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From Offices to Vice-Rectorates: Institutional Isomorphism and the Organizational Ascent of Quality Assurance in Chilean Universities

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Abstract

Quality assurance has become a major force reordering the contemporary university, and in Chile, its most visible expression is the ascent of quality units, which have moved from peripheral offices to, in many cases, vice-rectorate rank. This article examines that trajectory through a descriptive–comparative documentary analysis reconstructing the hierarchical position of these units in the 51 universities recognized by the Ministry of Education and comparing it with the 2008–2009 and 2019 time points, distinguishing the state, traditional private, and private non-Council of Rectors subsectors. Read through neo-institutional theory, the results show that the quality unit has become universal and has consolidated at the top of the hierarchy, albeit unevenly, since vice-rectorate rank remains almost exclusively a private-sector phenomenon, now spreading to the traditional sector. The analysis is organized as a congruence test between the framework’s expectations and the observed patterns, complemented by exact and trend tests. The resulting distribution is consistent with a reading in which legal coercion accounts for the widespread existence of these units, while imitation and market signaling correspond to their elevation, so that isomorphism produces homogeneity within each subsector and divergence between them. The documentary design, however, describes a form whose substantive integration remains undemonstrated.

Keywords: quality assurance; institutional isomorphism; accreditation; organizational change; Chilean higher education



Academic Editor: Xinqiao Liu

Received: 19 June 2026

Revised: 19 July 2026

Accepted: 29 July 2026

Published: 6 August 2026

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, few forces have transformed higher education as profoundly as quality assurance. What began as a set of evaluation and accreditation procedures has become a structuring feature of university life, capable of reordering not only what institutions do but the way in which they organize themselves to do it (Power, 1997; Neave, 1998; Stensaker, 2008). Recent research confirms and refines this diagnosis, showing that evaluation and accountability pressures have driven the expansion of an increasingly professionalized administrative apparatus and the consolidation of a veritable “strategic bureaucracy” in university governance (Guil-Gorostidi & Rubio-Arostegui, 2026; Woelert & Stensaker, 2025).

This transformation has left an imprint that is above all organizational, visible in the fact that a formerly peripheral function—the office in charge of self-evaluation or accreditation—has climbed the university hierarchy until reaching, in a good number of cases, vice-rectorate rank. That ascent, from offices to vice-rectorates, is the phenomenon this article sets out to examine.

Chile offers a privileged setting in which to observe it. Its higher education system, one of the most market-oriented in the world following the reforms of the 1980s (Brunner, 1990), also developed a quality assurance apparatus of unusual density, whose effects on university organization have been repeatedly documented (Espinoza & González, 2013; Scharager Goldenberg, 2018; Fernández Darraz & Ramos Zincke, 2020). This already considerable pressure tightened decisively in 2018, when Law 21.091 made institutional accreditation mandatory and incorporated a compulsory evaluation dimension concerning internal quality assurance, while Law 21.094 required state universities to establish a unit responsible for that function. With mandatory accreditation in force since 2020 and the new criteria and standards of the Comisión Nacional de Acreditación (CNA) operating since 2023, the period after 2018 presents itself as a natural laboratory for studying how external pressures translate into changes in the organizational structure of universities.

The direct antecedent of this research is the work of Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke (2020), which reconstructed the location of quality units in the organizational charts of Chilean universities between 2008–2009 and 2019 and found a differentiated evolution, in which some institutions—above all in the recently created private sector—elevated the function to vice-rectorate rank while others kept it in subordinate positions. The authors, however, explicitly left the explanation of that pattern open and formulated it as unresolved hypotheses that the change responded to processes of institutional isomorphism and to market signaling strategies. Since their analysis stops in 2019, just before the effects of the 2018 reform unfolded, a twofold gap persists: the organizational map has not been updated for the period of mandatory accreditation, and the isomorphic explanation of the differences between subsectors has not been systematically tested.

This article addresses that gap. Taking up and extending the procedure of Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke (2020), it reconstructs the hierarchical position of quality assurance units in Chilean universities as of 2026 and compares it with the 2008–2009 and 2019 time points, distinguishing the three major subsectors of the system: the state sector, the traditional private sector belonging to the Council of Rectors, and the private sector not affiliated with it. In doing so, it pursues three interrelated objectives: to describe how these structures have evolved over almost two decades; to examine the extent to which those patterns are congruent with the expectations that neo-institutional theory formulates regarding universities subject to common pressures; and to ask whether the ascent of the quality function toward the highest levels of the hierarchy expresses substantive integration into university governance or a primarily ceremonial conformity (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The resulting contribution is at once empirical, in that it offers an updated and near-census mapping of the phenomenon, and theoretical, in that it proposes a model specifying how the different mechanisms of isomorphism operate in a segmented system.

Three questions organize this undertaking. The first asks how the hierarchical position of quality assurance units has evolved between 2008 and 2026, and to what extent that evolution differs across the three subsectors of the system. The second asks to what extent the observed patterns are congruent with the expectations derived from the coercive, mimetic, and normative mechanisms of institutional isomorphism. The third, of a reflexive nature, asks what a documentary design can and cannot establish regarding the distinction between substantive integration and ceremonial conformity. Posing this last question is not

a digression, since the scope of the available evidence delimits the kind of claim the study is in a position to sustain, and it is preferable that this limit be stated at the outset rather than intimated at the end.

To develop this argument, the article first builds its analytical framework in three successive steps, examining the university as an organization and the foundations of neo-institutional theory, then analyzing the mechanisms of institutional isomorphism and the problem of decoupling, and finally characterizing quality assurance as an institutional pressure in the Chilean context. On that basis, it presents the materials and methods, sets out the results of the comparative analysis, and discusses their implications.

Universities as Organizations: Neo-Institutional Theory and Organizational Change

For much of the twentieth century, the university was difficult to conceive as an “organization” in the ordinary sense of the term, and the Chilean university was no exception. The dominant image described it, alternately, as a loosely coupled system in which the parts retain their identity and operate with notable independence (Weick, 1976); as an “organized anarchy” whose decisions emerge from the haphazard confluence of problems, solutions, and participants rather than from a rationality of means and ends (Cohen et al., 1972; March & Olsen, 1976); or, in Mintzberg’s (1979) typology, as a professional bureaucracy in which authority rests on academic expertise rather than on the hierarchical line. Under any of these readings, the university appeared as a fragmented institution, ambiguous in its ends, governed from its professional base, and largely impervious to managerial coordination.

That image has changed profoundly over the past three decades, and in Chile the shift has been particularly sharp. An influential strand of scholarship holds that universities have been reconstructed as organizational actors, that is, as integrated entities endowed with their own objectives, hierarchy, and strategic capacity, to which responsibility for their performance is attributed (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013; Seeber et al., 2015; Hüther & Krücken, 2018). What was once a conglomerate of faculties and chairs is today presented as a “complete organization,” endowed with identity, sovereignty, and formal rationality (Seeber et al., 2015), and subject to the expectations of management and competition characteristic of any contemporary organization (Krücken, 2021). The Chilean system, one of the most market-oriented in the world following the reforms of the 1980s, offers especially fertile ground for that transformation, since the relationship between the state and institutions was reconfigured according to the logic of the “evaluative state,” which grants autonomy in exchange for ex post accountability for results (Brunner, 1990; Neave, 1998). From that reconfiguration followed, as its organizational corollary, the proliferation of management structures—among them quality assurance units—that gave concrete form to the new expectations (Scharager Goldenberg, 2018; Fernández Darráz & Ramos Zincke, 2020).

Why do universities adopt precisely these structures and not others? The answer that underpins this study comes from neo-institutional theory, whose central thesis inverts the assumption that organizations are configured above all in accordance with technical efficiency. Much of the form they take responds, rather, to the need to secure legitimacy before an environment that prescribes how a serious and well-governed organization ought to look (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; W. R. Scott, 2014), an argument that recent research continues to employ in order to understand the dynamics of contemporary universities (Huisman & Burgoa, 2024). In Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) classic formulation, formal structures often operate as “myth and ceremony,” since they are incorporated because they have been institutionalized as appropriate, and it is that conformity, rather than their direct contribution to outcomes, which secures resources, support, and survival. Something of this occurs when a Chilean university creates or elevates a quality unit in order to satisfy the Comisión Nacional de Acreditación, for

the structure signals conformity with a legitimated model without thereby guaranteeing substantive improvement, as the literature on decoupling and quality assurance emphasizes (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025). Institutions, understood as the rules, norms, and cognitive schemas that lend stability and meaning to social life (W. R. Scott, 2014), thus function as a repertoire of available models that organizations sometimes incorporate almost automatically (Zucker, 1977; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983), in a tradition that goes back to Selznick (1957).

The decisive concept for linking environment and structure is that of the organizational field, that is, the set of organizations that in the aggregate constitute a recognized area of institutional life and share systems of meaning and patterns of interaction (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; W. R. Scott, 2014). It is at the level of the field, and not that of the isolated organization, that the pressures which ultimately shape internal structures take form, and Chilean higher education has been configured precisely as an increasingly dense and structured field, populated by the CNA, the accreditation agencies, the Higher Education Information System (SIES), rankings, networks such as CINDA, and the Council of Rectors itself, all of which disseminate common models and standards (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Holmén & Ringarp, 2023). Comparative evidence further confirms that these systems not only produce structural convergence but also transform the institutional culture of universities, their values, and their priorities (Guil-Gorostidi & Rubio-Arosteigui, 2026).

Seen in this light, organizational change in the university is not a mere rational adjustment to technical problems but a strongly institutional process. Reforms travel, are translated, and are adopted as available scripts rather than as tailored solutions (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Brunsson, 2009), so that their routine incorporation can coexist with a striking stability of practices. In that passage, universities not only modify their organizational charts but also professionalize their management and give rise to new administrative cadres and to hybrid roles situated midway between the academic and the managerial (Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004; Whitchurch, 2008; Pinheiro & Stensaker, 2014). In Chile, this phenomenon has been documented as the consolidation of a professional body devoted to academic quality management (Scharager Goldenberg, 2017, 2018), and its most visible expression is the emergence and progressive hierarchical ascent of quality assurance units, which move from offices and directorates to vice-rectorates along different trajectories depending on the type of institution (Fernández Darraz & Ramos Zincke, 2020). This article takes up and updates that observation, extending it to 2026 and to the three major subsectors of the system—the state, the traditional private, and the private sector not belonging to the Council of Rectors—in order to ask why structures born of common pressures end up converging on similar forms. That question concerning convergence is the one addressed in the following section.

Institutional Isomorphism and Decoupling

If universities respond to their environment by building structures that confer legitimacy upon them, it is reasonable to expect that, over time, they will come to resemble one another, and this intuition constitutes the point of departure for neo-institutionalism's most influential contribution. In their celebrated revisiting of the "iron cage," DiMaggio and Powell (1983) displaced the Weberian emphasis, arguing that the growing similarity among organizations was to be explained no longer by competition and the pursuit of efficiency, but by institutional pressures that impel them to adopt common forms regardless of whether these improve their performance. As an organizational field becomes structured—that is, as interaction, shared information, and awareness of belonging to a common enterprise increase—its members converge on a limited repertoire of legitimate models, so that homogenization emerges as the expected outcome of a field's maturity rather than as an accident. On this basis, the authors distinguished three mechanisms

through which the process operates—coercive, mimetic, and normative—which rarely act in isolation and which in the Chilean case can be traced with unusual clarity.

The first, coercive isomorphism, arises from formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by those on which they depend and by the cultural expectations of their environment, and its foremost source is the state, which homogenizes through legal frameworks, standardized procedures and, above all, its power as regulator and principal funder (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; W. R. Scott, 2014), a mechanism that recent research has documented specifically in higher education, where state reforms and new evaluation agencies operate as the principal source of homogenization (Marini, 2021). Few systems illustrate this mechanism as transparently as the Chilean one after 2018, since Law 21.091 abolished the voluntary character of accreditation, made it mandatory, and replaced the former “fitness for purpose” model with a set of criteria and standards defined centrally by the National Accreditation Commission, among which figures a mandatorily assessed dimension of internal quality assurance. Law 21.094, for its part, required state universities, in its Article 32, to designate a body or unit responsible for coordinating quality management, evaluation, and assurance, and raised the stakes by making accreditation outcomes grounds for the removal of the rector. It is difficult to conceive of a clearer coercive pressure, for having a quality unit ceased to be an option and became a legal obligation whose breach compromises even the tenure of the highest authority.

Alongside coercion, two subtler mechanisms operate, which explain why the institutional response is not only widespread but also surprisingly uniform in its forms. Mimetic isomorphism arises from uncertainty, since when objectives are ambiguous or the environment proves difficult to decipher, organizations take as their model those they perceive as more successful or legitimate, in an exercise of imitation that lowers the cost of deciding and shields them from criticism. The diffusion of the “vice-rectorate for quality assurance” as an organizational template—a label that travels from one institution to another and is replicated in almost identical phrasing—constitutes a textbook example, particularly visible in the private sector, where the absence of a legal mandate concerning the rank of the unit leaves room for the model to spread through emulation. Normative isomorphism, by contrast, stems from professionalization, for when a field develops bodies of experts trained in common norms, those professionals tend to reproduce, wherever they go, the schemas in which they were socialized (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; W. R. Scott, 2014), a process that in Chile has been documented by Scharager Goldenberg (2017, 2018) as the consolidation of a professional body devoted to academic quality management. It should be noted, however, that this last mechanism is invoked here as contextual background and not as one of the expectations the study submits to verification, since testing it would require examining professional networks, career trajectories, and shared norms, that is, evidence of a kind the documentary sources employed do not provide.

It would be a mistake, nonetheless, to read isomorphism as a mechanical destiny, for organizations do not merely comply with institutional pressures but deploy against them a repertoire of strategic responses ranging from full conformity to compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation (Oliver, 1991). The models in circulation, moreover, are not copied identically but translated and adapted to local trajectories and contexts, so that global convergence coexists with persistent national variations, in what Vaira (2004) termed “allomorphism” in higher education. Recent literature confirms this twofold movement: the review by Guil-Gorostidi and Rubio-Arostegui (2026) shows that the diffusion of quality management systems produces structural convergence and processes of adaptation, negotiation, and resistance alike, while the comparative analysis by Holmén and Ringarp (2023) demonstrates how isomorphic pressures are filtered differently according

to the public or private nature of institutions, a nuance especially pertinent to a system as segmented as the Chilean one (Cardona Mejía et al., 2020).

This last observation leads to the concept that provides the critical counterweight to the entire section: decoupling. Already in Meyer and Rowan's (1977) foundational formulation, organizations that adopt formal structures in order to satisfy external expectations tend to separate them, or "decouple" them, from their everyday activity, so that the institutional façade remains intact while the actual work follows its own logic, and conformity may then be either substantive or merely ceremonial. Bromley and Powell (2012) updated this idea for a world saturated with rationalized structures and showed that the most frequent gap today is no longer the simple failure to observe an adopted policy, but the decoupling of means from ends—that is, organizations deploying intense formal activity, in the shape of policies, units, indicators, and reports, whose connection to the outcomes they claim to pursue remains, at best, undemonstrated. Transposed to our object, the distinction warns that the organizational chart and actual practice may follow separate courses, a tension to which we return at the close of the analytical framework.

Quality Assurance as Institutional Pressure: Toward an Analytical Framework

The mechanisms described in the preceding section do not operate in a vacuum, for they require a concrete institutional vehicle to translate the expectations of the field into demands addressed to each organization, and in contemporary higher education that vehicle has been, above all, quality assurance. It should be noted at the outset that not even the notion of "quality" these systems mobilize constitutes a neutral datum, since the pioneering work of Harvey and Green (1993) established that it is a polysemous concept—excellence, fitness for purpose, transformation, value for money—whose definition depends on who enunciates it and to what ends, to the point that the question of "the end of quality" as a category with stable content has been raised (Harvey, 2002). A recent assessment of three decades of research in the field further confirms that quality assurance has tended to incline toward an approach of control and accountability rather than toward the transformation of learning it originally promised (Harvey, 2024), so that, if the criterion itself is a construction, the way accreditation operationalizes it—what is measured, what is rewarded, what is left out—already constitutes an exercise of power and not a simple technical verification.

Accreditation and evaluation must therefore be understood less as instruments of measurement than as devices that actively reconfigure institutional governance. Their expansion is inseparable from the rise of the "evaluative state," which grants formal autonomy in exchange for ex post verification of results (Neave, 1998), and from an "audit culture" that has turned accountability into a form of governance in its own right, with performative effects on that which it claims merely to observe (Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000; Shore & Wright, 2015). This is why the specialized literature has insistently shown that quality systems do not merely certify but transform, inasmuch as they strengthen central administrations, shift power toward managers, formalize procedures, and reorder institutional priorities (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Westerheijden et al., 2007; Stensaker, 2008). In Chile, this capacity to shape university organization has been repeatedly documented, since accreditation installed permanent quality assurance procedures and improved institutions' internal processes, at the cost of increasing formalization and bureaucratization (Espinoza & González, 2013; López et al., 2020; Fernández Darraz & Ramos Zincke, 2020).

The Chilean system offers, indeed, a paradigmatic case of this dynamic, both for its intensity and for the clarity of its regulatory trajectory. Its origins date back to 1999, with the creation of the National Undergraduate Accreditation Commission (CNAP) and its postgraduate counterpart, advisory bodies charged with conducting experimental and voluntary processes and with preparing the future legal framework (Lemaitre, 2015; Fernández Darraz & Ramos Zincke, 2020). That framework arrived with Law 20.129 of

2006, which institutionalized the National Quality Assurance System and created the National Accreditation Commission as a public and autonomous body in charge of the function. The decisive transformation, however, came with Law 21.091 of 2018 on higher education, which amended Law 20.129 and substantially tightened the regime, abolishing the voluntary character of institutional accreditation—mandatory since 2020—making it comprehensive, and replacing the former “fitness for purpose” model with a set of criteria and standards defined by the CNA, in force since October 2023. Among the dimensions these criteria assess on a mandatory basis is, in a manner especially significant for this study, “internal quality assurance,” that is, the capacity of each institution to regulate itself and to improve continuously, so that quality ceased to be a declared aspiration and became a function the state requires, evaluates, and certifies.

To this general architecture was added, in the same year, Law 21.094 on state universities, which established that these institutions must orient their work toward quality standards and, to that end, determine a body or unit responsible for implementing and coordinating quality management and assurance processes. That mandate did not remain a merely general declaration but was incorporated into the statutes of state universities, which granted it organic standing and permanence. The combined effect of the two laws is unequivocal: for the system as a whole, Law 21.091 made accreditation—and, with it, internal quality assurance—an inescapable condition of operation, while for the state subsector Law 21.094 transformed the very existence of a quality unit into a legal and statutory obligation. In both cases the pressure falls not on an abstract practice but on the organizational structure itself, since it obliges universities to establish a specific body in charge of quality.

It is here that the threads of this framework are drawn together. If accreditation is a pressure that does not measure but transforms, and if that pressure demands of every university a structure dedicated to quality, then quality assurance operates, in the terms of the preceding section, as a powerful engine of isomorphism, such that the legal obligation acts as coercive pressure, the diffusion of a single model of unit—and, notably, of the vice-rectorate for quality—as a mimetic mechanism, and the consolidation of a professional body trained in common criteria as a normative pathway (Scharager Goldenberg, 2018). It is to be expected, therefore, that structures born of shared pressures will converge on similar forms across the system, although the framework itself cautions that such formal convergence does not guarantee substantive transformation. Indeed, when conformity with the norm becomes an end in itself, institutions may learn to respond to accreditation “too well,” erecting structures and routines that stage compliance without necessarily altering the academic practices they claim to govern—what has been described as “dramaturgical compliance” (Barrow, 1999) and, more broadly, as the drift of quality assurance toward control rather than improvement (Harvey, 2024). It is no coincidence, in this respect, that academics themselves have displayed responses oscillating between adherence and open resistance to quality devices (Anderson, 2006).

The theoretical framework thus issues in a set of expectations that organize the empirical analysis. The first is that Chilean universities will generally exhibit units responsible for quality; the second, that the hierarchical position of these units will tend to converge within each subsector, though with differences between the state, the traditional private, and the private non-Council of Rectors sectors, according to the relative weight of each isomorphic mechanism; and the third, that the ascent of such units toward vice-rectorate rank will raise, in each case, the open question of their substantive or ceremonial character (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025). Examining these expectations empirically, on the basis of the trajectory of quality structures in Chilean universities between 2008 and 2026, is the task of the sections that follow.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design and Analytical Strategy

In order to examine the expectations derived from the preceding framework, the study adopts a documentary design of a descriptive–comparative character, which reconstructs the position of quality assurance units within the organizational structure of Chilean universities and interprets it in the light of neo-institutional theory. Documentary analysis is well suited to this purpose, since it constitutes a systematic and replicable procedure for examining official sources and tracing changes over time without altering what is observed (J. Scott, 1990; Prior, 2003; Bowen, 2009); it is, moreover, an established method in research on educational policy and organization, where the examination of regulations and institutional documents makes it possible to reconstruct both formal decisions and the forces that gave rise to them (Cardno, 2018). On this basis, the procedure replicates and extends that of Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke (2020), so that a new time point, corresponding to 2026, is added here to their 2008–2009 and 2019 benchmarks, making it possible to trace the trajectory of these units over almost two decades.

Rather than attributing the observed change to isomorphic mechanisms, the study adopts a congruence strategy: it contrasts the documented patterns with expectations formulated in advance on the basis of the theoretical framework, in line with the pattern matching customary in non-experimental research. The procedure requires that each expectation be translated into an indicator observable in the sources and, above all, that the observation which would have been incompatible with it be made explicit, so that the interpretation is subject to a test rather than merely accompanying the data. Table 1 summarizes this design. It should be stressed that congruence between an expectation and a pattern does not amount to the demonstration of a causal mechanism, since documentary sources record organizational outcomes and not the decision-making processes that produced them.

Table 1. Expectations derived from the analytical framework, their observable indicators, and the evidence that would have refuted them.

Expectation	Mechanism	Observable Indicator in the Sources	Evidence That Would Have Refuted It
E1. Widespread presence of the unit	Coercive	Existence of a unit responsible for quality in all 51 institutions, and the closing of coverage gaps after 2018	Persistence of institutions without a unit in 2026, or universalization already completed before the reform
E2. Ascent in the hierarchy	Coercive and organizational actorhood	Sustained increase in the proportion of units reporting directly to the rector, and retreat of peripheral locations	Stability or decline in the weight of the upper positions between 2008–2009 and 2026
E3. Concentration of vice-rectorate rank	Mimetic and signaling	Presence of vice-rectorate rank concentrated in the subsector most exposed to competition and absent where regulation sets a floor	Homogeneous distribution of the rank across subsectors, or its concentration in the state subsector
E4. Diffusion of the model across subsectors	Mimetic	Emergence of vice-rectorate rank in the traditional private subsector subsequent to its consolidation in the private sector not affiliated with the Council of Rectors	Sustained absence of the model in the traditional subsector, or diffusion in the opposite direction

Source: prepared by the authors on the basis of the theoretical framework set out in the previous section. The expectations were formulated prior to the coding of the 2026 time point.

2.2. Universe, Sources, and Coding Procedure

The study covers the 51 universities currently recognized by the Ministry of Education—virtually complete coverage of the university subsystem, from which four institutions undergoing closure were excluded—and takes the institution as the unit of analysis. Following the system's standard classification by ownership and membership in the Council of Rectors (Fernández Darraz & Ramos Zincke, 2020), three subsectors are distinguished, comprising 18 state universities, 9 traditional private universities, and 24 private universities not affiliated with the Council. This segmentation constitutes the analytical axis of the study, since, as argued above, each subsector is differently exposed to the coercive, mimetic, and normative mechanisms. The information was collected between January and June 2026 following an explicit hierarchy of sources. Recourse was had, in the first instance, to the official institutional organizational chart published by each university; failing that, to the statutes or the governing regulations in force; and, as a last resort, to institutional self-evaluation reports and to the active transparency portals mandatory for state universities. Every document consulted was archived digitally together with its date of capture, so that the classification remains verifiable irrespective of any subsequent modifications to institutional websites. To this corpus was added the legal framework of quality assurance, comprising Laws 20.129, 21.091, and 21.094 and the criteria of the National Accreditation Commission in force (2023). In each institution, the unit responsible for quality was identified by applying the inclusion criterion of Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke (2020), according to which the unit had to incorporate in its name the terms “quality,” “evaluation,” “self-evaluation,” or “accreditation,” or else official information had to confirm that responsibility.

The content of the categories employed warrants specification, since the contribution of the study is to a considerable extent classificatory. A quality assurance unit is understood as any body formally constituted in the organizational chart whose name incorporates the terms quality, evaluation, self-evaluation, or accreditation, or for which official information attributes that responsibility. Its position is classified into four levels. The vice-rectorate corresponds to a unit holding that rank within the formal structure, reporting directly to the rector and participating in the senior collegiate management body, irrespective of whether its name also encompasses other functions. Rector's office staff designates a unit of rank below vice-rectorate that reports directly to the rector or the pro-rector. A unit reporting to a vice-rectorate is one that reports to a vice-rectorate other than itself, typically the academic one. The residual category, other location, comprises units situated at any other level of the structure or whose reporting line does not correspond to the preceding ones. The three subsectors, in turn, are defined by the conjunction of ownership and membership in the Council of Rectors, a distinction that is not merely administrative, since it orders the conditions of competition and funding to which each group is subject.

Classification was resolved by means of decision rules established prior to coding. The governing criterion was the formal reporting line recorded in the organizational chart, so that each unit was assigned to the level of the authority on which it depends and not to the one its name might suggest. Two situations required additional rules. Where the quality function appears merged with planning, strategic development, or institutional analysis, the unit was classified according to the rank of the resulting body, with the merger duly noted. This rule warrants a qualification, for the equivalence it establishes is hierarchical and not functional: a unit combining quality and strategic planning and another combining quality and institutional analysis occupy the same level in the structure of authority, which is what is measured here, but may perform different tasks—a question this design does not address and which the supplementary matrix allows to be examined, since it records the full name of each unit. Where the organizational chart records a dual reporting line, the line of

authority established in the statutes or regulations was given precedence over the graphic representation. All cases were independently coded by two members of the team, who worked on the same archived corpus without access to each other's coding. Agreement between the two codings reached a Cohen's kappa of $\kappa = 0.82$, a value falling within the range of almost perfect agreement under conventional criteria (Landis & Koch, 1977), and discrepancies, concentrated in cases of dual reporting lines, were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached, with a record kept of the criterion applied in each case. The complete classification matrix, institution by institution, with the corresponding source and date of consultation, is provided as Supplementary Material.

2.3. Analytical Procedures

Two complementary analyses were conducted on these data. The first classified the hierarchical position of each unit into the four categories defined by Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke (2020)—vice-rectorate, rector's office staff, unit reporting to a vice-rectorate, and other location—tabulated by subsector in order to contrast 2026 with the previous time points. The second applied content analysis to the legal and statutory corpus (Krippendorff, 2018; Mayring, 2014), so as to characterize how the regulations institute, require, and elevate the quality function. To both was added a statistical treatment whose status warrants specification. Since the study covers the universe of recognized universities rather than a sample drawn from it, the tests are not employed to infer to a larger population, but as a criterion of robustness allowing a systematic pattern to be distinguished from a minor fluctuation. The association between subsector and the presence of vice-rectorate rank was examined by means of the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test, accompanied by Cramér's V as a measure of magnitude, and the temporal evolution of hierarchical positions by means of the Cochran–Armitage trend test. Exact tests were preferred over the chi-square statistic in the contrasts by subsector, since several expected frequencies fall below five.

It is finally worth delimiting the scope of what this design permits one to assert, distinguishing three levels. The sources document directly the existence of the legal obligation, the date on which it entered into force, and the formal position of each unit in the organizational chart. Readings that link the observed distribution to imitation among institutions or to signaling strategies constitute, by contrast, an inference drawn by the analysis, since both rest on the correspondence between pattern and theoretical expectation and not on any record of the decisions that led to it. There remains, finally, beyond the scope of the study, any judgment concerning the effective functioning of the units and, with it, concerning the degree of coupling between formal structure and academic practices.

2.4. Comparability Across Time Points

Since the 2008–2009 and 2019 time points derive from Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke (2020) while that of 2026 was compiled by the authors, the comparison requires examining the extent to which the three are homologous. Four dimensions are pertinent. As regards the categories, the study retains without modification the four defined by those authors, so that the classification is homologous. As regards the criterion for including a unit, the same naming criterion they employed was applied, reproduced verbatim. As regards the sources, all three time points rest on organizational charts and official institutional documentation, although the availability and level of detail of such documentation online have increased appreciably between 2008 and 2026. As regards coverage, the time points comprise 37, 48, and 51 institutions respectively, a difference attributable both to the creation of new universities and to the availability of information at the first time point.

One consequence follows from this examination that is worth assuming explicitly. The category most sensitive to differences in source is precisely the residual one, other location,

whose contraction may be due in part to the greater availability and precision of published organizational charts and not solely to the effective relocation of the units. For this reason, the argument concerning universalization rests here on the indicator least vulnerable to that bias, namely the very existence of a unit responsible for quality, unequivocally verifiable in 2026 for all 51 institutions, while the earlier time points are employed as comparative references rather than as the basis of the principal inference. The same holds, with greater reason, for the differences in coverage between subsectors at the first time point.

3. Results

3.1. Universalization of the Quality Unit

Table 2 presents the hierarchical position of quality assurance units across the three subsectors of the Chilean university system at three moments in time—2008–2009, 2019, and 2026—expressed as a percentage within each subsector. The first two time points derive from Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke (2020), while the third corresponds to the authors' own compilation described in the Methods Section.

Table 2. Hierarchical position of quality assurance units by subsector, 2008–2009, 2019, and 2026 (% within subsector; *n* in parentheses).

Subsector/Level	2008–2009	2019	2026
State university	(<i>n</i> = 13)	(<i>n</i> = 18)	(<i>N</i> = 18)
Vice-rectorate	7.7 (1)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
Rector's office staff	46.2 (6)	61.1 (11)	72.2 (13)
Unit reporting to a vice-rectorate	23.1 (3)	27.8 (5)	27.8 (5)
Other location	23.1 (3)	11.1 (2)	0.0 (0)
Private CRUCH university	(<i>n</i> = 8)	(<i>n</i> = 9)	(<i>n</i> = 9)
Vice-rectorate	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	22.2 (2)
Rector's office staff	37.5 (3)	44.4 (4)	66.7 (6)
Unit reporting to a vice-rectorate	12.5 (1)	22.2 (2)	0.0 (0)
Other location	50.0 (4)	33.3 (3)	11.1 (1)
Non-CRUCH private university *	(<i>n</i> = 16)	(<i>n</i> = 21)	(<i>n</i> = 24)
Vice-rectorate	0.0 (0)	47.6 (10)	33.3 (8)
Rector's office staff	56.3 (9)	42.9 (9)	58.3 (14)
Unit reporting to a vice-rectorate	25.0 (4)	9.5 (2)	8.3 (2)
Other location	12.5 (2)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)

* In 2008–2009, one private university not affiliated with CRUCH had no quality unit, so the percentages reported for that subsector do not add up to 100%. The 2008–2009 data correspond to the subset of 37 institutions with comparable information. Sources: for 2008–2009 and 2019, Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke (2020, Tables 3 and 4 in that study); for 2026, the authors' own compilation.

The first finding is also the clearest and runs across the entire system: the quality assurance unit has become universal. Whereas in 2008–2009 there were still institutions without a body dedicated to quality, and a good many of those that had one placed it in peripheral or subordinate positions, by 2026 all 51 universities have one, and the residual category “other location,” which at the first time point accounted for almost a quarter of the cases, is reduced to a single case in the entire system. The retreat of these peripheral locations describes a monotonic trend across the three time points (Cochran–Armitage, $z = -3.31$; $p < 0.001$), although, for the reasons set out in the section on comparability, this decline must be read with caution, since part of it may reflect the greater precision of the organizational charts available at the more recent time points. The datum that sustains the finding independently of that objection is the very existence of the unit, verified for all 51 institutions in 2026. The timing of the closure is equally precise, for the leap toward full coverage consolidates after 2018, as accreditation became mandatory in 2020 and the new CNA criteria and standards, with their internal quality assurance dimension, entered into

force in 2023, while in state universities Article 32 of Law 21.094 turned the very existence of the unit into a statutory obligation. In these terms, the pattern satisfies expectation E1.

3.2. Ascent in the Hierarchy

Universalization does not, however, exhaust the phenomenon, since it is equally if not more significant that the units, besides becoming widespread, ascended in the hierarchy. Table 3, which aggregates the data for the system as a whole, makes this shift visible: the proportion located as rector's office staff—that is, reporting directly to the highest authority—grew from 48.6% in 2008–2009 to 64.7% in 2026, while positions subordinate to a vice-rectorate or relegated to lower instances contracted steadily. Taking the two upper positions together—vice-rectorate and rector's office staff—the shift describes a monotonic trend over the period (Cochran–Armitage, $z = 3.35$; $p < 0.001$), and the distribution of hierarchical levels differs across the three time points ($\chi^2(4) = 15.68$; $p = 0.003$; Cramér's $V = 0.24$), so that the center of gravity of the function moved toward the top of the hierarchy, in line with expectation E2. To this ascent is added a qualitative feature common to all three subsectors, since the quality unit frequently appears merged with planning, strategic development, or institutional analysis.

Table 3. Distribution of quality assurance units across the system as a whole, 2008–2009, 2019, and 2026 (n and %).

Level	2008–2009 ($n = 37$)	2019 ($n = 48$)	2026 ($n = 51$)
Vice-rectorate	1 (2.7)	10 (20.8)	10 (19.6)
Rector's office staff	18 (48.6)	24 (50.0)	33 (64.7)
Unit reporting to a vice-rectorate	8 (21.6)	9 (18.8)	7 (13.7)
Other location	9 (24.3)	5 (10.4)	1 (2.0)
No quality unit	1 (2.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)

Sources: for 2008–2009 and 2019, [Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke \(2020\)](#); for 2026, the authors' own compilation.

3.3. Divergence Between Subsectors

The sharpest contrast emerges when the subsectors are compared with one another. No state university places quality at vice-rectorate rank in 2026, nor did any do so in 2019, and the single state vice-rectorate that existed around 2008–2009 was subsequently abolished ([Fernández Darraz & Ramos Zincke, 2020](#)), so that state universities comply with the legal mandate by establishing directorates reporting to the rector or the pro-rector (72.2%) or to an academic vice-rectorate (27.8%). In the private sector not belonging to the Council of Rectors, by contrast, the quality vice-rectorate—nonexistent in 2008–2009—emerged around 2019 and persists in 2026 in one third of the institutions. The association between subsector and the presence of vice-rectorate rank is statistically significant (Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact test, $p = 0.013$) and of moderate to large magnitude (Cramér's $V = 0.38$); the pooled contrast between the state subsector and the private sector as a whole yields $p = 0.009$. The pattern therefore satisfies expectation E3, which would have been refuted by a homogeneous distribution of the rank across subsectors or by its concentration in the state sector.

The 2026 time point registers, moreover, an unprecedented development. The traditional private subsector, belonging to the Council of Rectors, had no quality vice-rectorates in either 2008–2009 or 2019, whereas two appear in 2026 (22.2%). The model, born and consolidated in the younger private sector, is thus recorded for the first time in a historically more established subsector, in the sense and direction anticipated by expectation E4.

One qualification remains, imposed by the analysis itself. The number of vice-rectorates in the system remained stable between 2019 and 2026—ten at both time points—and, in the non-CRUCH private sector, their proportion even declined slightly as new institutions were incorporated which, as was to be expected, begin with a directorate

before moving upward. Rather than an indefinite proliferation of vice-rectorates, what the data document is the consolidation of the quality function in high positions within the hierarchy and its now universal presence.

Taken together, the data trace a two-sided pattern. Within each subsector, the units tend to cluster around one or two dominant positions—rector's office staff and dependence on a vice-rectorate in the state case, rector's office staff and vice-rectorate in the private one—whereas across subsectors, the forms diverge persistently, since what constitutes the norm in one is entirely absent from another. The interpretation of this contrast, and of the three preceding ones, is addressed in the following section.

4. Discussion

The preceding analysis makes it possible to return to the expectations with which the theoretical framework closed and to take up, with data through 2026, the question [Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke \(2020\)](#) left open, namely whether the differentiated organizational change in quality units is connected to isomorphic and signaling processes. The observed patterns are congruent with that twofold conjecture, though with a precision their original formulation did not anticipate, for quality assurance structures have not only become widespread to the point of covering the entire system but have also ascended within the organizational hierarchy, coinciding in time with the external pressure of accreditation and with an explicit legal mandate. That twofold movement—universalization and ascent—is consistent, in the Chilean case, with an institutional isomorphism that does not homogenize the system uniformly, but rather in a manner differentiated by subsector.

The interpretive key lies in distinguishing the work performed by each mechanism of isomorphism. The universalization of the unit satisfies the expectation derived from coercive isomorphism ([DiMaggio & Powell, 1983](#)), since the mandatory accreditation imposed by Law 21.091 and the mandate of Article 32 of Law 21.094 turned the existence of a quality body into a condition of operation rather than an option, so that by 2026 no university lacks one and peripheral locations, frequent two decades earlier, have almost entirely disappeared. The status of this claim warrants specification. That the legal obligation exists and that its entry into force precedes the closing of the coverage gaps are facts the sources document directly. That institutions incorporated the unit in order to satisfy that requirement and preserve their legitimacy, rather than on account of its contribution to performance, is by contrast an interpretation, supported by the temporal coincidence and by a classic script of institutionalization, according to which a structure adopted at first by a few ends up, once enshrined in law, becoming widespread with relative independence from its internal utility ([Meyer & Rowan, 1977](#); [Tolbert & Zucker, 1983](#); [W. R. Scott, 2014](#); [Huisman & Burgoa, 2024](#)). Coercion, however, accounts for the existence of the unit but not for its rank.

The ascent of the function toward the top of the hierarchy refers instead to a broader transformation: that of the university reconstructed as an organizational actor endowed with strategic direction and central command ([Krücken & Meier, 2006](#); [Ramirez & Christensen, 2013](#); [Krücken, 2021](#)). The shift in quality's center of gravity toward the rector's office staff, and its frequent merger with planning and strategic development, are consistent with the strengthening of the professional management cadres that this transformation brings with it, a process recent research describes as the consolidation of a "strategic bureaucracy" in university governance ([Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004](#); [Scharager Goldenberg, 2018](#); [Woelert & Stensaker, 2025](#)); they are likewise inseparable from the consolidation of the "evaluative state" and from an audit culture that have shifted power toward central administrations and raised the status of those who manage quality ([Neave, 1998](#); [Power, 1997](#); [Stensaker, 2008](#)).

Elevation to vice-rectorate level, however—the ceiling of the hierarchy, which no regulation requires—is congruent with a different logic, mimetic and signaling in character, concentrated where competition for enrollment, resources, and prestige proves most intense, that is, in the private sector not belonging to the Council of Rectors. In that register, the vice-rectorate operates as a costly and visible signal of quality directed at the environment and, therefore, as a resource of legitimacy before external audiences (Spence, 1973; Suchman, 1995; Mause, 2009), rather than as a uniform response to regulation. Where regulation compels institutions to have the structure, competition prompts them to display it, and this division of labor between the mechanisms—coercion for the floor, mimesis and signaling for the ceiling—offers a plausible reading of the apparent paradox of a system at once homogeneous, because all institutions possess the unit, and heterogeneous, because only some elevate it, refining the intuition of Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke (2020) by assigning each hypothesis its domain of validity. It should be stressed, however, that this reading does not rest on direct evidence concerning institutional motivations, since the study examined neither institutional communication, nor branding strategies, nor student recruitment practices, and did not gather the testimonies of those who made these decisions.

That caution requires consideration of alternative explanations the design does not permit us to rule out. The creation of a quality vice-rectorate may respond to a broader reform of internal governance, to the preference of a particular leadership team, to a deliberate strategy in view of a forthcoming accreditation process, to concern for institutional reputation, or to an administrative restructuring of general scope in which quality was merely one component. Several of these, moreover, are not exclusive of signaling, since a vice-rectorate may originate in an administrative restructuring and operate at the same time as a signal to external audiences. The data authorize only one qualification, and it is best formulated with restraint: the distribution of the rank is not random across subsectors, but is concentrated to a statistically significant degree where competition proves most intense and is absent where regulation sets a mandatory floor. Any alternative explanation would have to account for why the structures are distributed in precisely this way, a question that remains open.

Read through Oliver's (1991) repertoire of strategic responses, the subsectors do not react identically to one and the same pressure, since the state sector complies with the mandate in its minimal form—it satisfies the law by establishing a directorate, but does not convert it into a vice-rectorate—in a conformity that might be termed acquiescent, for the absence of market competition for students, together with a collegial tradition and the stability conferred by historical membership in the Council of Rectors, renders unnecessary the costly signal a vice-rectorate entails. The younger private sector, by contrast, turns compliance into an occasion for distinction, in keeping with the physiognomy of a higher education system that ranks among the most market-oriented in the world (Brunner, 1990); and the fact that this difference has remained stable over almost two decades suggests that it is not a transitory lag but rather a matter of institutional logics rooted in the position each subsector occupies within the field.

An unprecedented finding nonetheless qualifies that stability: the appearance, for the first time, of quality vice-rectorates in the traditional private subsector belonging to the Council of Rectors. The model, born in the competitive private sector, has begun to spread toward a grouping historically more reluctant to embrace market logic, along a path neo-institutional theory anticipates precisely, since a format that gains legitimacy is copied from peers perceived as successful and translated into new contexts (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). That the borrowing flows from the new private sector toward the traditional one, and not in the opposite direction, offers a clue as to how organizational prestige has been reordered in Chilean higher education, where the

grammar of quality management appears to have become a common language that even the most consolidated institutions adopt.

The most delicate contribution of this discussion is nonetheless also the most uncomfortable, for the universalization and ascent of quality structures document a form and not a practice. The neo-institutional tradition warns, from its foundational formulation onward, that organizations may adopt legitimated structures and decouple them from their effective work (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), and in its contemporary version, this decoupling manifests itself less as non-observance than as a proliferation of formal activity whose connection to outcomes remains undemonstrated (Bromley & Powell, 2012). The design employed here does not permit establishing which of the two readings prevails, and it would be improper to present as a finding what can only be formulated as a question. The literature offers reasons not to dismiss it, since three decades of research show that quality assurance has tended to incline toward control and compliance rather than toward the transformation of learning (Barrow, 1999; Harvey, 2024; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025), but those reasons justify an agenda, not a conclusion.

Implications follow from the foregoing that exceed the case at hand. For public policy, the study confirms that legal mandates are an effective instrument for producing structures, since the floor is built without exception, but that the ultimate objective of such policies, the quality of education, does not follow automatically from structural compliance, so that the risk is one of mistaking the map for the territory. For organizational theory, by contrast, the Chilean case enriches the model of isomorphism in two respects: it shows, on the one hand, that homogenization does not operate upon the system as a whole but within differentiated fields—what Vaira (2004) called allomorphism and recent comparative evidence reaffirms (Holmén & Ringarp, 2023)—and reveals, on the other, a division of labor among mechanisms in which coercion governs the existence of the structure while mimesis and signaling govern its form and its rank.

Beyond Form: Propositions for Future Research

Three propositions follow from the analysis and are set out here for research able to draw on other sources. The first holds that the hierarchical ascent of the quality unit is associated with greater effective capacity to influence academic, budgetary, and programming decisions. The second, that vice-rectorate rank operates differently across subsectors, as an instrument of internal governance where it responds to a legal mandate and as a signal directed at external audiences where it responds to competition for enrollment and prestige. The third, that the degree of coupling between the formal quality structure and academic practices varies according to the age of the unit and according to its merger with, or separation from, strategic planning. None of the three can be examined with documentary evidence, since all require interviews with actors, case studies, and indicators of influence, that is, the designs this study did not adopt and which its own findings render necessary.

These conclusions must, finally, be read in the light of the limits of the design. Documentary analysis captures with precision the formal position of the units, but not their functioning, nor does it allow one to establish whether the various mixed configurations—quality merged with planning, with strategic development, or with institutional analysis—perform comparable tasks. The 2008–2009 and 2019 time points, moreover, rest on the data of Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke (2020), with coverage and conditions of documentary availability different from those of 2026, which counsels the caution already noted with respect to the residual category; and some borderline cases required the classification decisions detailed in the Section 2. Far from invalidating the findings, these limitations delimit their scope and trace the boundary—between the form already

consolidated and the practice still to be demonstrated—where the ultimate meaning of the phenomenon this article has documented is at stake.

5. Conclusions

Over almost two decades, the quality assurance units of Chilean universities have traveled an unmistakable path, moving from incomplete presence and peripheral positions to universal existence and an increasingly high location within the organizational hierarchy. This article has reconstructed that trajectory through 2026 and has shown that the twofold movement of universalization and ascent is consistent, in the Chilean case, with an institutional isomorphism associated with the external pressure of accreditation and with the legal mandate of 2018.

Its principal contribution, however, lies not in establishing that isomorphism obtains, but in specifying how it operates, since the data reveal a division of labor among its mechanisms. Legal coercion raises a common floor—by 2026, no university lacks a quality unit—while elevation to vice-rectorate rank, which no regulation requires, is concentrated in the private sector most exposed to the market and proves congruent with a mimetic and signaling logic. Homogenization, moreover, does not encompass the system as a whole but takes place within subsectors that diverge from one another, so that what is the norm in the private domain—the vice-rectorate—is entirely absent from the state one, which fulfills the mandate through directorates of lesser rank. In this way, the study offers an empirical basis for addressing the question [Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke \(2020\)](#) had left open, and it documents, in addition, a new development: the recent diffusion of the vice-rectorate model toward the traditional private sector, previously untouched by it.

One caveat nonetheless remains, imposed by the analysis itself, for mapping where quality is located and how it has ascended is not the same as establishing what it does once installed at the top of the organizational chart. The elevation of a structure is, after all, a form, and form may express either a genuine integration of quality into university governance or a conformity that is above all ceremonial, mounted in order to satisfy accreditation and to signal legitimacy. That distinction, which documentary analysis cannot settle, carries the furthest-reaching implication for public policy, since legal mandates produce structures effectively, but the quality of education does not follow automatically from compliance with them. To confuse the hierarchical elevation of the quality unit with a substantive improvement in institutional quality would be to assume that change in organizational form amounts, in itself, to an effective transformation of university practices. Stated in the most precise terms that the design authorizes, the study shows that quality assurance has become more visible and formally central in the Chilean university organization, not that it has become more effective.

The next step, consequently, is to shift the gaze from form to practice, that is, to inquire whether quality vice-rectorates effectively govern academic decisions, resources, and routines, or whether they operate, above all, as a signal directed at the environment. Until that question is answered, the ascent from offices to vice-rectorates will remain at once the most visible symptom of a profound organizational transformation and an enigma as to its ultimate meaning.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/educsci16081251/s1>, a classification matrix of the 51 universities, indicating the quality unit identified in each case, its hierarchical level, the source consulted, and the date of capture of the document.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, E.M.-R. and E.D.P.; methodology, E.M.-R. and C.Z.-M.; software, C.Z.-M.; validation, E.M.-R., A.M.-Q. and E.D.P.; formal analysis, E.M.-R. and C.Z.-M.; investigation, E.M.-R. and A.M.-Q.; resources, A.M.-Q.; data curation, C.Z.-M.; writing—original draft preparation, E.M.-R.; writing—review and editing, E.D.P., C.Z.-M. and A.M.-Q.; visualization, C.Z.-M.; supervision, E.D.P.; project administration, E.M.-R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding. The article processing charge (APC) was funded by Universidad de Los Lagos. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable. The study involved neither humans nor animals, as it is based exclusively on the analysis of public documents (organizational charts, institutional websites, statutes, and the legal and regulatory corpus of quality assurance).

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable. The study did not involve humans.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The 2008–2009 and 2019 data are drawn from [Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zincke \(2020\)](#), and the 2026 data were compiled by the authors from publicly available institutional sources.

Acknowledgments: The authors used computer-assisted translation software to support the English version of the manuscript; the authors reviewed and edited the output and assume full responsibility for the content.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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