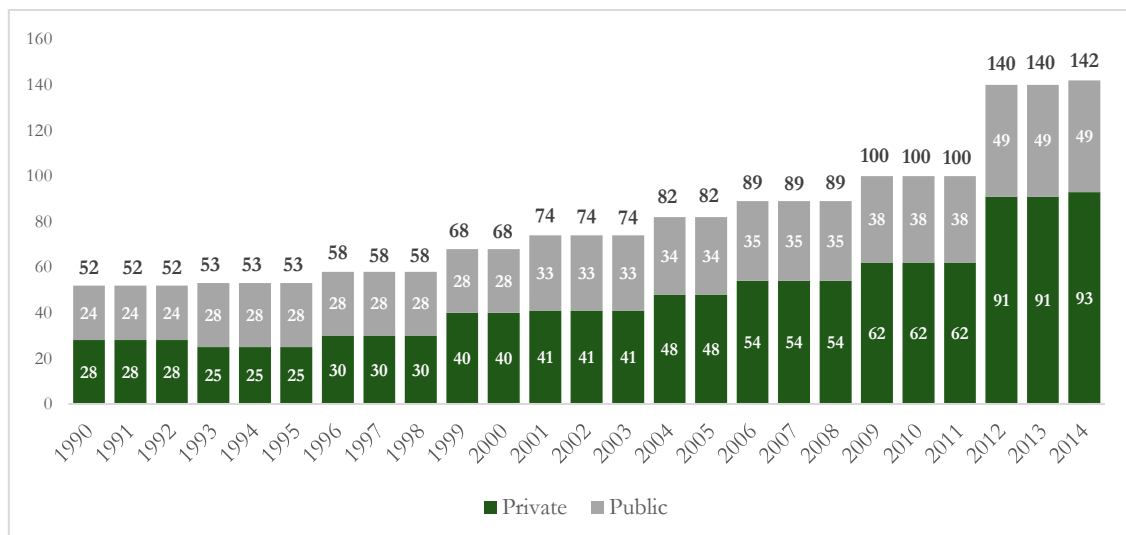
Chapter 3: Background of the study – Quality of Higher Education in Peru

3.1 Peru and the neoliberal policies in Higher Education

The neoliberal “twist” in Peru propelled in the nineties, under the mandate of former president Fujimori, led to the retrenchment in the role of the state as a provider of services (Torres, 2024, n.p.). The approval of University Law 23733 in 1983 and the enactment of the Legislative Decree 882 in 1997 that promoted private investment crystallized the neoliberal agenda and breached two main principles that guided the Peruvian university: “the non-profit university and the democratic government of the university community, which in public universities means gratuity” (Lynch, 2019, p. 227).

The adopted neoliberal policies had major effects in the higher education system allowing the creation of profit-seeking educational entities which were provided with the autonomy to operate and organize themselves. This was reflected in the increase and spread of “chicha” universities throughout the national territory, this term refers to universities where quality was not guaranteed, to the contrary they aimed for a fast expedition of university degrees (Ibid, 2019, p. 228). As a result, the number of universities almost tripled in 25 years, from around 52 in 1990 to almost 145 in 2014. More detail is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Evolution of the number of Peruvian Universities (1990 - 2014)



Source: Own elaboration based on MINEDU (2023) *The University in Numbers*.

Therefore, the main issue with higher education shifted from a problem not only of access but also added to the problem of the quality of education. The Peruvian higher

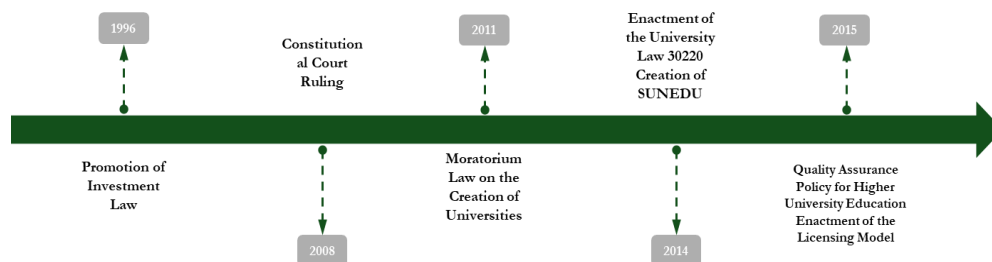
education system was experiencing an “inorganic increase in the university realm” with institutions that could not guarantee minimum quality (CNSRU, 2002, p. 3), but also with a central government who was not able to drive a state policy of higher education towards the assurance and promotion of quality (MINEDU, 2006, p. 28). Three relevant dimensions related to the quality of the service were identified by a consultant commission regarding the university system: a) inefficient role of the university to promote citizenship, b) scarce development of science and technology in the Peruvian university and c) disconnection between university education and adequate competencies for employment.

The expansion in the enrolment in tertiary education unfortunately was not accompanied by better consideration and assessment of the quality of the supply of the educational services. On the contrary the university system turned into one that was stratified, in the sense that the capacity of payment determined the university that a student could attend, and that dynamic left behind a great portion of the population and perpetuated schemes of injustice and inequality of the educational service (MINEDU, 2015, p.4).

3.2 The University Reform

In this scenario, of an increasing offer of poor educational services the main challenge regarding higher education was to reorganize the university system and to promote one that is quality-centered (SUNEDU, 2015, p. 11). The increase of institutions accompanied by inadequate regulation and quality led to the emergence of initiatives of quality assurance to correct these failures. In that regard, the Peruvian government deployed several actions and pushed for a university reform which had as its main milestone the enactment of the **University Law N°30220 in 2014**. This legal device emphasized the relevant role of the state to correct competitive market failures and to assure the quality of the educational service (Benavides et al., 2019, p. 1022)

Figure 2: Timeline of the main events that led to the University Reform



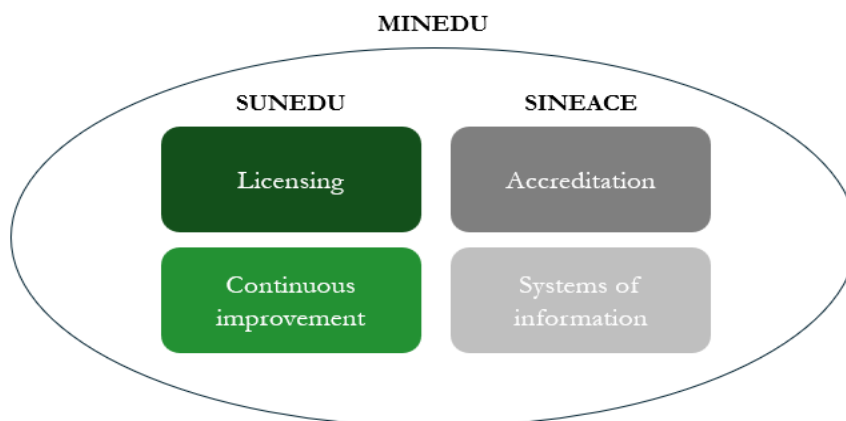
Source: Own elaboration based on SUNEDU (2015) and MINEDU (2023).

The enactment of this law brought two changes. The first change is that the Ministry of Education became the rector in matter of higher education according to the Article 12 of the University Law 30220, and in 2015 assumed the responsibility of the Quality Assurance Policy for Higher University Education, which aimed to systemically organize all the actors involved in higher education and to develop the System of Quality Assurance to provide an appropriate educational service (MINEDU, 2023, p. 9). This policy instrument updated the definition of what constituted quality in the Peruvian higher education field, which refers to it as:

“...the degree of adjustment between the actions carried out by the university or academic program to implement the guidelines contained in the institutional mission and purposes, and the results that such actions obtain” (SUNEDU, 2015, p. 15)

Meanwhile the System of Quality Assurance was constituted by four pillars which is worth explaining. The first pillar is *licensing* which is a quality control instrument, under the rectorship of SUNEDU (Superintendencia Nacional de Educación Superior Universitaria in Spanish) which aims to protect the individual and social welfare by prohibiting the functioning of institutions if they underperform the eight Basic Quality Standards, it is compulsory by law for all universities. The second pillar is *accreditation*, a mechanism that entails the guarantee of quality, is a voluntary process led by SINEACE (Sistema Nacional de Evaluación, Acreditación y Certificación de la Calidad Educativa in Spanish). The third and fourth pillars are *systems of information* and *continuous improvement*, these elements refer to institutions using mechanisms for autoregulation and self-assessment to continue in the quality path. In this system two institutions have a key role: SUNEDU for the licensing process and SINEACE in the accreditation realm.

Figure 3: Pillars of the Peruvian System of Quality Assurance



Source: Own elaboration based on SUNEDU (2015).

Despite the idea that the concepts of licensing and accreditation might be seen as similar in relation to quality assurance, in the Peruvian educational context both are different but complementary, while the first one focuses on the achievement of minimum quality standards and is compulsory, the second one is oriented towards the academic excellence and is voluntary, however both are necessary in the path to introduce quality-oriented management in universities (SUNEDU, 2015, p.3).

The second major change that the law brought was the creation of SUNEDU, an autonomous technical body responsible to conduct the licensing process as well as the supervision and authorization of the higher educational service (SUNEDU, 2015, p. 14.; Ley Universitaria, 2014, p. 22). It is necessary to point out that the Licensing Approach has stages. Institutional Licensing is the first stage to assess universities in various aspects related to the basic quality conditions. Another stage is *Program Licensing* which focuses on assessing applications for the functioning of academic programs, a third stage is *Licensing Renewal*, a second process of institutional licensing with a different and shorter set of basic conditions compared with the first one (SUNEDU, 2015, p. 5). However, the interest of this study is institutional licensing, which is why further explanation of the context is given regarding this precision.

Figure 4: Licensing Model Approach



Source: SUNEDU (2015). Own translation

The process of the University reform attempted to achieve the integration but also the constitution of a quality university system, by establishing a set of rules but also clarifying functions among the main actors involved in the process with the State as the guarantor of the right to an education of quality and the universities as the providers of the service (Congreso de la República, 2014, p. 4).

3.3 Tackling low quality: The Institutional Licensing Model

In 2015 SUNEDU launched the Institutional Licensing Model (ILM) following what was stated in the University Law and framed in the National Policy of Quality Assurance for

Higher Education, in the attempt to make public and private universities reach an acceptable level of quality education and to force them to function within a quality assurance framework.

The ILM was of widespread and compulsory application to all universities and had the aim for: protecting users of the higher education service, contributing to the generation of knowledge and information that will be useful for universities and the Ministry of Education to improve the design and decision-making process of policies, but also to promote innovation, efficiency and efficacy in Peruvian higher education (SUNEDU, 2015, p. 26). The mandatory requirements of the model consisted of eight basic quality conditions, measured through fifty-five indicators and sixty-six means of verification (SUNEDU, 2015, p. 27), as can be seen in the following table.

Table 1: Basic Quality Condition of the Institutional Licensing Model

Nº	Condition	Nº of components	Nº of indicators	Means of verification
I.	Existence of academic objectives, diplomas and degrees, and corresponding curricula	6	8	9
II.	Educational offer to be created compatible with the purposes proposed in the planning instruments	2	7	7
III.	Infrastructure and equipment appropriate to the fulfilment of its functions (classrooms, libraries, laboratories, among others)	9	15	15
IV.	Research lines to be developed	3	8	8
V.	Verification of the availability of qualified teaching staff with no less than 25% of teachers to full time	3	4	3
VI.	Verification of basic complementary educational services (medical, social, psycho-pedagogical service, sports, among others)	8	8	15
VII.	Existence of mediation and job insertion mechanisms (Job Exchange or others)	2	4	8
VIII.	Transparency in universities	1	1	1
Total		34	55	66

Source: SUNEDU (2015)

In the Institutional Licensing process universities had to commit to their requirements and if they failed the evaluation process, they were denied the possibility to provide the educational service. As a result of the process the universities were provided or denied an “Institutional operating license” which was temporary and renewable. At first the license was intended to last ten years, however during the implementation process in the first years only five universities could meet all the requirements, while the rest struggled with some standards, particularly related to scientific production and innovation. In that regard adjustments were made to the model and licenses of eight and six years were also possible to acquire (Diario Gestión, 2020, n.p.).

The ILM had three sequential processes that were intended to last around 120 days, it combined both document assessment as well as on site verification methods, which meant

that the assessment not only relied on the revision of documents sent to SUNEDU, but also on-site verification in the universities' establishments.

Figure 5: Stages of Institutional Licensing



Source: Own elaboration based on SUNEDU (2015)

Different adjustments were made to the Licensing Model as it has been implemented since its application at the end of 2015. As a result, ninety-eight public and private universities obtain their license by 2024, however they did it in different conditions, with very few of them getting a 10-year license, while a substantial majority obtained a 6-year license. Further detail is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Licensed universities by type of regime and license

Duration of License	Private	Public	Total
10 years	2	3	5
8 years	2	4	6
6 years	45	42	87
Total	49	49	98

Source: Diario Gestión (2020) and SUNEDU (2024)

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Methodological approach

The implementation of the Institutional Licensing Model as a quality assurance mechanism in the higher education field certainly gave important numeric and documentary information on the process of compliance of public universities. However, it is necessary to go beyond what was reported to understand the dynamics of compliance of administrative staff and how the institutional management of public universities was affected with this external tool of quality assurance. In this regard, qualitative research is the suitable methodology for this purpose since it allows to “gain an intimate understanding of people, places, cultures and situations through rich engagement and even immersion in the reality being studied” (O’Leary, 2017, n.p.).

In-depth interviews constituted the main qualitative method of data collection used to address the research questions. They were chosen as they “allow individuals to explain, in their own words, how they understand and interpret the world around them” (Knott et al., 2022, p. 1), this method allowed access to primary information provided by key institutional stakeholders (administrative staff in charge or involved in the Licensing Process) from a sample of public universities about their perceptions and reflections of how the process of compliance was carried out in their institutions.

However, it is also important to mention that secondary data was reviewed and used as an important first step to have a comprehensive understanding of how the Institutional Licensing process came to be and how public universities locate on it, through the access and revision of official documents and web pages of governmental institutions.

4.1.1 Document review

This process of review, done from July to September 2024, was necessary as it allowed further understanding on the context of Institutional Licensing, the regulatory and normative framework, as well as the main stakeholders involved in the process of Licensing in the Peruvian Higher education system. The different documents reviewed can be grouped under the following themes:

Regulatory documents: the current University Law 30220 was launched in 2014 and provides all the information regarding the roles, responsibilities and expectations from the higher education system in a broader way, in addition it provides more specific information for public universities in relation to the way they are constituted, the type of resources they are entitled to and constitutions since they are public entities that belong to the government.

Policy documents: the Quality Assurance National Policy issued by MINEDU provided an overview of where the higher education system was supposed to head in terms of quality and how its mechanisms of quality assurance interact and integrate, meanwhile the Institutional Licensing Model issued by SUNEDU provided information on the characteristics of this model as well as all the details of how and when an institution should present their licensing requirement.

Institutional reports: MINEDU launched several reports about the higher education system, its constitution and how its main indicators evolved. However, the report launched in 2023 (MINEDU, 2023) offered an overview of the university

system, but also showed the status of public universities in relation to the Licensing Model and its Basic Quality Conditions.

Resolutions of Licensing: these documents were the result of the Licensing Process for those universities who obtained a license, it summarizes all the information required to the university in relation to the Basic Quality Conditions as well as the assessment, recommendations, and final conclusions of SUNEDU.

4.1.2 In-depth interviews

Sample selection of participants

Peru has forty-nine licensed public universities, this constitutes the total population of the study, however given the limitations of the research in terms of capacity and time a small sample was chosen to conduct in-depth interviews, based on the method of *stratified sampling*.

Stratified sampling consists of “dividing a population into smaller groups based on particular characteristics [...] and then sampling randomly within each group” (Knott et al., 2022, p. 2). This was the chosen method since there was a considerable list of potential participants to be considered for the interviews. Three were the “particular characteristics” that led to the selection of the sample of public universities, which are constituted by the following criteria:

1. ***Institutional Licensing Model distribution:*** The ILM divided all universities (public and private) into eight groups of around 15 universities each to present their licensing requirement progressively and then being confronted with the assessment (SUNEDU, 2015, p. 57), this means that each group had a particular and sequential timeline to present the requirement of licensing. This distribution grouped universities with different nature and characteristics:
 - Universities that hold an authorization to function and that were also created by law (this indication was particular for public universities).
 - Public and private universities
 - Different geographic location in all the Peruvian national territory

This feature already included an assorted composition of universities in distinct groups which provides a first consideration of potential public universities to choose. In this regard, the sample had to consider public universities from distinct groups.

2. ***Year of acquisition of the license:*** between the years 2016 and 2019, this means that any university that got their license within this period, as was specified in the

guidelines of the Implementation plan of the Licensing model (SUNEDU, 2015, p. 58). This study is focused on this period as 2019 is the end of the first and most important phase of Licensing (Vicerrectorado Académico PUCP, 2019a, n.p.).

3. ***Type of license acquired:*** when the ILM was being implemented some changes were made to the type of license that could be acquired. As a result, besides a 10-year license, 8-year licenses and 6-year licenses were also possible to obtain. However, very few public universities could get licenses of 10 years (3 public universities) and 8 years (4 public universities) and most of them got the 6-years one. In this regard, the sample aims to achieve at least institutions with a variety of types of licenses.

The decision to have this institutional diversity is made in the attempt to avoid biased conclusions, as a result seven universities were chosen from different regions of Peru which acquired distinct types of licenses within the period 2016 – 2019.

Table 3: List of selected public universities

Nº	Name of university	Location	Type of License	Year of acquisition of License
1	Universidad Nacional de San Agustín	Arequipa	10 years	2018
2	Universidad Nacional Daniel Alcides Carrión	Pasco	6 years	2019
3	Universidad Nacional de Trujillo	La Libertad	8 years	2019
4	Universidad Nacional Enrique Guzmán y Valle – La Cantuta	Lima	6 years	2019
5	Universidad Nacional de Ucayali	Ucayali	6 years	2019
6	Universidad Nacional del Centro del Perú	Junín	6 years	2019
7	Universidad Nacional Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza	Amazonas	6 years	2018

Source: Author's elaboration

The diversity of the sample is a feature of this selection as it attempts to obtain different results that will allow a better understanding and analysis of the influence of the Licensing Model in different institutional settings. This is something that will be further discussed in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

Interviews with key stakeholders

Every qualitative method requires a tool to collect data (O'Leary, 2017, p. 11), for the in-depth interviews an interview outline was designed (see Annex), which was constituted of a set of questions related to the topic of the research. This was the main device to obtain data

from interviewees on how the Institutional Model influenced their perception and commitment to quality, but also their practices of institutional management to comply with the Basic Quality Conditions (BQC).

The key stakeholder in each selected institution was the Head of the Quality Assurance office who participated during the Institutional Licensing process. This profile was chosen since they were, in most cases, the actor in charge of guiding and making decisions in relation to the Licensing process and other quality assurance matters within public universities. However, given that there is a high personal rotation within public universities (especially since the process of Licensing started in 2016) two other important roles were also considered for the interviews when the former Head of the Quality Office was not available or not located as they had a strong involvement and strategic participation in the process of Licensing:

- Academic Vice rectorship
- Dean of Faculty

Table 4: List of interviewees per university

Nº	Name of university	Interviewee	Name Code
1	Universidad Nacional de San Agustín	Dean of Faculty	QAI1
2	Universidad Nacional Daniel Alcides Carrión	Former Head of Quality Office	QAI2
3	Universidad Nacional de Trujillo	Former Head of Quality Office	QAI3
4	Universidad Nacional Enrique Guzmán y Valle – La Cantuta	Former Head of Quality Office	QAI4
5	Universidad Nacional de Ucayali	Dean of Faculty	QAI5
6	Universidad Nacional del Centro del Perú	Former Head of Quality Office	QAI6
7	Universidad Nacional Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza	Former Head of Quality Office	QAI7

Source: Own elaboration

It is important to mention that all interviews were done online (using a meeting platform) and in Spanish, which is the native language of the interviewees and the researcher. However, all the obtained information were transcribed and later translated to English for the purpose of the research.

4.2 Analysis of data

4.2.1 Document review

The review of the different documents had the purpose of providing a basis of knowledge to understand the normative, but also the motivation behind licensing and the effects that this new regulatory framework could have on public universities.

This information was useful to compare and contextualize the results from the in-depth interviews, especially in relation to the objectives that were portrayed in those documents. But these references also contributed to have a better understanding of the universities' staff viewpoints concerning quality assurance mechanisms, as well as the possible technical challenges for institutional management practices.

4.2.2 In-depth interviews

The method used to analyze the information obtained from the interviewees is *thematic analysis*, which allows the “analysis of qualitative data and interview material as a method of coding data to develop and interpret themes in the data” (Knott et al., 2022, p. 6). This process of coding refers to “highlighting a segment of text (this may be a sentence, a clause or a longer excerpt) and assigning a label to it.” (Ibid, 2022, p. 7), in other words it means the process of identifying certain themes across responses in interviewees in relation with the formulated research questions presented in Chapter 1.

The categorization was done manually under the following codes: “previous perceptions on the importance of quality” and “conceptions about Quality Assurance” for Research Question 1, “challenges of compliance” and “strategies of compliance” for Research Question 2; and “structural changes” and “sustainable practices” for Research Question 3. In the next chapter all these codes are fully disclosed in subsections that explore and analyze the responses provided by interviewees.

4.3 Positionality and ethical considerations

4.3.1 Positionality

Positionality refers to where an individual comes from and the position adopted in relation to a research task as well as the social and political context (Darwin, 2020, p. 1). In the present research I attempted to explore how institutional management in public universities was affected by the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms like the Licensing Model,

which aimed to improve the conditions of quality education. The research primarily focusses on exploring and analyzing the perceptions of university staff from public universities by applying qualitative methods like online interviews.

Until 2023 I used to be an employee of the Ministry of Education, in the Directorate of Higher Education and my position was focused on working with public universities, despite being involved in topics related to the design of policies for this sector I was neither related with the implementation nor the supervision of the Licensing Model, therefore my position as a researcher is as an outsider since I did not had the same experiences than my potential informants.

I am aware that biases might arise during the knowledge production process, when obtaining and deciding which information to use from primary information collected from informants and secondary sources, however I was committed to permanently reflect about my own assumptions regarding my topic of research, therefore I am able to portray information adequately and accordingly to the sources it was obtained from.

To reduce power imbalances between myself as a researcher and my informants I had full transparency with them regarding the research process. I provided informant consent before the interviews to give them a clear overview of the research and the purposes of it.

4.3.2 Limitations

The data collection process was conducted only to a sample of the total number of public universities from Peru because of constraints related to limited resources, particularly time. Although the criteria used to select them tried to be representative of the total population of universities, while the analysis of the results might be deep it could not be a guarantee of generalization to all the public universities.

In addition, the in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain the perspectives of the Head of the Quality Office or similar offices who participated in the Licensing process, in this regard the responses of the interviewees could bring some issues. On the one hand they could be “sociable desirable,” for example mainly trying to highlight the positive aspects of the process or on the other hand only the shortcomings of it, since their ability to recall accurately events from the past is not guaranteed and that can affect the authenticity of the data. Also, by focusing only on participants from the Quality Offices objectivity might be compromised as other perspectives from relevant stakeholders like students, teachers and

administrative staff from other units are left behind. In relation to this last group, their viewpoints are also valuable as some of those units oversee core services provided by universities; for example, social responsibility services which involve direct interaction with students.

However, the focus of the topic is on institutional management and quality assurance, concepts that in practice are usually handled by administrative staff of Quality Offices, and another positive aspect is that most of the interviewees who were former Heads of Quality Offices were also teachers in different faculties of their universities, this also allows to have perspectives that reflect on the complex nuances of the institutional management in universities.

Chapter 5: Findings

Through this chapter I present the collected perceptions from administrative staff from the chosen public universities in key aspects related to their understanding of quality assurance mechanism, how it and the commitments to it were influenced by Institutional Licensing, and to what extent the practices of public universities regarding quality can be sustainable.

The results are structured following the main research question and sub-questions and are organized thematically according to the following themes: previous conceptions and perceptions of quality assurance and its importance, challenges and strategies of compliance, structural changes, and sustainable practices of quality assurance, all of them related to Institutional Licensing as a quality assurance mechanism. The sample chosen for this research was diverse and although significant differences were identified what highlights the most is the existence of similar patterns in their reasoning and process of committing to the requirements of the Licensing Model.

5.1 Perceptions and commitment to quality assurance: views from university staff

The Licensing Model was not the first tool of Quality Assurance used by Peruvian public universities to work towards improving the quality of their services. Since 2006, accreditation of programs was also an available mechanism launched by SINEACE, however its implementation was not properly structured within a quality assurance system, neither was it aimed at institutional compromises in universities, to the contrary it was a voluntary instrument focused on guaranteeing quality per academic program.

When the Licensing Model was about to be implemented all the seven interviewees agreed that there was reluctancy and resistance about this external quality assurance tool, since it was going to be deployed at a different scale, but also no one had ever questioned whether there was a possibility of a university, especially public institutions, not being adequate to provide a quality service. The impression that Licensing caused among public universities can be reflected in the perceptions of two of the interviewees. QAI6 stated “*it was something very new, definitely, because we were talking about a model that had an institutional scope and besides it was compulsory*”, while interviewee QAI3 also referred to the skepticism and sense of invasion that emerged among public universities:

“...so, at that time it was a shock for the country's universities, given that no one in their right mind could think that we could question the quality of the graduates that came out of the universities. [...] At first, we universities didn't understand it, we felt violated, we felt invaded, we felt questioned...” (Interviewee QAI3)

It took a while, in some cases months, until universities changed their perception on this novel approach on quality assurance. However, as time was passing by, and they were reaching the deadlines to present their proposals for assessment they came to realize two things. On the one hand, the model was a mandatory order by the central government, and defying a command of such magnitude would imply a risk for the university to be shut down no matter their public nature. This scenario meant not only students not receiving more education, but also administrative and teaching staff to lose their jobs. A quote shared from interviewee QAI4 conveniently summarizes this perception, “*also, I believed that at one point we made it clear that having a denied license would also mean jeopardizing our workplaces, right?*”.

On the other hand, when universities began to organize themselves and prepare the documentation in coordination with the different offices within the institution, several issues arose as they noticed a considerable distance from where they were to what was required from the Basic Quality Conditions (BQC) as a threshold. For example, one university noticed high inconsistencies in curricular designs of different programs (related to the indicator two of the BQC 1) that were supposed to be updated to guarantee the quality of the educational service. As the University Law states in its Article 40, the curricular design is the core item that guides the teaching-learning process in every faculty until students graduate. Therefore, a strong concern emerged as similarities were identified among these documents in different faculties of the university.

“...then we saw that, for example, these curricular designs (referring to different programs) that seem to be one after another, [...] so it was copied, one copied over the other, then, for

example, we really realized how important, that is, why it had to be reviewed in all this [...] then you could quickly realize that there were inconsistencies...” (Interviewee QAI6)

This kind of “revelations” led public universities to had deeper insights and become critical on the gravity of the conditions in which they were providing the educational services and their commitment to it, so although they had an organizational structure with defined institutional purposes on paper, in practice they were far from where they were supposed to be heading. In this sense Licensing was perceived, at least from five of the interviewees, as something valuable in the pursuit of better conditions of quality, rather than only an imposed external assessment. From the point of view of interviewee QAI3 Licensing “*was a good start inside all the mess that we had [...] it was an opportunity for all of us to worry about offering the best educational service.*”. This opinion was supported by interviewee QAI4 when she said that despite initial resistance to Licensing there was a later and more positive understanding of it:

“In its initial stage there was resistance to all the work, but later we understood that it was a favorable process because it allowed us to look inside ourselves, the conditions in which we offered our services. So, particularly from the perspective of our team (referring to the Quality Office), who worked in a direct way, it was greatly beneficial, right?” (Interviewee QAI4)

Not only did the approximation of public universities change, but also their commitment towards Licensing. As the implementation of it was going on, the closure of “bad universities” (mostly private) was a rapid and notorious outcome. This series of events led to a different appreciation of Licensing, it was seen as a legitimate and crucial tool to guarantee quality in higher education institutions. However, the shutdown of private universities also added upon reflections on the role of public universities in regions where the educational offer was limited. So, it was not only about correcting the failures of the market, but especially in providing adequate access to education for students coming from denied licensed institutions. This was the case in the Ucayali region, where at the end the public university became the only offer of higher educational services:

“Licensing also gave the chance to open the doors to students from universities that did not license, so these students could keep studying to obtain their degrees, it was an open door for them, because if not I do not know what could have happened to these students from the Ucayali region” (Interviewee QAI5)

Getting through the process of Licensing also led the interviewees to share their perceptions on the quality assurance system they belonged to. In this regard, all the seven interviewees shared their opinions on public universities’ autonomy in relation to Licensing

as a mandatory demand. Their responses about this issue had different angles, but they all agreed that the financial autonomy aspect was the one that changed because MINEDU became rector in matters of higher education. This legitimate role that the ministry acquired meant that public universities had an additional institutional layer to which they had to present their economic demands to be approved. But other than that, they remained autonomous on other aspects like administrative and academic autonomy. They all agreed that the Licensing Model did not compromise their autonomy and own management since they had freedom to make all the decisions. Therefore, a reduction in autonomy could not be used as an excuse to avoid commitment to the BQC of the model, as it meant no risk for them:

“On the other hand, in a public University [...] there are strengths, but we still have to mature in terms of quality, so here autonomy, in my opinion, is not well understood [...] said in other words there is a little misconception, it is kind of used to stop doing what we should do. Right?” (Interviewee QAI7)

Although all the staff interviewed agreed that Institutional Licensing was relevant in the path of more compromise towards improving the educational services offered to students and society, there were critics of three interviewees about the limitations and shortcomings of the mechanisms created and implemented by central government as can be read in the following quote:

“...this is already an issue in the country, quality models have a birth problem, and there is an epistemological problem in the quality models being terribly erroneous. But why does that happen? Because there has been an invasion of the professional development area. These quality models have been developed fundamentally by professions not dedicated to education, and their function, their profession is not education.” (Interviewee QAI4)

Not only did they consider that quality assurance mechanisms could be designed better, but they were also critical about the way the higher education system was functioning, particularly referring to the lack of integration between the licensing and accreditation processes. So, although in the initial stages of the Licensing universities ended up recognizing the relevance of its implementation to strengthen their commitment to quality, individually but as a system too, the interviewees showed a sense of dissatisfaction on how things were managed by the central government.

They indicated that different mechanisms were designed and implemented, but they did not finish to articulate within the system, and to the contrary could be creating a double burden in terms of compliance with quality, making it hard to make decisions in relation to

prioritization. Particularly two of those three opinions from interviewees highlighted the lack of capacity of the MINEDU to oversee public universities and offer proper guidance and support. On the contrary, in their viewpoints, this institution was creating new regulations and norms that were undermining public universities' foundations.

5.2 Navigating the process of compliance

The path of complying with this external requirement implied a rapid adaptation of public universities to a set of demands focused on guaranteeing a minimum level of quality in the educational service. The process of Licensing led universities to analyze and rethink their ways of management and organization and produce different strategies to respond to the challenges that this new mandatory mechanism brought for them in terms of quality.

The purpose of this section is to analyze the information shared by the interviewees in relation to how they faced the Licensing Model, highlighting internal dynamics, challenges, strategies, and key factors that led them to meet the BQC and obtain their License Resolution.

The requirements of the model represented a major challenge for the institution: a series of 8 BQC, fifty-five indicators and sixty-six means of verifications had to be filled in different formats, this meant a huge volume of documentation that had to be collected and analyzed in universities in brief time. Given the nature of the model, a holistic assessment of all the main aspects of a university captured in 8 BQC, the technical teams of universities could not prioritize key areas, since they had to share information of all the requirements at the same time. In this scenario four interviewees acknowledged that the first sensation they had towards it was the lack of clarity regarding how to get started, what was needed to accomplish it and how to oversee it thereafter, this impression is shared by Interviewee QAI4 in the following quote:

“...universities had a licensing process that was institutional, a monster [...] it was not clear what was needed to be able to close the gap towards the basic conditions of quality and therefore the necessary resources had not been budgeted to close the gaps [...]” (Interviewee QAI4)

To address this enormous task the first strategy was to put together a team or a committee under the leadership of the Quality Office. Even though at that time the roles and functions of public universities did not specify that this office was accountable for conducting a Licensing process it ended that way since they did oversee tasks in relation to quality (previously with accreditation of programs). This “Licensing committees” in words

of interviewee QAI6 brought together “*representatives of fundamental areas [...] for example, the research area, the academic part, support planning, a somewhat large commission*”. However, this composition of professionals should hold certain levels of knowledge (technical expertise) and decision-making skills. These features were necessary to generate consensus and trigger rapid responses and outcomes. Interviewee QAI4 summarized this situation in the following quote:

“...the strategy I applied was first to assemble a team and second to generate a consensus at the level of all the authorities. Rector at the head, we established well the senior management and support functions, and the technical team was constituted...” (Interviewee QAI4)

A key element that helped two universities to make rapid progress in their pursuit of the License was the existence of a particular profile within their technical experts. In both cases the former Heads of the Quality Offices were part of an international training program done back in the early 2000’s which focused on self-assessment in relation to accreditation. This knowledge allowed them to sensitize other stakeholders of the institution about the importance of getting a License and what needed to be done for that, having previous experience and training helped them to have a multiplying effect in relation to the spread of relevant knowledge in matters of quality assurance. For example, interviewee QAI3 commented “*I already knew about quality models [...] and I also had training in quality issues for about 10 years, right?*”, and interviewee QAI4 highlighted that her institution also had personnel with the knowledge and training on quality accreditation which “*had a multiplier effect within the University*”.

Nonetheless, the existence of a Licensing committee and key professionals was not enough guarantee of a commitment towards the Licensing Model. Since a public university constitutes a complex institution with different actors and inner dynamics, to achieve a consensus towards working for the achievement of a License was an arduous task to solve because of the challenges that emerged. One of them was the lack of compromise, particularly by the authorities. Although they participated in the constitution of the Quality committee, they could not understand the urgency of Licensing, as it was not required in the short term. In contrast to other urgent issues going on in the daily activities of the university which required attention, authorities overshadowed the need to follow the Licensing procedures.

Political resistance inside universities was another identified challenge. A university could be seen as a small representation of a government, every four to five years they go

through an authority's election process. While in some cases the Licensing process came in where different parties agreed on the importance of compromising with it, in other cases tensions were clear and opposite sides made it harder to generate a consensus within the universities. Even when universities could have management assets to conduct the Licensing process this did not automatically guarantee the existence of a unified position from the beginning:

“...it was political, they did not agree with the authority, they did not want the authority to achieve the licensing, so they tried to impelled it, but since we were a majority, we continued, and we kept on going” (Interviewee QAI1)

In the organizational scheme of a university if an authority does not support an initiative the likelihood of the rest of the members to be supportive is very low, and this is what the interviewees manifested. While in two cases there was a strong actor who could sensibilize them, in the rest of the cases authorities did not align any kind of response towards the Licensing Process because they did not feel any pressure. In this scenario Quality Offices had no choice but to send the information they could collect, however SUNEDU made strong observations that had to be offset sooner than later, this in addition to the fact that news spread about universities being shut down caused a change in people's perception towards the gravity of not obtaining a License.

An example of this situation is brought by interviewee QAI5 as she shared the episode that her institution faced when presenting inadequate information to SUNEDU and the reactions of authorities after: *“we sent all that and [...] we really had observations, right? So, that helped us to have a hard and committed work of these offices and the authorities, yes, a total commitment like that, total, right?”* And when the university responded to those observations, she perceived there was a better work commitment towards Licensing from the different parts involved, she mentioned that *“there was hard work, those documents and the institution were improved a lot [...] the people, both the administrative staff, teachers and authorities, helped a lot to organize us”*.

So, the authorities' compromise and support became a reality, and this change was harnessed by the technical committee, which, in addition to a good capacity for management, worked towards having better responses to important challenges that emerged in their way, like the resource limitations and the need for strategic decisions. Both challenges were recurrently highlighted by interviewees, but opinions were mixed, in three cases resources per se were not perceived as a limitation, rather a good capacity for management and strategic

decisions resulted in more resources for the universities. One of those perceptions is from interviewee QAI5 who stated that:

“Two things you must do, you have to know how to plan the projects and the other is that you have to effectively manage the budgets, right? Those two paths, if you are clear there is no problem for me [...] quality of management, that is the central issue.” (Interviewee QAI5)

However, on the other hand, one university was categorical when referring that despite having a Quality team and the authorities support their in-house capacities where not enough to complete all the requirements to meet the Basic Quality Conditions. In that scenario they had to look for outside support by hiring external consultants who could clarify and guide the actions of the University’s team but at the expense of the scarce budget that was allocated for other purposes.

All interviewees mentioned that within the months that universities engaged in the Licensing process, a positive aspect that emerged was the increase in the feeling of identity not only by the authorities, but also by other members like teaching staff as well as students. Just to mention an example, when SUNEDU conducted the on-site visit in one university, there was a process of collaboration and involvement from different stakeholders to have the institution ready for the assessment, particularly in the case of the infrastructure.

“For example, if a classroom had to be painted and they couldn't, the teachers painted with the students, then arranged everything from the technical visit to the visit at the end of the evaluation. [...] When they returned (referring to the technical team of SUNEDU), everything changed. -So, how have they done this? The professors, they replied. Never in another University have we seen this change that the professors have done this type of thing.” (Interviewee QAI3)

The Licensing process implied a challenge of a big magnitude that required strategies and actions to tackle them and thrive through the process. Among the strategies used, having Licensing committees and ensuring the support from universities’ authorities was imperative in all responses since this also triggered active participation from other members of the university community. In addition, the existence of key elements like professionals with knowledge in quality assurance and good management skills helped to address issues related to scarcity of resources and making strategic decisions.

Something that also stood out in the shared experiences is the fact that all the work and involvement of university members during the Licensing Progress had changes in their

institutional management which helped to laid foundations for the construction of an institutional culture that welcomed quality and continuous improvement in the center of it.

5.3 Beyond compliance: sustaining quality after the Institutional Licensing Model

Public universities adopted different strategies and implemented changes to adequate themselves to the requirements of the Basic Quality Conditions. Nonetheless, this quality assurance mechanism was implemented by the central government as part of a complete system that aimed to reorganize the provision of the educational service and guarantee quality. Considering this, the purpose of this section is to explore to what extent the practices and changes implemented in institutional management of public universities were pertinent enough to laid foundations that allow them to continue the pursuit of quality beyond compliance. Especially in a scenario where external factors, like political ones, represent a threat to undermine the sustainability of the progress achieved by the university system.

According to six interviewees the obtention of an Institutional License propelled Quality Offices to gain more relevance within the organizational structures in public universities. Since they conducted the Licensing Process through the Quality Committees and with the authorities' support, they were able to obtain more visibility and participation in making strategic decisions related to maintaining the Basic Quality Conditions, but also improving quality. As interviewee QAI3 stated “*we managed to position ourselves [...] in the sense that nothing was acquired unless it contributed to the quality or to a Basic Quality Condition*”. These offices managed to position themselves by providing support to institutional management as they became key actors in ensuring the promotion of institutional quality in relation to the different activities that the universities deployed.

“...it has remained (referring to Licensing and commitment to quality), yes, and a way for us as a Quality office, to always be monitoring for continuity, for sustainability, right? So, in general terms, I could tell you what that is, it is that care that we always take...” (Interviewee QAI6)

Once Quality Offices were better positioned within the organizational structure in public universities, some tasks became more relevant than ever within the functions that they had to lead. In that regard the implementation of a *Quality Management System* and *process management* was an immediate activity to which they became very committed.

Public universities became aware of Quality Management Systems since it was a requirement from the Accreditation Model of SINEACE, a voluntary quality assurance mechanism complementary to Licensing in the scheme of the Quality Assurance System in higher education. And it refers to “a combination of processes and tools that help an institution to establish its policies and objectives and handle activities to the achievement of them” (SINEACE, 2021, n.d.). Nonetheless, the results of the Licensing process were more convincing for Quality Offices to propel and materialize compromises regarding quality, through the implementation of systems of quality management. The importance that six interviewees gave to this new task is reflected in the words of interviewee QAI2 when he referred to that:

“This is what we would need so that the University can really make its good practices into sustainable management and continuous improvement, because that is what brings a System of Quality Management, right? Among the benefits it brings to management is reviewing them and evaluating ourselves through their indicators.” (Interviewee QAI2)

In the interviewee’s reflection, the implementation of these systems not only was a technical improvement for a better management of functions within her institution, but also it had a greater purpose as it could allow them to keep their good practices sustainable by having a continuous self-assessment on themselves.

While an *internal quality management system* was seen as “*the column that allow to meet all the requirements of all the models of quality assurance*” in words of interviewee QAI4, *process management* was the mechanism by which public universities break down and operationalize all the activities they had. However, they made sense of those processes by guaranteeing their alignment to their major institutional goals in high consideration of quality. In that line also interviewee QAI4 explained the importance of it as being “*precisely the basis of an assurance and quality system [...] and it is a mockup of how universities should be functioning*”. An example of the application of these tasks was provided by interviewee QAI5, when he referred to the outcome processes of the design of their quality management system:

“...we design three types of processes, strategic processes, missional processes, and support processes. The missionaries are those who come from the mission directly and there is the comprehensive formation process, the research process, and the social responsibility process. Strategic processes, we have raised the strategic management process, and we have mapped it, organized, proceduralized, control indicators placed so that from then on, we can continue working. And with all the regulations we have from the State, which sometimes becomes a straitjacket, what we were looking for was dynamization...” (Interviewee QAI5)

These reflections demonstrate that the beliefs and efforts of the administrative staff of Quality Offices were beyond normative compliance with the Licensing demands. The activities they were conducting were also to guarantee solid foundations in their institutional structures to perpetuate commitment towards quality in the long run. So, it was not just about guaranteeing Basic Quality Conditions, it was also about a reorganization in its functioning and the activities every stakeholder oversaw so they could end up having a structure that could allow an appropriate allocation of responsibilities and therefore a more efficient and dynamic institutional management aligned with quality purposes.

Besides the structural changes that universities went through there was a sort of non-tangible effect on the ways the administrative staff perceived and embraced the continuous work towards quality in their institutions. The process of Licensing and obtaining the License represented a turning point regarding what university workers expected from public universities to achieve. Before, only a few workers oversaw the conduction of the Licensing process and participated in it. Nonetheless, four interviewees particularly mentioned that there was an increase in the number of employees that became more involved in the different core processes of quality management, wherever they were standing (being authority, an official or a teacher). As an example of these changes related to the magnitude of participation, Interviewee QAI5 shared *“if before 30 teachers participated in a work meeting, today 300, 400 people participate. Right? So, there is a whole awareness that has been advanced all this time.”*

Even when there was a shift on the way university workers were getting involved, it was not only from duty and responsibilities because of their role in their institutions, it also had to do with a higher motivation and sense of identity that propel more involvement towards quality, a depiction of this is presented by Interviewee QAI6 when she referred to the feelings that her and other members of her institution had: *“Yes, most of us are identified, motivated, [...] the majority of us are encouraged to quality, quality management.”* Meanwhile interviewee QAI4 referred that the expectations of the members of his university changed to a bigger institutional aspiration related to achieving a better position in the university system: *“...after Licensing [...] we wanted to be 1 of the 10 public universities considered within the ranking that the Ministry of Education has, right?”*. In that regard, Licensing indirectly propelled a sense of competition between public universities to achieve a better place in national rankings as this was seen as way of external validation and acknowledgement of their efforts towards quality.

Despite the efforts and the changes that universities incorporated, two interviewees highlighted two main difficulties that compromised the efforts of institutional management towards quality. One was the lack of managerial capacities, especially in the authorities, which was perceived to undermine the progress made towards obtaining a License. The second barrier refers to the availability of resources which are highly entangled with scarcity in managerial abilities.

“...maintaining the basic conditions of quality and growing in quality [...] costs, doesn't it? you have to invest resources, and you have to have a prominent level of management. You have to look at the University, as well as a big hat, right? And unfortunately, what universities still lack are managers. So those who become rectors and vice-chancellors know little or nothing about university management and everything there is. They are good teachers, right? Maybe good laboratory researchers, but here we are dealing with other skills, management competencies that they did not look. They stayed at the ‘Licensing party’ and did not notice that they had to continue growing.” (Interviewee QAI6)

To improve quality implies making strategic decisions to trigger institutional actions that will have a positive effect in the long term, but for this to happen resources are also needed. Even though universities were able to manage the implementation of internal mechanisms like process management, the continuation of them demanded actions of supervision and control too, and not surprisingly they require a portion of the already limited budget that universities have. The central government provided additional resources to public universities (SUNEDU, 2018, n.p.); however, this was done mostly prioritizing that a higher number of institutions were able to meet the BQC. Although additional actions were taken to give resources after Licensing to contribute to the supervision and maintenance of quality, the amount of funds was limited and only provided to a small quantity of universities (Vicerrectorado Académico PUCP, 2019b, n.p.). Only one university from the sample of this research was included in the group, and interviewee QAI5 from that institution highlighted that the allocated amount was not enough to guarantee maintenance actions.

Because of the shortcomings identified, five of the interviewees were also clear about the fact that public universities were not yet ready to be fully independent from external supervision from the central government. They particularly referred to the changes approved in 2024 by the Peruvian Congress (the legislative branch). These implied a shrinking in the functions of SUNEDU and the promotion of a permanent license instead of the implementation of the License Renewal Model (Gestión, 2024, n.p.), which was designed and approved in 2021 to be the continuation of the Licensing Model of 2015. Although

public universities had their Institutional Licenses and were in the process of incorporating their quality management systems, they recognized that support and supervision was still needed as they did not see themselves fully mature in relation to offering quality educational services. A perception of this is provided by interviewee QAI2:

“...our country is not yet mature enough to self-regulate, when we are mature enough to self-regulate and to grow alone without being pressured (by entities like SUNEDU), then, surely there we shoot ourselves, but not yet. In other words, we are still in the first stages of quality, where we do need pressure and that must happen, right?...” (Interviewee QAI2)

The Licensing process propelled significant changes in public universities management towards quality. Not only at an organizational level with the strengthening of Quality Offices as the one in charge of promotion and commitment towards quality assurance, but also at a professional level with workers having a higher identification with their institutions and a desire to have their institutions in better positioning within the university system.

However, the foundations and sustainability of these practices faced relevant challenges, internally as externally. In an internal view the lack of continuous authorities' support, and availability of resources have compromised the stability and continuity of these practices. In addition, there are recent changes in the educational sectorial realm which shrank the position of the regulatory body, a situation highly criticized by the interviewees as it is seen as a risk in the construction of a solid pathway towards quality not only in their institutions but also in the university system.

Chapter 6: Discussion and implications

6.1 Discussion

The purpose of this research was to analyze how Institutional Licensing influenced public universities' perceptions on the importance and commitment towards quality assurance. But also, to explore how their institutional practices navigated the process of compliance, and whether they were helpful to lay foundations to guarantee continuous efforts for better quality in Peruvian public universities.

In that regard, the findings revealed that Licensing certainly influenced universities' perception of the importance of quality assurance in a constructive way, promoting advances in the practices of institutional management for adequate compliance. Whereas Licensing

came in as a control mechanism it also had a more purposeful effect on the commitment of public universities that was beyond the mandatory. In a broader view quality improvement also became part of their motives. However, the process of compliance was not exempt from difficulties, and public universities ended up navigating these with key elements like authorities' support and management capabilities until the obtention of their Licenses. Regarding sustainability after Licensing, this was jeopardized both by factors inside and outside the universities. In the following paragraphs further discussion is presented following the structure of the sub-research questions presented in Chapter 1.

The literature review highlights two purposes for quality assurance frameworks which are not necessarily exclusive: accountability, which also involves control, and quality enhancement-improvement. The Institutional Licensing in Peru was designed to be a control mechanism that guarantees the achievement of Basic Quality Standards but immersed in a quality assurance system that aimed to contribute to the improvement of quality. In this view, Licensing was the first layer for Peruvian universities to set solid foundations towards their continuous work for quality.

The research findings revealed an understanding highly related to an accountability and control approach. On the one hand, there was a perception of Licensing representing an additional administrative task of great magnitude that in a way questioned their nature and value as public universities. And on the other hand, their response to compliance mainly came out of avoiding the risk of being shut down, since it was already happening with private universities.

However, different nuances in relation to Licensing emerged as it was being implemented. First, being a quality assurance mechanism, it served as a source of information, although Kinser and Lane (2017, p. 9) referred more to the data provided by the final outcomes, for the universities' staff the information they obtained during the process of compliance also gave insights of the state of their institutions in quality terms. This feature triggered interviewees to later see Licensing as a valuable instrument that could offer educational support to universities, as Asencio et al. mentioned (2019 in Gómez Méndez et al., 2024). In addition, once universities obtained their Licenses, those became a contributor to their reputation and legitimation, a perception in alignment with what was found out by Manatos and Sarrico (2023, p. 268).

Nonetheless, from a more systemic point of view, interviewees manifested their dissatisfaction with the way the state was conducting quality assurance policies, especially in

relation to Licensing and Accreditation, but also to additional normative devices elaborated by the MINEDU. They sensed disconnect between the quality policy instruments and the features and functioning of university education. This reflection is related to what was stated by Taousandinis and Antoniadou (2010, p. 89) when they referred that the purposes used on quality assurance tend to forget that education is a complex arena, where not everything is necessary possible to measure or quantified. This is particularly relevant for public universities, institutions that hold a wide variety of features like legal nature, size, availability of resources, location, among others.

In summary, although Licensing generated a genuinely positive perception beyond normative compliance, in the eyes of the university interviewees the way in which it was designed and applied was not guarantee of a real and sustainable reform in the quality of the educational services in higher education.

A study done by the World Bank indicated that Peruvian public universities “faced a set of different conditions and limitations when trying to comply with the Licensing Model (2020, p. 29). This is something that the perceptions of interviewees aligned with, particularly with respect to how their institutional management navigated the process of compliance. The literature review pointed out that in scenarios where quality assurance is applied, there are outcomes more visible than others (Stensaker, 2008), that is also the case in Peru.

From the experiences shared by interviewees, to navigate the Institutional Licensing process, but also to accomplish the obtention of a License, two elements were crucial. On the one hand the authorities’ support turned out to be a general agreement among all interviewees. Even though Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018, p. 260) mainly explained this by prompting a positive correlation related to effectiveness, in the case of Peruvian universities the perceived support was more a result of the pressure of this mandatory requirement since this was a new mechanism of a different scope. In that regard the authorities’ commitment propelled an institutional alignment and involvement of the rest of the university stakeholders, relevant to address all the detailed demands from Basic Quality Conditions (BQC) and its indicators.

Secondly, managerial capabilities were crucial in the conduction of the Institutional Licensing Process in public universities. As Benavides (Educacionenred.pe, 2019, n.p.) pointed out, by the time Licensing was going to be implemented these institutions were deteriorating because of issues related to disorganized management, scarce budget, corruption, and inadequate rectors. Considering these limitations interviewees highlighted

the relevance of management in their Institutional Licensing process. Since the BQC's were vast and demanded the engagement of different stakeholders and units from universities, managerial skills eased the coordination among them which also led to a more organized implementation. This aligns with what was manifested by Kevans (2020, p. 158) when she referred that management was a key factor to meet quality standards in the educational process, as it allows a certain level of anticipation, planning and adaptation of practices to respond to new demands.

The third sub research question aimed to explore to what extent did the changes and practices implemented in the institutional management of public universities laid proper foundations to guarantee continuous work on quality education beyond Institutional Licensing.

Harvey and Williams (2010, p. 24) discussed a clear tension in relation to quality assurance as a bureaucratic and administrative task and genuinely being a source of quality improvement. Although the findings obtained from interviewees do not portray this tension in the same way, they do highlight similar aspects. Especially when talking about what was left behind for public universities after Licensing. Considering the responses of interviewees it could be noted that despite the changes that the practices of institutional management achieved, these were undermined by factors at an internal and external level creating a scenario where quality improvement was compromised.

Despite having institutionalized Quality Offices within universities, interviewees mentioned that their positioning faced struggles. These units were usually in charge of the implementation of internal quality assurance mechanisms highly compromised with constant self-assessment, and working towards the alignment with goals at a systemic and national level. Nonetheless the presence of new authorities, with new agendas, represented a challenge to the prioritization and maintenance of these activities. Just to mention an example, although public universities were incorporating the implementation of internal quality management systems, their sustainability demanded resources every year to guarantee its proper functioning, however this became contingent to the preferences of authorities. Meanwhile outside public universities in the higher education policy realm, ongoing political debates were emerging, which ended up in the shrinking of the role of SUNEDU and their Licensing supervision function. This last event of 2024 propelled a concern in all interviewees as it was seen as an event that endangers the educational system, but also the efforts public universities made with Licensing.

Nicholson (2011, p. 6) manifested that accountability was usually the prioritized purpose compared to quality enhancement, especially because it was conducted at a governmental level which created stronger enforcement and sense of compliance. In the case of Peruvian public universities, the University Reform was an attempt to construct solid foundations in quality assurance matters that could allow both intentions. Institutional Licensing was the first step and basis for maintaining the work towards improving quality, even if it was from a normative angle. Yet the existence of internal factors and external non-controlled factors hindered the compromise of public institutions in pursuing better-quality performance from the perspective of university staff.

In summary, the main purpose of this research was to have further understanding of how Institutional Licensing influenced the perceptions and commitment towards quality assurance, as well as to what extent this mechanism was helpful to laid foundations for a continuous work towards improving quality. The findings of this study indicate that Licensing indeed influenced the way university staff understood and committed to quality assurance. They committed to it firstly because it was compulsory, but later because they saw the value it added to their institutions. In this regard, Licensing represented an important challenge for them, but under the guidance of Quality Offices and with the authorities' support they were able to respond to the demands of the compliance process until the obtention of their Licenses.

However, the existence and implementation of Licensing was not enough guarantee to maintain practices that sustain efforts towards improving the quality of higher educational services. Especially since interviewees agreed that the policies of the central government were inadequate; and their institutions, like MINEDU and SUNEDU, were not in the capacity to provide adequate guidance and supervision to public universities.

6.2 Implications

This study has practical implications for policy stakeholders, as well as for public universities. The government has the opportunity to provide further support for public universities, not only with the provision of a more pertinent normative framework that facilitates the provision and disposition of their own resources, but also by strengthening management capacities of key actors. A particular example is considering the potential of personnel of units like Quality Offices. With adequate training they could have a multiplying effect on other university stakeholders towards a stronger institutional commitment that propels better quality and that allows the sustainability of the best practices.

For public universities, given that they are now immersed in a quality assurance framework it is important to develop adequate management capacities that go beyond the commitment with normative regulation, to the contrary this study has shown that universities' personnel already have a more quality enhancement approach, however this needs to be properly engaged and sustained. In addition to this, although there are existent higher education networks, it is important to foster more interinstitutional cooperation in the public sector, so universities can be aware of what is going on in the higher education realm and what strategies and good practices their peers are implementing. This will be helpful to design better strategies and a more adequate integration of quality principles in their everyday management.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Institutional Licensing is a new mechanism of quality assurance applied since 2016, and the main milestone of the University Reform in higher education propelled since 2014 in Peru. This research provided a valuable perspective on how this mechanism influenced the management of public universities by exploring perceptions of administrative staff in relation to the understanding and commitments towards quality assurance, as well as institutional management practices to meet the BQC. This study found out that although at first this quality assurance mechanism was mostly perceived as a normative and control mandate, it was progressively acknowledged as something valuable for public universities as it contributed to their institutional quest for quality. Licensing also propelled a more coherent structure to address the quality issue in public universities.

The findings also revealed that complying with the BQC's demanded substantial efforts considering the limited resources. In a scenario where deadlines were clear and maintaining their existence was assessed, managerial skills played a significant role for public universities. This contributed to obtain important support from authorities and other relevant universities' stakeholders, but also to make the most efficient use of the limited and restricted resources available. Nonetheless, interviewees also highlighted limitations in the way the central government designed and implemented quality assurance policies, with Licensing and Accreditation, to mention an example, not being adequately articulated. Situations like this jeopardized the sustainability of the achieved efforts. Factors inside universities also harnessed these efforts made for Licensing, in that regard a stronger support towards management abilities in personnel of universities is key to lay more solid foundations

for continuous institutional development towards quality, but also for a more adequate response to the changing expectations from society.

Finally, this research attempted to add upon studies on quality assurance, by focusing on the perspectives from public universities' officials. However, complementary research is further advised to have a broader understanding of the implications of quality assurance mechanisms in practice. Drawing from these outcomes, public universities could further benefit from research that seeks to identify key factors that allow them to identify and sustain their efforts towards quality. Besides, it is also important to explore the perceptions on quality assurance mechanisms of other relevant stakeholders like teaching staff and students, who are directly involved in the provision of the educational services. At a policy level, it is also relevant to explore the suitability of quality assurance policies and mechanisms. Studies on the comparison of institutional practices and challenges of public and private institutions, could be helpful in giving further insights to adjust or elaborate more pertinent and contextual strategies that help to maintain and improve quality in higher education.

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Appendix

Interview guideline for staff from public universities

INTRODUCTION

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself, indicate your position in the institution, and describe what your role was in the process of complying with Institutional Licensing?

PART 1: Perception of Quality and Quality Assurance

2. How do you understand quality and quality assurance? Why is it important or not?
3. Do you think this understanding was influenced by the quality assurance mechanisms that came with the University Reform?
4. Did the university have quality management/assurance instruments or mechanisms in place before the Licensing Model? What were they, could you share them?

PART 2: Institutional management and compliance with Institutional License

5. How do you perceive that the institution faced the licensing process? What were the reactions of the stakeholders involved?
6. How did the licensing model affect the institutional management of the university? Were there specific areas that benefited or affected?
7. What were the main challenges faced by the institution? How did it manage them? Can you provide examples?
8. How do you think the university balanced/negotiated autonomy and licensing compliance?
9. Given that public universities have limited resources, what were the challenges you identified in terms of budget allocation when trying to meet all requirements from the model?
10. How did strategic planning change at the university when the Licensing Model came into play? Can you give examples?
11. Do you feel that there have been notable changes regarding the roles of university actors, such as authorities, professors, or administrative staff?

PART 3: Quality beyond Institutional Licensing

12. After acquiring the license, what significant changes did you notice in the university's decision-making processes? How was the quality agenda and what were the main objectives in terms of quality at the university?
13. What is your opinion about a standardized evaluation tool, such as the licensing model, which is the same for public and private universities?
14. The objective of the Licensing Model is to guarantee minimum quality standards for the higher education system. What is your opinion on the indicators defined and the means of verification regarding the fulfillment of this objective?
15. Do you think the licensing process could have been better designed and implemented? If so, what would there be some suggestions/recommendations you could provide to make it better fit your purposes?
16. Undoubtedly, the current political environment represents a major challenge in the efforts to build a quality system, how do you think this delimits the efforts made in your institution for Licensing and after?
17. Do you think that there is a correct articulation between quality assurance mechanisms? What do you think about the roles of SUNEDU and MINEDU in the consolidation of the Quality Assurance System?