

A Review of Quality Assurance Frameworks in African Universities: Implications for Policy and Practice

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Abstract

Quality assurance (QA) underpins credibility, recognition, and student outcomes in African higher education; yet, practices remain uneven and overly compliance-driven due to resource constraints. The study synthesises peer-reviewed evidence (2005–2025) on QA frameworks, mechanisms, outcomes, and enabling or constraining factors, and proposes an institutional roadmap. A systematic literature review was conducted using multi-database searching, explicit eligibility criteria, dual screening, and a Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) / Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) appraisal, followed by thematic synthesis and PRISMA-aligned reporting. Five themes emerged—structures and governance, resources and capacity, scope imbalance, quality culture, and regional harmonisation—each accompanied by graded confidence statements. The study offers actionable guidance for universities, regulators, and partners and outlines a targeted research agenda.

Keywords: Quality Assurance (QA), Higher Education in Africa, Internal Quality Assurance (IQA), External Quality Assurance (EQA), Accreditation Frameworks, Quality Culture and Governance

Introduction

Context and Problem Statement

Over the past two decades, African higher education (HE) has undergone rapid expansion, driven by demographic growth, economic diversification, and aspirations for global competitiveness. This expansion has diversified institutional types and programmes, heightening the need to demonstrate academic credibility, cross-border recognition, and measurable gains in teaching, learning, and research quality (Harvey, 2024; Jowi, 2024; Legemaate et al., 2021). Within this dynamic landscape, quality assurance (QA)—broadly defined as the systematic set of policies, processes, and practices designed to maintain and enhance academic standards—has become a cornerstone of reputation, mobility, and stakeholder trust (Harvey, 2024; Greere, 2023).

However, despite its prominence, QA has produced mixed effects across the continent. While its formal structures have professionalised review processes, they can also introduce bureaucracy and divert attention from genuine enhancement if not grounded in capacity-building and continuous improvement (Harvey, 2024; Khoo et al., 2025). Persistent systemic and institutional gaps compound these tensions. First, QA arrangements remain fragmented and unevenly implemented across sub-regions and linguistic blocs, resulting in variable thresholds for programme and institutional recognition (Jowi, 2024; Zavale, 2021). Second, capacity constraints—including limited staffing, training, data systems, and budgets—impede the translation of external standards into meaningful internal improvement cycles (Ebekozi, 2023; Tamrat, 2021). Third, evidence of impact remains inconsistent: while some studies note improved compliance and documentation, others caution that accreditation-centred approaches may stifle authentic learning and student support (Harvey, 2024; Zavale, 2021). Finally, equity and inclusivity concerns intersect with quality, underscoring the need for QA systems that respect contextual diversity rather than impose narrow, uniform metrics (Khoo et al., 2025).

Taken together, these challenges highlight the need for a more integrated and context-sensitive understanding of QA—one that connects external accountability with internal development and capacity building.

Purpose and Contribution of the Study

Responding to this need, the present study synthesises peer-reviewed evidence published between 2005 and 2025 on QA frameworks and practices in African universities. It analyses mechanisms, outcomes, enablers, and barriers to inform both institutional and system-level decision-making (Jowi, 2024; Harvey, 2024). Beyond aggregating findings, the study develops an integrative model that links internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA) with capacity, culture, and data—proposing a sequenced roadmap for strengthening QA under resource constraints (Legemaate et al., 2021; Ebekozi, 2023). Methodologically, the review follows PRISMA 2020 guidelines, employs MMAT for empirical studies and CASP-style criteria for conceptual work, and applies a CERQual-inspired approach to grade confidence, thereby ensuring transparency from study quality to thematic weighting and confidence statements (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021; Wainwright et al., 2023).

Structured Review Question

What quality-assurance frameworks, mechanisms, and interventions are used in African universities (2005–2025) to strengthen teaching, learning, research, student support, and governance, and through which enablers or barriers?

Conceptual Definitions and Scope

Quality assurance (QA) refers to coordinated policies and practices for maintaining and enhancing academic standards and quality enhancement; IQA denotes institution-internal structures and processes (e.g., programme review, assessment moderation, continuous improvement); EQA denotes external evaluations by quality agencies and professional bodies; accreditation is the formal recognition that a programme or institution meets defined standards (Myburgh & Calitz, 2022); quality culture is the shared values, norms, and routines that sustain continuous improvement; programme review focuses on specific curricula and learning outcomes, while institutional review covers governance, resources, and systems;

recognition frameworks underpin cross-border comparability and student mobility (Harvey, 2024; Legemaate et al., 2021; Ebekozi, 2023). The review targets African universities (both public and private) and peer-reviewed journal articles in English (and, where available, French-origin papers translated into English) published between 2005 and 2025.

Theoretical Lenses (To Guide Interpretation)

The analysis draws on multiple, complementary perspectives. Quality conceptions—fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformative potential—provide criteria for judging whether QA supports meaningful improvement rather than ritual compliance (Harvey, 2024; Duarte & Vardasca, 2023). Institutional theory highlights how legitimacy pressures and isomorphic tendencies can standardise QA forms while masking local needs; this is balanced by resource-based and resource-dependence views, which foreground capabilities, constraints, and the role of external partners in shaping what is feasible (Lackner & Borgen, 2024; Ebekozi, 2023). Finally, Total Quality Management (TQM) and continuous-improvement perspectives emphasise feedback loops, staff development, and data-informed action, linking quality culture to outcomes for learners and programmes (Stalmeijer et al., 2023; Prinsloo & Kaliisa, 2022; Legemaate et al., 2021). These lenses enable a critical reading that distinguishes symbolic alignment from operational enhancement.

Significance

This review is timely for two reasons. First, regional initiatives have accelerated, including standards and guidelines intended to harmonise quality expectations while enabling contextual flexibility; institutions now face strategic choices about how to internalise these expectations into workable IQA systems (Jowi, 2024). Second, the literature signals a shift from accreditation-as-compliance to quality-as-enhancement, with calls to integrate equity, student voice, and evidence-informed improvement into mainstream QA (Harvey, 2024; Stensaker, 2024; Khoo et al., 2025). The study responds by offering a roadmap that prioritises capacity, culture, and analytics, thus supporting universities, national regulators, regional bodies, funders, and students to convert QA from periodic inspection into continuous educational value (Hamshire, 2024).

This review advances the social science of higher education by providing the first continent-wide synthesis that explicitly links quality assurance to theories of organisational learning, institutional change, and policy diffusion in the Global South. It contributes an integrative analytical model that bridges external and internal QA logics, highlighting how capacity and culture mediate the outcomes of reform. By situating QA as both a governance mechanism and a social practice, the study extends existing frameworks beyond compliance to include the dynamics of agency, adaptation, and evidence use within African higher education systems.

Methods

Review Design and Reporting

The study employed a literature-only systematic review with narrative/thematic synthesis, a suitable approach when heterogeneous designs and outcomes preclude statistical meta-analysis but a structured, transparent synthesis remains necessary (Campbell et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021). Reporting followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for search reporting to

ensure the clarity and reproducibility of all steps (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021). No protocol was prospectively registered; deviations are reported in Section 2.10.

Eligibility Criteria (SPIDER framework)

Eligibility was structured using the SPIDER framework to accommodate mixed evidence in quality assurance research. The Sample comprised African universities—public or private—so findings transfer directly to institutional settings. The Phenomenon of Interest encompassed quality assurance frameworks and practices, including implementation processes and outcomes across teaching, learning, research, student support, and governance. To capture methodological diversity while preserving analytical rigour, the Design domain admitted empirical studies—qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods—alongside peer-reviewed conceptual or theoretical contributions that explain QA mechanisms. Under Evaluation, studies were required to present substantive analysis of mechanisms, processes, outcomes, or implementation experiences rather than description; papers were excluded where methodological detail was insufficient to judge credibility. Finally, for Research type, only peer-reviewed journal articles in English or French with an English version were eligible; non-tertiary QA, editorials or commentaries lacking analytic substance, and duplicative datasets were excluded. This specification strikes a balance between inclusivity and delimitation in university settings and provides analyzable evidence.

Information Sources and Dates

Searches covered Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, EBSCOhost (relevant Education/Business collections), and AJOL. Reference lists of included studies and pages of relevant African QA networks were manually searched to minimise database bias. The time window was from January 1, 2005, to September 1, 2025 (the last search date). Language limits to English/French were imposed to match the dominant languages of regional scholarship and policy discourse while maintaining feasibility; potential language bias is addressed in Section 2.9 (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

Search Strategy (Concise, Reproducible Strings)

A structured Boolean search string combining terms related to quality assurance and higher education in Africa was adapted across various databases. Regional filters were applied to capture African scholarship, with additional country terms used where indexing was limited. Searches were restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles published between January 2005 and September 2025 in English or French. Results were de-duplicated before screening. Reporting follows PRISMA guidance to ensure transparency and reproducibility (Campbell et al., 2020; Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

Selection Process

The selection process employed dual, independent screening at both the title/abstract and full-text levels, with disagreements resolved through discussion. A total of 580 records were initially identified; 329 remained after de-duplication. From these, 249 were excluded at the title/abstract stage. Eighty full texts were assessed in detail, of which 46 were excluded with reasons (insufficient methodological detail $n = 15$; outside QA scope $n = 12$; editorial/commentary $n = 11$; duplicate datasets $n = 8$). Ultimately, 34 peer-reviewed articles were retained. Counts are illustrated in Figure 1.

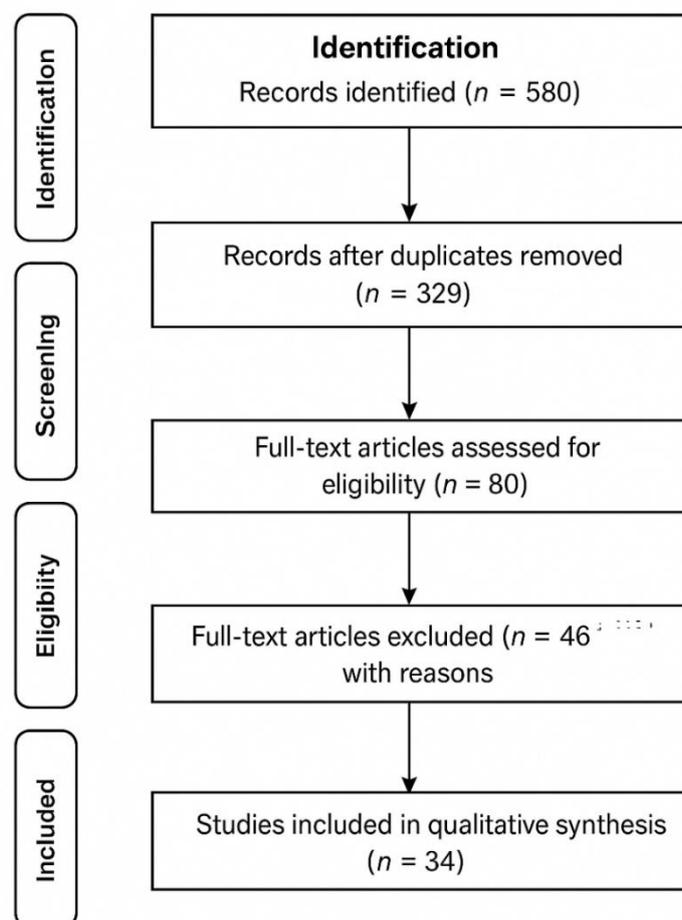


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow

Diagram

Note: Flow of records through the systematic review. Identification yielded 580 records, reduced to 329 after duplicates were removed. Following screening and eligibility checks, 34 studies were included in the analysis. Exclusion reasons: insufficient methodological detail ($n = 15$), outside QA scope ($n = 12$), editorial/commentary ($n = 11$), and duplicate datasets ($n = 8$).

Data Extraction

A standardised form captured bibliographic details, country/region, institution type, QA domain (teaching, research, student support, governance), study design and methods, mechanisms/interventions, outcomes, enablers/barriers, and implementation notes. Extraction was piloted on a subset to refine definitions and improve consistency. The approach strikes a balance between capturing comparable fields and allowing for mechanism-rich narrative detail, thereby supporting subsequent thematic synthesis and cross-case comparison (Kolaski et al., 2023; Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

Quality Appraisal

Methodological quality was assessed with the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for empirical designs and CASP-style criteria for conceptual/theoretical papers (clarity of aims,

theoretical contribution, and coherence). Two reviewers appraised the material independently and reconciled any differences by consensus. Appraisal ratings informed synthesis through weighting of convergent evidence and sensitivity checks that down-weighted low-quality studies to test the stability of thematic directions (Kolaski et al., 2023; Long et al., 2020).

Synthesis Approach

Given heterogeneity in designs and outcomes, the study used thematic narrative synthesis, integrating inductive coding with deductive framing from QA theory. A codebook was piloted on 10 studies and refined; intercoder agreement procedures followed contemporary guidance for qualitative evidence synthesis, aiming for transparent documentation of agreement and reflexive discussion of differences (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Consistency was examined via cross-case matrices by region, institution type, and design. Final outputs included CERQual-style confidence statements per theme, aligning certainty with methodological limitations, coherence, adequacy, and relevance (Wainwright et al., 2023; Campbell et al., 2020).

Risk of Bias Across Studies and Reflexivity

Risks considered included publication/language bias, regional coverage imbalances, and policy-reporting bias, which may overrepresent compliance achievements relative to student-learning outcomes. Mitigation steps included multi-database coverage, hand-searching, and explicit appraisal-to-weighting links. Reflexive memos recorded analytic decisions, especially where context or design limited transferability; confidence statements were calibrated to these constraints (Wainwright et al., 2023; Page et al., 2021).

Deviations from the Initial Plan

During scoping, AJOL and targeted hand-searches of African QA networks were added to address under-representation of regional scholarship; exclusion criteria were refined to clarify "insufficient methodological detail." These deviations align with best-practice guidance to document changes that enhance coverage without compromising transparency (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

Results

Thirty-four studies were included in the synthesis; the full screening and eligibility pathway is reported in Section 2.5 and visualised in Figure 1 (PRISMA 2020).

Characteristics of Included Studies

The 34 included studies span all African sub-regions, with uneven distribution across countries and institutional types. Most studies focus on universities (public and private), examining a mix of internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms (e.g., programme review, course evaluation, assessment moderation, data systems) and external quality assurance (EQA) instruments (e.g., accreditation, audits). Study designs include qualitative case studies and document analyses, with a smaller number of mixed-methods surveys and conceptual/theoretical contributions. Table 1 provides study-level descriptors (region/country, HEI type, QA focus, domain, and design); methodological quality ratings are reported in Section 3.3 and Table 2.

Table 1

Characteristics of included studies (excerpt)

Study (APA short)	Country/Region	HEI Type	QA Focus (IQA/EQA)	Domain(s)	Design/Methods	Core finding (1 line)
Tamrat (2021).	Ethiopia (East)	Private university	IQA	Teaching, governance	Qualitative interviews & doc. analysis	IQA is perceived as necessary but constrained by capacity and role clarity.
Zavale (2021).	Mozambique (South)	Public system	EQA ↔ IQA link	Teaching, research	Policy/document analysis	National QA principles are adapted unevenly to local contexts.
Ebekozien (2023).	Nigeria (West)	Public & private programmes	EQA (accreditation)	Teaching inputs/outcomes	Stakeholder survey & interviews	Accreditation relevance is recognised; however, resource bottlenecks hinder its impact.
Khoo et al., 2025	Multi-region (incl. SA)	Mixed	IQA–equity interface	Student support, governance	Delphi/collective intelligence	Equity aims require QA that values participation and context.
Harvey, (2024).	Global (conceptual)	N/A	QA meta-reflection	System-level	Conceptual synthesis	Sustained concerns about compliance overshadowing enhancement.
Chiome (2024).	Pan-African	Multi-institution	Recognition/c redit	Student mobility	Qualitative multi-site	Momentum toward African CATS depends on policy alignment and QA trust.
Kapfudzaruwa, (2024).	Global South focus	N/A	Internationalisation–QA link	Governance	Content analysis	National rationales shape recognition practices and QA priorities.
Atanaw et al., 2024	Ethiopia (East)	Public universities	IQA–governance	Teaching, research	Quantitative (survey, regression)	Governance principles correlate with perceived service quality.

Quality Appraisal Summary

Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed) were appraised with MMAT 2018/2022; conceptual/theoretical contributions were appraised using adapted CASP criteria. Of the included 34 studies, 36.7% were rated as High, 46.7% as Moderate, and 16.7% as Low quality (percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding). Qualitative case studies frequently demonstrated clear aims and coherent methods, but varied in terms of reflexivity and triangulation. Quantitative studies demonstrated acceptable sampling and analysis, although they sometimes had limited external validity. Conceptual pieces were strong in theoretical clarity, yet uneven in their African grounding. These judgments informed the synthesis weighting: High-quality studies anchored each theme; moderate studies added breadth; and

low-quality studies were used cautiously for context, not for claims about effects (Harvey, 2024; Khoo et al., 2025).

Table 2

Methodological Quality Summary (excerpt)

Study	Design	Appraisal tool	Rating	Notes for synthesis
Tamrat (2021)	Qualitative case	MMAT	Moderate–High	Strong alignment of aims/methods; limits in transferability.
Zavale (2021)	Documentary/policy	MMAT (qual)	Moderate	Rich policy context; limited stakeholder triangulation.
Ebekozien (2023)	Mixed methods	MMAT	High	Robust stakeholder coverage; clear accreditation inferences.
Khoo et al. (2025).	Conceptual/Delphi	CASP (conceptual)	High	Clear theoretical contribution connecting equity and QA.
Harvey (2024)	Conceptual synthesis	CASP (conceptual)	High	Authoritative meta-reflection; global scope.
Atanaw et al. (2024)	Quantitative survey	MMAT	Moderate	Sound analysis; generalisability limited to sampled HEIs.

Thematic synthesis: Core Findings

Five overarching themes emerged from the synthesis. (i) Adoption of QA structures and governance, (ii) Resources and capacity constraints, (iii) Scope imbalance and metric fixation, (iv) Building and sustaining a quality culture, (v) Regional harmonisation and recognition.

Theme 1: Adoption of QA structures and governance (Confidence: High): Most universities reported formal IQA units, programme and institutional reviews, and periodic audits aligned to national EQA agencies; governance arrangements clarified responsibilities yet often created parallel reporting lines (Tamrat, 2021; Zavale, 2021). Supporting evidence indicates the development of maturing policy frameworks and standardised review cycles, accompanied by incremental gains in documentation and accountability (Ebekozien, 2023; Atanaw et al., 2024). Divergent findings caution that structural adoption does not guarantee improved learning where decision rights are unclear or where academic units perceive QA as compliance rather than enhancement (Harvey, 2024; Sarrico, 2022).

Theme 2: Resources and capacity as binding constraints (Confidence: High): Across regions, staffing, training, data capability, and dedicated QA budgets determined implementation depth. Studies emphasised the importance of professional development for QA practitioners and frontline academics, together with digital infrastructure for evidence-informed decision-making (Greere, 2023; Legemaate et al., 2021). Evidence from Nigeria and Ethiopia linked outcome variability to resource intensity and leadership support for governance reforms and quality analytics (Ebekozien, 2023; Atanaw et al., 2024). A minority of cases described targeted donor or project support that temporarily alleviated constraints but raised sustainability concerns once projects ended (Harvey, 2024).

Theme 3: Scope imbalance and metric fixation (Confidence: Moderate–High): Findings reveal an overweighting of compliance with input/process metrics (e.g., staff qualifications,

facilities) relative to demonstrable learning outcomes, research quality, and holistic student support. This imbalance risks narrow optimisation, with some studies describing “audit-driven” behaviours and attenuated spaces for pedagogical innovation (Harvey, 2024; Sarrico, 2022). Other contributions argue for longer-term, developmental approaches that value improvement cycles and authentic student outcomes over short-term scoring (Hamshire, 2024; Khoo et al., 2025). Where balanced scorecards and programme-level assessment were embedded, unintended consequences were reduced, and staff engagement improved; however, evidence quality for these gains varies by context.

Theme 4: Building and sustaining a quality culture (Confidence: Moderate): Studies converge on leadership, incentives, staff agency, and student voice as mechanisms that translate structures into everyday practice. Socio-technical approaches emphasise alignment between people, purposes, and processes, underscoring that culture cannot be mandated but can be designed for through participatory routines and feedback loops (Legemaate et al., 2021; Krooi et al., 2024). Divergence persists: some institutions report resistance linked to workload and scepticism about metrics, while others document improved collegial dialogue where QA is framed as developmental and values-driven (Harvey, 2024; Atanaw et al., 2024). Overall certainty is moderate due to heterogeneity in designs and measures of “culture.”

Theme 5: Regional harmonisation and recognition (Confidence: Moderate): Emerging regional instruments (credit accumulation and transfer systems; mutual recognition practices) are reported as catalysts for comparability and student mobility, provided institutional QA processes secure trust in awards (Chiome, 2024; Kapfudzaruwa, 2024). Case evidence shows tensions between convergence pressures and contextualisation needs, especially in language-diverse systems and resource-constrained HEIs; yet pilot implementations suggest feasibility when policies, curricula, and assessment standards align (Khoo et al., 2025; Zavale, 2021). Certainty is moderate because peer-reviewed evaluations of continental frameworks remain limited.

Together, these themes reflect both progress and persistent challenges in African higher education QA. Structures and resources are firmly established, yet issues of scope, culture, and harmonisation remain contested or emergent. Confidence levels for each theme are summarised in Table 4 (Section 6.2), drawing on CERQual domains of methodological limitations, coherence, adequacy, and relevance.

Cross-Regional and Cross-Case Patterns

Patterns varied across both regions and institutional types. In East and West Africa, more explicit agency mandates and regular accreditation cycles facilitated the earlier adoption of QA structures, although the benefits depended on capacity and data systems (Tamrat, 2021; Ebekozi, 2023). Southern African universities adapted global standards to local contexts with mixed effects, while North African systems were shaped by firm state steering and internationalisation priorities. Pan-African frameworks such as the African Standards and Guidelines show promise but remain under-evaluated (Wainwright et al., 2023).

Institutional differences were also evident. Private universities often introduced agile QA practices but faced resource constraints, while public universities benefited from scale yet struggled with bureaucratic inertia (Arthur & Kuranchie, 2022; Atanaw et al., 2024). In several

cases, compliance routines delivered limited gains for learning or research, whereas informal, peer-driven quality practices—especially under strong leadership—proved more effective (Harvey, 2024; Khoo et al., 2025).

Sensitivity to study quality

The synthesis remained sensitive to methodological quality, given variation across qualitative case studies, document analyses, mixed-methods surveys, and conceptual works. Higher confidence is associated with findings supported by multi-country comparative designs with triangulated data (e.g., Harvey, 2024). By contrast, single-country/system studies—including Tamrat (2021) and Zavale (2021)—provide valuable depth but narrower external validity and were weighted accordingly. Themes informed mainly by single-institution cases or conceptual analyses carry proportionately lower confidence (Khoo et al., 2025; Matthews, 2023). Importantly, inclusion of conceptual contributions did not distort the thematic structure, though it limited depth in areas such as quality culture and regional harmonisation. These gradations are consolidated in Table 4 (Section 6.2), which signals overall confidence in each theme following CERQual logic.

An Integrative Institutional Framework (Africa-Qa Model)

Overview and Rationale

The AFRICA-QA model translates the review's five themes into an institutional framework that links inputs (governance, people, resources, data) to processes (participation, continuous improvement, assurance-to-enhancement) and outcomes (learning, research robustness, student support, recognition). The model is needed because the results showed structural adoption without commensurate improvement, particularly where capacity was thin, metrics were narrow, and a weak quality culture prevailed (Section 3). By explicitly aligning governance with resourcing, inclusive participation, and analytics, AFRICA-QA addresses fragmentation, uneven implementation, and metric fixation, while preserving accountability (Harvey, 2024; Sarrico, 2022). It also operationalises continuous-improvement logics suited to resource-constrained contexts, drawing on evidence that participatory routines and staff development mediate the effects of formal QA on teaching and student support (Tamrat, 2021; Stalmeijer et al., 2023). Finally, by linking institutional routines to regional recognition practices, it reduces the gap between local enhancement and cross-border trust (Zavale, 2021; Kapfudzaruwa, 2024).

Model components (AFRICA-QA)

Alignment & Governance: Effective quality work begins with clear role definitions, policy coherence, and an explicit interface between internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA). Institutions that mapped responsibilities, integrated programme and institutional reviews, and aligned Senate/Board oversight with agency requirements were more likely to convert audits into action. Where governance was ambiguous, QA devolved into documentation cycles with limited pedagogical value (Tamrat, 2021; Ebekoziem, 2023; Harvey, 2024). The model therefore prioritises alignment, with charters that specify decision rights, escalation pathways, and timelines.

Feedback & Continuous Improvement: AFRICA-QA embeds PDCA cycles (plan–do–check–act) at programme and school levels, requiring that review findings trigger time-bound improvement projects with owners, resources, and monitoring. Evidence supports moving

beyond episodic inspection toward routine formative evaluation, peer dialogue, and curriculum-assessment alignment (Stalmeijer et al., 2023; Sarrico, 2022). The framework mandates post-audit “closing of the loop” memos and follow-up checks in the next semester, not the next accreditation cycle.

Resources & Capacity: Resourcing determines implementation depth. Studies linked effect sizes to dedicated QA staff, professional development, and digital infrastructure for data capture and reporting (Ebekozi, 2023; Atanaw et al., 2024). AFRICA-QA specifies minimum capacity standards—named QA leads in all faculties, protected workload for programme review teams, and ring-fenced budgets for training and analytics. Donor projects are treated as accelerators, with sustainability plans to avoid post-project decay (Harvey, 2024).

Inclusive Participation: Quality improves when faculty, students, employers, and alumni co-produce evidence and solutions. The review found that inclusion raised the legitimacy of QA and diversified indicators beyond inputs, particularly for student support and work-readiness (Khoo, 2025; Tamrat, 2021). AFRICA-QA formalises student representation in programme reviews and requires employer/alumni input into curriculum renewal, with feedback instruments that capture equity and belonging alongside academic performance.

Culture of Quality: A quality culture—shared values, norms, and routines that sustain improvement—cannot be decreed; it is cultivated through leadership modelling, incentives, recognition, and safe spaces for critique. Socio-technical approaches stress aligning purposes, people, and processes (Stalmeijer et al., 2023; Krooi et al., 2024). AFRICA-QA links recognition (promotion, awards) to demonstrable teaching-learning enhancement and requires department-level reflective meetings where evidence is interpreted and acted upon.

Assurance-to-Enhancement: The model reframes assurance (meeting standards) as a gateway to enhancement (raising performance), countering metric fixation. Institutions are guided to balance compliance indicators with outcome-oriented measures and improvement narratives. Conceptual and empirical work warns that input-heavy scorecards can crowd out innovation; AFRICA-QA balances these with assessments of learning and student experience (Harvey, 2024; Sarrico, 2022).

Quality Data & Analytics: Reliable indicators, transparent dashboards, and assessment evidence are the backbone of improvement. The model defines small, valid indicator sets for teaching, research, and student support, plus tracer studies for employability. Evidence suggests that analytics capability is a binding constraint; where present, it improves governance decisions and programme renewal (Atanaw et al., 2024; Sarrico, 2022). AFRICA-QA includes data standards, ownership, and audit trails that protect integrity and enable longitudinal analysis.

Accreditation & Recognition: To strengthen trust and mobility, AFRICA-QA connects institutional QA to national/regional instruments (e.g., credit accumulation and transfer, mutual recognition). The literature shows feasibility and benefit when local QA ensures assessment credibility and curriculum transparency, but also highlights tensions between convergence and contextualisation (Zavale, 2021; Chiome, 2024; Kapfudzaruwa, 2024). The

model therefore includes comparability protocols (learning outcomes maps, credit definitions) that respect disciplinary and linguistic diversity.

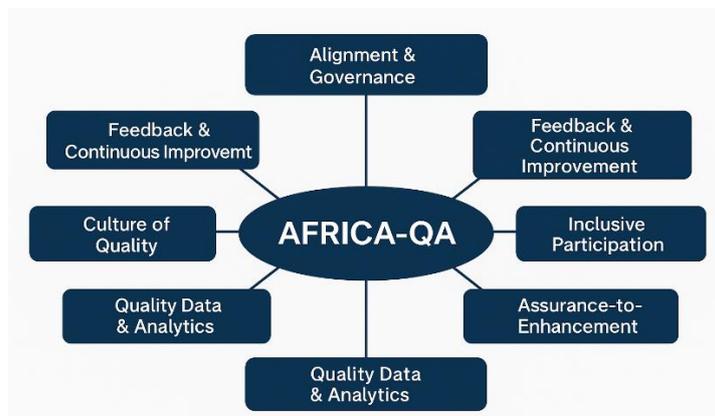


Figure 2: *AFRICA-QA Model (schematic)*

Note: AFRICA-QA Model (schematic). Inputs (Alignment & Governance; Resources & Capacity; Quality Data & Analytics) feed into Processes (Inclusive Participation; Feedback & Continuous Improvement; Assurance-to-Enhancement), which generate Outcomes (learning gains, research quality, student support effectiveness, and regional recognition). Moderators include institutional type, funding, and regulatory maturity, while Risks include workload inflation and narrow metrics.

Mapping Evidence to Model Elements

Evidence strength mirrors the review's confidence statements (Section 3). High support: Alignment & Governance; Resources & Capacity—multiple studies across regions link these to implementation depth and accountability (Tamrat, 2021; Ebekoziem, 2023; Atanaw et al., 2024). Moderate–High support: Assurance-to-Enhancement and Feedback & Continuous Improvement—consistent arguments and case reports show benefits, but outcome measures vary, and some contexts still privilege inputs (Harvey, 2024; Sarrico, 2022; Stalmeijer et al., 2023). Moderate support: Culture of Quality and Inclusive Participation—effects depend on leadership, incentives, and student voice mechanisms; designs and measures are heterogeneous (Khoo, 2025; Krooi et al., 2024). Moderate support: Accreditation & Recognition—promising but uneven peer-reviewed evaluation; feasibility improves when institutional QA ensures credible assessment and transparent crediting (Zavale, 2021; Chiome, 2024; Kapfudzaruwa, 2024). Confidence gradings are justified using CERQual logic (methodological limitations, coherence, adequacy, relevance) to preserve traceability from appraisal to synthesis (Wainwright et al., 2023).

Implementation Roadmap: Phased Actions, Indicators, and Enablers

This section presents an implementation roadmap derived from the AFRICA-QA model. The roadmap is organised around three interlinked components: (i) phased actions that guide institutions from stabilisation to consolidation, (ii) performance indicators and risk management strategies to track progress, and (iii) enabling conditions that embed equity, student participation, and digital support. The aim is to provide evidence-informed but adaptable guidance, recognising that universities operate in diverse contexts across Africa.

5.1 Phased Actions

Institutions should begin with a readiness assessment that baselines governance, processes, data systems, capacity, and culture. Governance clarity between internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA), the authority of QA offices, and alignment with academic boards strongly predict follow-through (Atanaw et al., 2024; Krooi et al., 2024). Processes should be assessed for the regularity of programme reviews, assessment moderation, and audit-to-action routines, since these enable continuous enhancement rather than episodic compliance (Stalmeijer et al., 2023). Data integrity across student, curriculum, and outcomes records is equally important, as weak fidelity undermines dashboards and risk screening (Paulsen & Lindsay, 2024; Masiello et al., 2024). Culture depends on leadership signalling, incentives, staff engagement, and student partnerships, which enhance legitimacy and ownership of QA processes (Stensaker, 2024; Matthews, 2023).

Sequenced implementation should then follow three phases: short-term stabilisers in the first six months (QA leads, responsibility charts, minimum data standards, pilot programme reviews, and internal QA calendars ahead of accreditation deadlines) (Stensaker, 2024; Harvey, 2024; Zavale, 2021); medium-term system build over 6–18 months (curriculum review cycles, assessment moderation, tracer studies, faculty development, and LMS-based dashboards with safeguards) (Paulsen & Lindsay, 2024; Masiello et al., 2024; Krooi et al., 2024; Atanaw et al., 2024); and longer-term consolidation over 18–36 months (benchmarking, external peer review, public dashboards, and regional recognition to support mobility) (Beerkens, 2022; Sarrico, 2022). This phasing helps universities move from compliance to demonstrable enhancement.

Indicators and Risks

Progress must be tracked with indicators and supported by proactive risk management. Table 3 presents a concise KPI set linking review closure, assessment alignment, student feedback, graduate outcomes, accreditation standing, and equity monitoring.

Table 3
Institutional QA KPIs

KPI	Definition	Data Source	Frequency	Responsible Unit	Target/Threshold
Review the closure rate	% of QA review recommendations closed within agreed timelines	QA action-log; senate minutes	Quarterly	QA Office; Faculties	≥80% within 2 terms
Assessment moderation coverage	% of courses with documented pre- and post-moderation cycle	Department logs; sample per scripts	Each term	Departments; Examinations	≥70% year 1; ≥90% year 3
Outcomes-assessment alignment	% of courses with mapped learning outcomes, rubrics, and blueprint	Course files; LMS	Each term	QA Office; Programme Leads	100% by year 2
Student uptake	feedback response documented changes	LMS/Survey + course reports	Each term	Programme Leads	≥60% response; change log present
Tracer employment rate	% graduates employed or further study at 12 months	Tracer study; alumni registry	Annual	Planning; Careers	Context-specific baseline +5pp/year
Progression/completion	On-time progression and completion rates	SIS	Annual	Registry; Planning	Year-on-year improvement
External accreditation status	% programmes with current good standing	Agency letters; registry	Annual	QA Office	100%
Research-teaching integration	% programmes evidencing research-informed teaching in reviews	Review reports	Annual	Deans; Office	QA ≥70% year 2; ≥85% year 3
Student resolution	Median days to support resolve academic/support cases	Case management system	Quarterly	Student Affairs; Counselling	≤14 days median
Equity gap	Gap in progression between priority groups vs. overall	SIS (disaggregated)	Annual	Planning; QA; Student Affairs	Student Gap <5pp

These indicators are deliberately few, validity-checked, and designed to demonstrate improvement rather than paperwork (Beerens, 2022; Sarrico, 2022; Dzomeku et al., 2024; Paulsen & Lindsay, 2024; Masiello et al., 2024). At the same time, known risks—including metric fixation, staff workload strain, data quality failures, tokenistic student engagement, donor-driven distortions, accreditation slippage, equity gaps, and technology dependency—require structured monitoring and mitigation. Studies emphasise that each of these risks can undermine credibility unless clear ownership, timelines, and safeguards are in place (Harvey, 2024; Sarrico, 2022; Khoo et al., 2025; Paulsen & Lindsay, 2024; Masiello et al., 2024). Rather than treating risks as failures, the roadmap treats them as signals for adjustment, ensuring QA remains sustainable, ethical, and focused on learning outcomes.

Enablers: Equity, Participation, and Digital Support

Finally, inclusive participation and digital enablement are essential enablers of credible QA. Evidence shows that student involvement in programme reviews, senate-level QA committees, and co-designed evaluations strengthens legitimacy, while equity gains are supported through the use of disaggregated indicators and targeted follow-up (Stensaker, 2024; Matthews, 2023; Khoo et al., 2025). A minimal but reliable data architecture—comprising defined QA data models, connectors to LMS/SIS, audit trails, and transparent dashboards—provides the backbone for evidence-informed decisions (Paulsen & Lindsay, 2024; Masiello et al., 2024). Studies caution that dashboards add value only when pedagogically informed, transparent about limitations, and used for improvement conversations rather than surveillance (Paulsen & Lindsay, 2024; Masiello et al., 2024). Together, these practices embed a culture of partnership, fairness, and evidence-informed improvement, aligning with the confidence gradings reported in Table 4.

Robustness and Confidence in Evidence

Risk of Bias across the Body of Evidence

Three cross-cutting risks were identified—first, publication and language bias. The corpus comprises peer-reviewed journal articles in English and selected French, which increases transparency but may underrepresent Lusophone and Arabic scholarship or high-quality grey evidence; PRISMA recommend explicit reporting of such limits and their implications for coverage (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021)—second, coverage and measurement imbalances. Sub-regional distribution is uneven, and outcome measures vary, so claims about magnitude and generalisability must remain cautious; confidence grading therefore privileges thematic direction over effect size (Wainwright et al., 2023; Sarrico, 2022)—third, policy-reporting effects. Studies linked to accreditation cycles tend to emphasise compliance successes, which can inflate perceived impact unless triangulated with learning and student-support outcomes; conceptual work repeatedly warns against metric fixation without enhancement (Harvey, 2024; Khoo et al., 2025). Together, these risks were mitigated through multi-database searching, hand-searching, dual appraisal (MMAT/CASP), and explicit linkage from appraisal to synthesis weighting (Page et al., 2021; Wainwright et al., 2023).

CERQual-style Confidence Statements (Consolidated)

Confidence is reflected in four components—methodological limitations, coherence, adequacy, and relevance—mapped from the MMAT/CASP appraisal and the distribution of studies across regions and designs (Wainwright et al., 2023). The statements consolidate detailed theme-level grading reported in Section 3.

Table 4

Confidence in Each Theme (CERQual logic)

Theme	Methodological limitations	Coherence	Adequacy	Relevance	Overall confidence
1. Adoption of structures and governance	Many qualitative/mixed studies with clear aims and robust designs; few low-quality outliers	High convergence on IQA units, review cycles, and EQA alignment	Substantial body across East/West/Southern Africa; multiple contexts	High relevance to universities under national regimes	High (direction and rationale stable)
2. Resources and capacity as constraints	Strong empirical base; occasional sampling limits	Consistent pattern linking staffing, training, and data systems to implementation depth	Broad coverage with multiple institutional types	High resource-constrained contexts	High (effect of capacity on implementation is apparent)
3. Scope and imbalance and fixation	Mix of empirical sources; metric variability in outcome measures	Coherent narrative that input/process metrics dominate	An adequate number, but uneven operationalisation of outcomes	High institutions facing accreditation pressure	Moderate–High (direction stable; size/context variable)
4. Building and sustaining quality culture	Heterogeneous methods; reflexivity varies	Convergence on leadership, incentives, and student voice exists, but the mechanisms differ.	Adequate but uneven limited longitudinal designs	High in teaching-learning enhancement agendas	Moderate (mechanisms plausible; empirical depth mixed)
5. Regional harmonisation and recognition	Few rigorous comparative evaluations; many descriptive/early-stage reports	General agreement on feasibility and tensions (convergence vs. context)	Limited peer-reviewed evaluations; pilots dominate	High relevance policy for mobility/recognition	Moderate (promise evident; evaluation base thin)

Table 4 shows a gradient of confidence across the five themes. Evidence is strongest for structural adoption and capacity constraints, where findings are consistent and well supported across regions. Confidence is somewhat lower for scope balance, reflecting variability in outcome measures, and lowest for culture and regional harmonisation, where evaluations are fewer and more heterogeneous. This distribution suggests that while some areas offer a solid foundation for immediate action, others remain promising but under-researched, necessitating careful piloting and further evaluation.

What would change the conclusions?

Three developments could shift the study's conclusions. First, large multi-country evaluations that link specific QA mechanisms (e.g., assessment moderation, programme review) to standardised learning and student-support outcomes over time would refine estimates of magnitude and identify boundary conditions; current evidence supports directionality more than effect size (Sarrico, 2022; Stalmeijer et al., 2023). Second, improved data and analytics—including interoperable dashboards tied to transparent indicator definitions and ethics—would reduce measurement error and enable routine sensitivity analyses at programme and faculty levels (Paulsen & Lindsay, 2024). Third, broader regional coverage—especially Lusophone and North African contexts—and systematic evaluations of recognition/credit frameworks would test the portability of the AFRICA-QA model and could strengthen confidence in Theme 5 (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024; Page et al., 2021). If such evidence demonstrated sustained learning gains attributable to specific mechanisms, confidence grades for Themes 3–5 would likely rise; conversely, null effects across diverse contexts would argue for redesign of indicators and incentives (Harvey, 2024; Wainwright et al., 2023).

Synthesis and Discussion

Synthesis of Findings and Theoretical Implications

The review shows that formal QA structures have diffused widely across African universities; however, their effects depend on capacity, culture, and data. This pattern refines classic quality conceptions by distinguishing *assurance* (meeting external standards) from *enhancement* (systematic improvement), and it supports a shift from input–process metrics to outcome-oriented learning and student support (Harvey, 2024; Sarrico, 2022). Institutional theory helps explain isomorphic adoption of IQA/EQA forms under legitimacy pressures, while resource-based perspectives account for uneven implementation and the mediating role of analytics capability and staff development (Tamrat, 2021; Ebekozién, 2023; Atanaw et al., 2024). Evidence on quality culture validates socio-technical views: leadership signalling, incentives, and participation translate structures into practice; without these, audits become documentation cycles with little pedagogical value (Legemaate et al., 2021; Stalmeijer et al., 2023). The AFRICA-QA model (Section 4) integrates these insights by sequencing alignment, capacity, participation, and analytics so that assurance becomes a gateway to enhancement rather than an end in itself (Harvey, 2024; Sarrico, 2022).

Supporting and Divergent Views

Across regions, studies converge on the centrality of resourcing (staff, training, digital systems) and role clarity for translating QA into improved teaching and student support (Ebekozién, 2023; Atanaw et al., 2024). They also agree that metric fixation risks crowding out innovation and student-centred improvement unless indicators are balanced with reflective narratives and assessment evidence (Harvey, 2024; Sarrico, 2022). Divergence appears in three areas. First, governance effects: where decision rights are clear and faculty-level ownership is strong, audits-to-action loops close; where governance is fragmented, effects stall (Tamrat, 2021; Zavale, 2021). Second, participation: some contexts report tokenistic student involvement; others document substantive gains when students and employers co-produce evidence and solutions (Khoo et al., 2025; Matthews, 2023). Third, regional recognition: initiatives show promise but vary in feasibility depending on curriculum transparency and assessment credibility, producing tensions between convergence and contextualisation (Chiome, 2024; Kapfudzaruwa, 2024). These divergences are plausible given

differences in incentives, regulatory cycles, linguistic blocs, and analytic capacity documented in Results (Section 3).

Comparison with Non-African Literature (brief)

Findings align with global analyses that caution against over-reliance on input indicators and advocate continuous-improvement designs that link programme review, assessment moderation, and feedback to action (Harvey, 2024; Stalmeijer et al., 2023). Similarly, the global performance-measurement literature cautions that dashboards can either inspire or burden, depending on their design and governance (Sarrico, 2022; Beerkens, 2022). What is distinctive in African settings is the binding role of capacity and data infrastructure—for example, the salience of minimal, interoperable dashboards and tracer studies to offset data paucity—and the importance of proportionality given heavy accreditation calendars (Paulsen & Lindsay, 2024; Masiello et al., 2024; Zavale, 2021). In short, African institutions confront the same assurance–enhancement tension observed elsewhere, but under tighter resource constraints and more variable regulatory maturity.

Heterogeneity and Context

Mechanisms work when four conditions co-exist: (1) clear governance interfaces between IQA and EQA; (2) protected workload and skills for QA teams; (3) inclusive participation that legitimises change; and (4) reliable data with transparent indicators (Atanaw et al., 2024; Ebekozi, 2023; Khoo et al., 2025; Paulsen & Lindsay, 2024). Failure typically arises where one or more conditions are missing—e.g., fragmented decision rights (reviews produce reports but not action), capacity gaps (moderation cannot be scaled), tokenistic voice (low uptake of student feedback), or weak data integrity (dashboards mislead) (Tamrat, 2021; Matthews, 2023; Masiello et al., 2024). Context also matters by institutional type: private universities often adopt nimble IQA routines but face uneven resourcing; public universities, on the other hand, leverage scale yet encounter bureaucratic drag (Arthur & Kuranchie, 2022). Sub-regional variation reflects regulatory maturity and language blocs: settings with stable agency mandates embed structures earlier, but realised benefits track analytics capability and leadership support (Zavale, 2021; Jowi, 2024; Greere, 2023). These contingencies justify the AFRICA-QA emphasis on sequencing (Section 4) and the roadmap’s phased approach (Section 5), as well as the CERQual-based confidence gradings that privilege direction over effect size where measures vary (Page et al., 2021; Wainwright et al., 2023).

Implications

Policy Implications

For national quality assurance agencies. The evidence points to the need for alignment and proportionality. Agencies should publish clear interfaces between external evaluation and internal quality assurance, with cycle lengths and evidence requirements scaled to institutional risk and maturity. Standards should prioritise demonstrable improvement in student learning, student support, and programme renewal—rather than voluminous inputs—by requiring “audit-to-action” trails that show owners, timelines, and closure rates. Minimum national data standards are essential: a core indicator set with definitions, disaggregation rules, and data-quality checks that every university can implement. Regulatory calendars should be sequenced to leave space for internal review before external audits, reducing last-minute compliance behaviour. Public reporting should emphasise a concise set of valid indicators, complemented by institutional narratives that explain improvement

actions and contextual constraints. Finally, agencies should embed recognition and credit-transfer rules that connect local standards with regional comparability, while protecting space for curricular diversity.

For regional bodies. Harmonisation should be coupled with contextual flexibility. Regional frameworks can provide common reference points for learning outcomes, credit values, and assessment credibility; however, they should also offer crosswalks that accommodate language, qualification, and disciplinary variations. Regional platforms can convene peer-review panels, publish indicator dictionaries, and curate case repositories on effective improvement routines, enabling cross-border learning without forcing uniformity. Lightweight regional benchmarking—focused on a few high-quality indicators and concise interpretive notes—will help avoid metric overload while fostering mutual trust.

Institutional Practice Implications

- **Resourcing and role clarity.** Institutions should allocate budgets specifically for quality work, appoint faculty-level leads, and clearly specify decision rights through concise RACI charts, ensuring that recommendations are translated into funded actions.
- **Culture-building and student engagement.** Leadership should model a developmental stance, including regular reflective meetings, recognition for program-level improvement, and structured student partnership in reviews and curriculum renewal. Student voice must be integrated into decision points (not only data collection) and tracked for uptake.
- **Analytics and data stewardship.** A minimal, auditable data architecture is required, including a versioned data dictionary, connectors between student information, learning management, and assessment systems, automated data-quality checks, and dashboards that display indicator definitions, freshness, and caveats. Each programme should nominate a data steward.
- **Continuous improvement routines.** Programme review, assessment moderation, and curriculum renewal should run on predictable cycles, with “closing-the-loop” memos filed within fixed timeframes. Evidence clinics—where staff and students jointly interpret data—help shift from compliance to enhancement.
- **Risk controls.** To counter metric fixation, each indicator should be paired with an improvement narrative and triangulated evidence (for example, assessment artefacts, external examiners’ notes, and student feedback). Internal calendars should precede external deadlines to avoid rushed compliance. Periodic external peer review, targeted at programmes with persistent risks or major redesigns, can accelerate learning.
- **Equity and inclusion.** All indicators should be disaggregated by priority groups, with specific actions and resources attached to identified gaps, ensuring quality and fairness advance together.

Donor/Partner Implications

- **Capacity first, then compliance.** Investment should prioritise durable capabilities—people, routines, and interoperable data systems—over one-off policy production. Funding agreements should reward evidential closure of improvement actions rather than the volume of reports.
- **Sustainability by design.** Projects should include maintenance and staffing plans, open technical standards, and exit strategies that avoid post-project decay. Co-funding of

shared services (for example, regional indicator dictionaries, tracer study toolkits, or moderation training) can lower costs and enhance comparability.

- **Learning-oriented conditionalities.** Conditions should avoid narrow input targets; instead, they should require clear theories of change, baseline diagnostics, and periodic learning reviews that adapt activities as evidence accumulates. Support for longitudinal outcome evaluations and small experimental pilots (with pre-specified learning measures) will strengthen future decision-making.
- **Partnership with regulators and students.** Donor programmes should be co-designed with national agencies to align instruments and calendars, and should resource student partnership projects that improve feedback quality and uptake. Alignment with the integrative framework ensures that external funds amplify, rather than distort, institutional improvement trajectories.

Conclusion

African higher education has expanded rapidly, intensifying the need for credible quality assurance that improves learning, research, and student support. Synthesising peer-reviewed evidence, the study found that formal structures are widespread but outcomes hinge on capacity, data, and a culture of improvement. The AFRICA-QA model organises alignment and governance, resources, participation, and analytics to convert assurance into enhancement. The implementation roadmap transforms this logic into sequenced, auditable steps—readiness checks, stabilisers, system build, and consolidation—enabling universities to progress from documentation to demonstrable gains. Together, the synthesis, model, and roadmap offer a practical route to credible standards and sustained, equitable educational value.

This literature-only review relied on peer-reviewed sources in English and selected French, potentially introducing language and publication bias, and likely underrepresenting Lusophone and Arabic scholarship. Coverage across sub-regions is uneven, and many studies prioritise compliance indicators over rigorous learning or research outcomes. Methodological heterogeneity limits the inference of effect sizes, and outcome measures are inconsistently defined. Despite mitigation steps, residual bias and data gaps constrain generalisability across contexts and limit the precision of the conclusions.

Future work should investigate the causal pathways between specific quality-assurance mechanisms and outcomes using rigorous designs and standardised measures. Priorities include multi-country evaluations that link programme review, assessment moderation, and student-support interventions to standardised learning gains and research quality; longitudinal studies that follow cohorts and programmes through full improvement cycles; and quasi-experimental or experimental pilots that compare alternative QA routines under real constraints. Comparative studies across sub-regions and language blocs should map boundary conditions and portability of practices. Cost-effectiveness analyses are necessary to inform sequencing and budgeting, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Digital QA warrants focused trials of interoperable dashboards, data governance, and learning analytics tailored to low-resource environments. Finally, student-centred QA should be advanced through research on authentic partnership models, the impacts of equity, and mechanisms that translate feedback into curricular change, ensuring that enhancement

benefits are distributed fairly and transparently. Research should also examine recognition frameworks, credit transfer, and regional mobility outcomes.

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