

# Performing quality or chasing rankings? Rethinking compliance-driven quality assurance in universities through the TESCEA transformative approach

Gloria Lamaro<sup>1\*</sup>, Elly Kurobuza Ndyomugenyi<sup>2</sup> and George Ladaah Openjuru<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Education Management, Faculty of Education and Humanities, Gulu University, Gulu City, Uganda.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Animal Production and Range Management, Faculty of Agriculture and Environment, Gulu University, P.O. Box 166, Gulu City, Uganda.

<sup>3</sup>Department of ODELL, Faculty of Education and Humanities, Gulu University, P.O. Box 166, Gulu City, Uganda.

Accepted 19 November, 2025

---

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics of participatory quality assurance (QA) reforms at Gulu University, Uganda, under the Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) project. Adopting a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, the research employed a single instrumental case study design to examine how faculty, administrators, students, and external stakeholders perceived, interpreted, and engaged with QA processes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and non-participant observation, and analyzed using thematic analysis with both deductive and inductive coding. Findings reveal that participatory QA design initially enhanced stakeholder ownership, collaboration, and alignment with institutional mission, particularly regarding employability, gender responsiveness, and community engagement. However, external compliance pressures from national accreditation and donor reporting gradually redirected focus toward proceduralism, producing mission drift, stakeholder fatigue, and constrained innovation. Strong leadership, intrinsic motivation linked to the social mission, and adaptive stakeholder strategies emerged as key enablers sustaining mission-aligned QA practices. The study contributes to theory by linking participatory QA, institutional isomorphism, and Theory of Change frameworks, highlighting the tension between locally meaningful reform and externally imposed accountability. Recommendations emphasize flexible accreditation frameworks, participatory governance, and context-sensitive evaluation to ensure sustainable, transformative QA in African higher education.

**Keywords:** Quality assurance, higher education, participatory governance, institutional reform, compliance pressures, TESCEA, Africa.

---

\*Corresponding author. Email: g.lamaro@gu.ac.ug.

## INTRODUCTION

As QA systems increasingly privilege quantifiable indicators, universities are incentivized to demonstrate performance through standardized templates, reporting cycles, and measurable outcomes that often fail to capture the complexity of teaching, learning, or community engagement. Scholars argue that such metric-driven environments produce “performativity cultures,” where institutions and academics engage in symbolic compliance rather than substantive improvement (Ball, 2003; Harvey and Newton, 2007). For higher education institutions in the Global South, these pressures can be particularly acute, as they

operate within asymmetrical global knowledge regimes that privilege Western-centric definitions of excellence while marginalizing local epistemologies, contextual priorities, and socio-economic realities (Hazelkorn, 2015). As a result, QA reforms implemented under donor-funded or internationally benchmarked projects often risk being appropriated into existing compliance cultures instead of transforming them.

Within this broader landscape, the TESCEA project sought to introduce a more participatory and context-responsive approach to quality and curriculum reform, encouraging collaboration across faculties, integration of

gender-responsive pedagogy, and alignment of teaching with community needs and employability goals.

However, institutional change is rarely linear. Literature on higher education reform in Africa suggests that even well-designed change initiatives encounter structural constraints, entrenched bureaucratic cultures, and resistance shaped by historical, political, and organizational dynamics (Materu, 2007; Mohamedbhai, 2014). At Gulu University, the coexistence of TESCEA's transformative ambitions with ongoing regulatory, ranking, and donor-reporting demands created a complex environment in which stakeholders had to negotiate competing expectations. Understanding how these dynamics unfolded, whose voices shaped QA practices, what forms of compliance or innovation emerged, and how institutional actors interpreted the legitimacy of different pressures provides critical insight into the possibilities and limitations of pursuing meaningful QA reform in the Global South.

### Statement of the problem

During the implementation of the TESCEA project at Gulu University between 2018 and 2021, the university endeavored to develop a participatory, mission-driven quality assurance (QA) framework that genuinely enhanced teaching, learning, and community engagement. However, the institution simultaneously faced increasing pressures from the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), international donors, and global ranking systems, all demanding strict compliance with standardized metrics and procedures. These external demands threatened to reduce QA to a bureaucratic exercise focused on ticking boxes rather than fostering meaningful improvement. Global research similarly demonstrates that compliance-oriented QA regimes often lead to performative practices, ritualistic reporting, and limited impact on actual educational quality (Harvey and Newton, 2007; Shah and Nair, 2013; Ball, 2003). Ranking pressures, in particular, have been shown to reshape institutional priorities and divert attention away from teaching, equity, and local relevance (Hazelkorn, 2015; Morrish, 2019). Studies on higher education governance further indicate that such external accountability mechanisms foster institutional isomorphism, pushing universities to mimic globally legitimized models even when they conflict with local mission and context (Dill and Beerkens, 2010). Recent work from East Africa echoes these concerns, showing that compliance-driven QA approaches often result in fragmented systems, limited stakeholder involvement, and reforms that exist more on paper than in practice (Mutebi and Ferej, 2023; Daudi et al., 2023). At Gulu University, this tension raised significant questions about whether the QA reforms introduced under TESCEA would truly align with the university's mission or merely function as performative gestures to satisfy external expectations. This study was therefore necessary to

examine how compliance pressures influenced QA processes, shaped faculty and student experiences, and ultimately affected the transformative intentions of the TESCEA-supported reforms.

### Research objectives

1. To explore how TESCEA shaped the design and implementation of QA frameworks and policies at Gulu University.
2. To understand how stakeholders perceived and experienced QA practices under compliance pressures.
3. To examine the impacts of compliance-driven QA on institutional priorities, stakeholder engagement, and mission alignment.
4. To identify enablers and barriers to achieving meaningful, mission-aligned QA in a Global South context.

### Research questions

1. How do stakeholders at Gulu University describe TESCEA's influence on QA policy design and implementation?
2. In what ways did stakeholders perceive and experience QA practices shaped by external compliance demands during TESCEA?
3. How did compliance pressures affect institutional priorities, stakeholder engagement, and alignment with Gulu University's mission?
4. What factors enabled or hindered meaningful, mission-aligned QA in the TESCEA context?

### Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore how compliance-driven QA shaped the development, implementation, and outcomes of QA reforms under TESCEA at Gulu University, from the perspectives of stakeholders, and to identify what promotes or inhibits authentic, mission-aligned QA in such contexts.

### Significance of the study

This study contributes to higher education scholarship in several ways. First, it provides empirical, qualitative evidence from the Global South of how external compliance interacts with internal reform efforts. Second, it informs university leaders, QA units, donors, and policymakers about how to design QA systems that resist superficial compliance. Third, it has practical value for institutions engaged in similar transformative projects, offering lessons on maintaining mission alignment, stakeholder engagement, and quality beyond rankings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Stakeholder perspectives on TESCEA's influence in shaping quality assurance policy design and implementation at Gulu University**

This theme investigates how stakeholders at Gulu University perceive TESCEA's role in influencing QA policy design and implementation, focusing on collaboration, participatory governance, and integrating priorities such as employability, gender equity, and community relevance. Recent studies emphasize that stakeholder engagement is critical to the ownership and sustainability of QA reforms. For example, research from East African universities (Kanyike et al., 2024; Onyango et al., 2023) confirms that involving faculty, students, and external partners leads to more effective policy outcomes. TESCEA's collaborative approach aligns with these findings, yet detailed insights into how stakeholders specifically shaped policy content remain underexplored.

Literature also reveals tensions between participatory policy design and external compliance demands. Patel and Sibanda (2023) highlight that while TESCEA advocated inclusive governance, external pressures constrained the extent to which stakeholders could influence policy meaningfully. This reflects a significant gap, suggesting a need for further exploration of how stakeholders negotiate these competing influences in the policy design process.

Gender responsiveness is an increasingly important aspect of QA reforms, with studies (Adeyemi and Banda, 2024) emphasizing empowerment of marginalized voices. TESCEA's emphasis on gender equity resonates with this trend; however, empirical research on how female faculty and students at Gulu University perceive and affect gender-focused QA initiatives is limited, indicating a key area for further study.

Institutional context is also pivotal in shaping stakeholder participation effectiveness. Nyathi and Chirwa (2023) suggest that factors such as regional culture and organizational history influence how stakeholders engage in QA reforms. For TESCEA, Gulu University's unique regional and cultural setting likely shaped stakeholder dynamics, yet much of the literature generalizes findings without disaggregating these contextual nuances.

Moreover, the mechanisms through which TESCEA facilitated stakeholder involvement—such as workshops, consultations, and feedback sessions—are documented in institutional reports (TESCEA, 2018-2021), but academic evaluations of their inclusivity, effectiveness, and challenges are scarce. This gap limits understanding of how deeply stakeholder inputs shaped final QA policies.

Finally, much of the existing literature focuses on policy-level perspectives, with limited attention to frontline stakeholders' lived experiences. Yet a growing body of research shows that faculty and other academic actors actively negotiate, resist, or symbolically comply

with QA mechanisms in ways that are not captured in top-down policy narratives (Lucas, 2014; Matsebatlela, 2015). Studies have also highlighted how QA procedures can generate administrative overload, emotional strain, and perceptions of bureaucratisation among educators, underscoring the human and institutional tensions often overlooked in formal QA designs (Nguyen, 2023; Silva et al., 2023). Understanding how faculty and students perceive their influence in policy design could therefore provide valuable nuance, addressing a notable deficiency in the literature on participatory QA processes. Moreover, Imbulgoda's (2020, 2022) work on symbolic compliance demonstrates that frontline actors' moral capacities shape whether they meaningfully internalise reforms or merely perform surface-level adherence, further reinforcing the need to investigate how academics experience and interpret QA reforms in practice.

### **Experiences of QA practices under external compliance demands during TESCEA**

This theme examines how stakeholders at Gulu University experienced QA practices influenced by external compliance requirements, including accreditation, donor conditions, and ranking systems. The literature consistently documents the dominance of external frameworks in shaping QA, often producing tension between compliance and genuine quality enhancement (Adeyemi and Banda, 2024; Onyango et al., 2023). TESCEA stakeholders reported frustrations with proceduralism and "box ticking," mirroring findings from other African universities.

However, there is a shortage of qualitative studies capturing how these compliance pressures impact daily QA activities. Most research remains at the policy level, neglecting the lived realities of faculty, QA officers, and students. TESCEA's qualitative data offers an opportunity to fill this gap by providing detailed accounts of how compliance influences morale, motivation, and engagement.

Student involvement in QA under compliance regimes is another underexplored area. The literature often centers on faculty and administrative perspectives, while students' voices remain marginalized. TESCEA's inclusion of students in QA reform can illuminate how external demands shape learners' views on quality and institutional responsiveness.

Further, studies indicate that compliance-driven QA frequently privileges measurable outputs over complex dimensions like gender equity or community relevance (Patel and Sibanda, 2023). TESCEA's attempt to embed these qualitative priorities highlights the difficulty of integrating softer metrics within rigid external frameworks, yet empirical analysis of this process remains sparse.

Comparative research distinguishing the impacts of various external pressures, such as national accreditation versus donor requirements or global

rankings, is lacking. TESCEA's multi-faceted external environment offers fertile ground to explore these differential influences in depth.

Finally, the literature rarely addresses how stakeholders cope with or resist compliance demands, despite growing evidence that such dynamics significantly shape QA implementation. Recent studies show that academics frequently engage in selective or strategic compliance, reinterpret QA mandates, and negotiate space for professional autonomy within increasingly metric-driven environments. For instance, van der Wende and Krooi (2024) demonstrate how universities align QA purposes, people, and processes through adaptive practices rather than strict conformity, while Gibbs et al. (2024) document how institutions modify QA tools to protect innovation from bureaucratic overload.

In the Global South, emerging work by Muriisa et al. (2025) illustrates how Ugandan universities navigated conflicting regulatory and contextual pressures by prioritizing mission-relevant practices during periods of crisis, and Shanziwe (2025) shows that Zambian academics often resist or reshape QA demands to manage workload and uphold pedagogical priorities. Similar insights from Asamoah et al. (2025), Weenink (2024), and Junias et al. (2025) highlight the persistence of symbolic compliance, contextual interpretation, and values-based forms of resistance across different higher education settings. Against this backdrop, TESCEA data could meaningfully extend current scholarship by revealing how stakeholders adopt adaptive strategies such as selective compliance, collaborative reinterpretation of standards, or advocacy for mission-focused QA, thereby enriching the discourse on how institutions manage complex external pressures.

### **Impact of compliance pressures on institutional priorities, stakeholder engagement, and mission alignment at Gulu University**

This theme explores how external accountability mechanisms affect university priorities, stakeholder involvement, and alignment with institutional missions, often leading to mission drift or disengagement. Existing research documents that increasing compliance demands can shift institutional focus toward meeting external standards, potentially causing mission drift (Patel and Sibanda, 2023; Meho, 2025). In Gulu University's TESCEA context, efforts to center QA around the university's mission reportedly faced pressure from competing accountability requirements.

Despite broad recognition of mission drift, detailed analyses on how these compliance pressures differentially affect stakeholder groups, faculty, students, and administrators are limited. TESCEA's diverse participant data could address this gap by providing differentiated insights into experiences of disengagement or fatigue.

The concept of institutional isomorphism, where

universities mimic dominant global QA models despite local relevance concerns, is gaining traction in the literature (Adeyemi and Banda, 2024). TESCEA's struggle to balance community relevance against accreditation and ranking pressures exemplifies this challenge, yet there is a lack of detailed case narratives unpacking this dynamic.

Emerging research using Critical Policy Sociology perspectives (Patel and Sibanda, 2023) examines power relations within QA processes, emphasizing whose voices are marginalized when compliance dominates. TESCEA's experience provides a valuable case for further exploration of these power dynamics and their effects on institutional identity.

Additionally, institutional responses to compliance pressures vary depending on leadership, culture, and resource availability (Kanyike et al., 2024). Comparative studies exploring these mediating factors in mission alignment remain sparse, limiting tailored strategies for different institutional contexts.

Lastly, although ongoing stakeholder engagement is crucial to counteract disengagement, few studies document effective models for sustaining participation amid heavy compliance burdens. Emerging research begins to fill this gap: a participatory evaluation study recently found that when QA practices are co-designed and continuously revisited with faculty, staff, and students, they contribute to both accountability and lasting commitment (Almeida and da Silva, 2025). Systematic reviews of internal quality assurance in the Global South similarly highlight that strong leadership and participatory cultures are among the most important enablers of sustained stakeholder engagement (Berkat, 2025).

Research from Nepal underscores the importance of institutionalizing stakeholder involvement as part of a continuous-improvement QA system, helping transform QA from a one-off bureaucratic exercise into a lived, mission-aligned practice (Bista, 2025). Moreover, studies on accreditation advisory boards show that sustained participation depends not just on formal mechanisms but also on genuine collaborative processes, transparency, and feedback loops (Attree et al., 2025). In this context, TESCEA's model of embedding participatory governance in QA could provide valuable practical lessons on how to maintain stakeholder involvement even when compliance demands are high.

### **Enablers and barriers to achieving meaningful, mission-aligned quality assurance in the TESCEA context**

This theme synthesizes literature on factors that facilitate or impede the development of genuine, context-sensitive QA systems aligned with institutional missions. Leadership commitment, institutional culture, and resource availability emerge as key enablers (Kanyike et al., 2024; Onyango et al., 2023). TESCEA's initial

collaborative framework development reflects these enabling conditions, though detailed exploration of their interplay in resource-constrained settings like Gulu University is limited.

Sustained stakeholder participation across QA cycles, not only during policy design but also in monitoring and review, is identified as crucial for ownership and adaptability (Nyathi and Chirwa, 2023). TESCEA's approach aligns with this principle; however, rigorous academic evaluation of the sustainability and impact of these participatory practices is lacking.

Conversely, rigid external accountability frameworks often hinder meaningful QA by privileging quantitative over qualitative measures (Adeyemi and Banda, 2024). TESCEA's experience highlights this tension, but more empirical work is needed to inform policy reforms promoting flexible, context-sensitive QA.

Capacity constraints, including limited faculty training in QA methodologies and insufficient QA staffing, are recurrent barriers identified in the literature (Patel and Sibanda, 2023). TESCEA invested in capacity building to address these gaps, yet the long-term impact and scalability of these interventions remain underexamined.

Cultural factors such as attitudes toward change and internal power relations also influence QA reform success (Onyango et al., 2023). Research on these socio-cultural dimensions is still emerging in East Africa, representing a critical area for further study in TESCEA's context.

Finally, donor expectations often shape QA priorities, sometimes conflicting with mission alignment (Meho, 2025). There is a notable gap in the literature examining how universities practically negotiate these tensions, and TESCEA's multi-stakeholder experience could provide valuable insights into balancing external demands with institutional missions.

### **Recent scholarship on external pressures and QA in higher education**

Recent research highlights how external pressures shape QA systems in African universities. Compliance demands frequently produce superficial "box-ticking" practices that prioritize documentation over pedagogical transformation and responsiveness to local labor markets (Adeyemi and Banda, 2024). Meanwhile, ranking metrics are driving mission drift: universities increasingly emphasize research output and international visibility at the expense of community engagement (Patel and Sibanda, 2023), mirroring patterns seen in TESCEA's context. At the continental level, the HAQAA3 initiative is deepening harmonization of QA standards through African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA), while also raising concerns that over-standardization could stifle institutional distinctiveness (ENQA, 2023; DAAD, 2023). For instance, HAQAA3's recent external review of Malawi's National Council for Higher Education noted robust stakeholder involvement but also flagged

"evaluation fatigue" and overlapping compliance demands. Simultaneously, continental QA reforms are being co-constructed through wide consultations under HAQAA3 to strengthen stakeholder ownership (PAQAA consultations, 2024).

Emerging empirical work also highlights how these external pressures can limit meaningful participation. A global ranking-systems analysis suggests that some institutions are engaging in "metric-optimizing" behaviours, amplifying output at the expense of mission-aligned goals. At the same time, challenges such as rapid massification in African universities, characterized by huge classes and resource constraints, compound QA compliance burdens and risk reducing QA to procedural formality. These findings underscore the urgent need to investigate how projects like TESCEA navigate external pressures while preserving institutional missions and fostering genuine engagement.

External accountability pressures can foster performativity cultures, where universities meet quantitative benchmarks without transforming pedagogy or community engagement (Ball, 2003; Harvey and Newton, 2007). Recent studies show that academics often respond strategically by selectively complying with QA requirements, reinterpreting mandates, or advocating for mission-aligned QA (van der Wende and Krooi, 2024; Gibbs et al., 2024). In African contexts, these strategies are shaped by resource constraints, bureaucratic norms, and the moral and professional capacities of actors (Imbulgoda, 2020, 2022; Claretah et al., 2025). Such adaptive responses highlight that compliance is not uniform but mediated by institutional culture and local priorities.

Sustaining meaningful stakeholder engagement under heavy compliance pressures remains a key challenge. Research shows that participatory QA processes, co-designed with faculty, students, and staff, enhance accountability, promote buy-in, and increase the sustainability of reforms (Almeida and da Silva, 2025; Berkat, 2025). Embedding engagement in continuous improvement cycles transforms QA from a bureaucratic obligation into a mission-aligned practice (Bista, 2025; Attree et al., 2025). TESCEA's approach, integrating collaborative governance, gender-responsive pedagogy, and community-aligned learning, illustrates how participatory models can maintain engagement even in highly regulated environments.

Recent scholarship emphasizes adaptive QA strategies as crucial for balancing external pressures with institutional priorities. Academics may selectively comply, reinterpret mandates, or negotiate flexibility in QA processes to preserve pedagogical and mission-focused goals (de Boer and Huisman, 1999; Trowler, 1998; Morley, 2003; Neema-Abooki, 2024). In African universities, adaptive strategies often involve co-creating QA practices with multiple stakeholders, allowing institutions to meet external requirements while retaining local relevance (Kuagbedzi, 2025; Claretah et al., 2025). TESCEA's trajectory provides a practical example of how context-sensitive and participatory QA

interventions can succeed under complex, high-pressure conditions.

Overall, emerging research underscores the importance of QA systems that are contextually sensitive, participatory, and flexible. While external frameworks and benchmarks are necessary for accountability and standardization, they must allow room for local adaptation, stakeholder engagement, and mission alignment. TESCEA's experiences highlight the potential of integrating these principles to ensure QA reforms support transformative learning, community relevance, and sustainable institutional development in African higher education contexts.

### Theoretical framework

This study is framed by a Theory of Change (ToC) model, which posits that institutional transformation is achieved through intentional interventions, stakeholder involvement, and alignment of inputs, processes, and outcomes over time. Under TESCEA, the ToC envisioned that collaborative policy and framework design, curriculum reform, QA capacity building, and reflective practices would lead to improved employability, enhanced quality, and social relevance. Complementing ToC, theories of institutional isomorphism help explain why universities under pressure from rankings and accreditation tend to mimic externally validated models, even when those are misaligned with local mission; Critical Policy Sociology provides lenses for understanding power dynamics, who defines "quality," and how compliance mandates shape institutional values. These perspectives together illuminate how ranking pressures not only reinforce institutional isomorphism but also expose the global policy discourses that privilege metrics over contextually grounded conceptions of quality.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research orientation and paradigm

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist research paradigm, which is appropriate for exploring the subjective meanings and lived experiences of individuals within complex social and institutional contexts. The interpretivist stance assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the perspectives of those who experience it (Creswell and Poth, 2024; Marshall and Rossman, 2024). In the context of this research, understanding how stakeholders at Gulu University perceived, interpreted, and navigated quality assurance (QA) reforms during the Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) project required deep engagement with their narratives and social meanings.

Qualitative research is increasingly recognized as essential for evaluating higher education reforms,

particularly in African contexts where cultural, institutional, and political dynamics significantly shape implementation (Onyango et al., 2023; Adeyemi and Banda, 2024). The interpretivist approach allowed the researcher to explore the meanings attached to QA processes by different actors and how these meanings influenced their engagement with institutional reforms.

### Research design

This study used a single instrumental case study design, focusing on Gulu University as a bounded case to examine how QA policies and practices evolved during the TESCEA project (2018–2021). According to Yin (2023), an instrumental case study is suitable when a case is used to gain insight into a broader issue. In this case, the intersection of donor-funded QA reform, institutional mission, and stakeholder experience.

The case study design is particularly appropriate in educational research because it allows for an in-depth, contextualized understanding of policy processes and institutional behavior (Patel and Sibanda, 2023). Through this design, the study could capture the complexity of QA reforms as they unfolded within the specific institutional, cultural, and regulatory context of Gulu University. This approach is supported by recent African scholarship calling for case-based studies that examine how global or regional QA frameworks are adapted to local realities (Kanyike et al., 2024; Meho, 2025).

### Context of the study

Gulu University is a public institution located in northern Uganda, a region historically affected by conflict and socio-economic disadvantage. Between 2018 and 2021, Gulu University was a core partner in the TESCEA project, which aimed to strengthen curriculum design, pedagogy, and institutional QA systems to enhance graduates' employability and social agency. The TESCEA project was implemented through a multi-level participatory approach. This included faculty and staff capacity-building workshops focused on gender-responsive teaching, participatory pedagogy, and QA processes; curriculum co-creation sessions involving students, faculty, and community stakeholders to ensure relevance to local labor markets; and revision of internal QA procedures to align institutional standards with national frameworks and international best practices.

In addition, TESCEA promoted collaborative QA governance, establishing working groups and committees to monitor curriculum implementation, teaching quality, and graduate outcomes. Faculty were encouraged to experiment with innovative teaching methods, integrate employability skills, and document learning outcomes for continuous improvement. Students and community representatives participated in feedback mechanisms, providing perspectives on

course content, teaching approaches, and the applicability of skills in real-world contexts. External experts and international partners supported benchmarking exercises, aligning local QA practices with global standards while respecting local priorities.

These reforms were implemented within a complex external QA environment, shaped by the Uganda National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), donor expectations, and global pressures for rankings and accountability. While TESCEA offered opportunities for transformative change, stakeholders had to navigate competing demands, balancing compliance with innovation, and adapting QA systems to local realities while meeting external benchmarks. This context provides a unique lens for understanding how participatory, context-sensitive QA reforms can be operationalized in a resource-constrained higher education setting.

This context reflects the dynamics identified in recent literature, which highlights the dual pressures faced by African universities: responding to local development needs while aligning with externally imposed QA frameworks (Onyango et al., 2023; Adeyemi and Banda, 2024). The institutional setting thus provided a rich site to explore how QA reforms are negotiated, adapted, or resisted in the face of competing demands.

### Scope of the study

This study focused on institutional quality assurance (QA) reforms at Gulu University during the TESCEA project (2018–2021). It examined how stakeholders, including faculty, administrators, and students, perceived and engaged with QA processes, as well as how policies were interpreted and implemented within the university. The study relied on document analysis, interviews, and observation of implementation processes, rather than quantitatively measuring student learning outcomes. The findings are specific to the Ugandan higher education context and reflect the dynamics of a public university operating under national QA regulations, donor expectations, and global benchmarking pressures. While insights may inform QA reform in similar contexts, caution is needed in generalizing results to universities with different regulatory, cultural, or resource environments.

### Population and sampling

The study used purposive sampling to select 20 key participants involved in QA reform during TESCEA. This included: Members of the Quality Assurance team. Senior university leadership (e.g., deans, directors, or deputy vice-chancellors). Academic staff involved in TESCEA-led curriculum and pedagogical transformation and TESCEA project partners, including NGO collaborators and regional stakeholders.

Purposive sampling is widely accepted in qualitative

research when the goal is to gain an in-depth understanding from those directly involved in the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2023; Creswell and Poth, 2024). The criteria for inclusion ensured diversity in discipline, role, and level of involvement to reflect the institutional ecosystem of QA reform.

This approach is supported by recent higher education studies, which emphasize the importance of capturing multiple stakeholder perspectives to unpack how reforms are interpreted and enacted differently across institutional hierarchies (Kanyike et al., 2024; Patel and Sibanda, 2023). The sample size ( $n = 20$ ) is within the optimal range for single case study research, where depth of insight is prioritized over generalizability (Meho, 2025).

### Data collection instruments and techniques

Three primary methods were employed for data collection:

**Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with all 20 participants, each session lasted 45–60 minutes, allowing for depth while maintaining focus. Interview questions explored participants' experiences with QA policy design, implementation, challenges under compliance pressures, and perceptions of TESCEA's impact. Semi-structured interviews are ideal for exploring personal interpretations while allowing flexibility to pursue emerging themes (Marshall and Rossman, 2024). This technique is widely recommended in policy analysis and educational reform research for eliciting rich, contextually grounded data (Onyango et al., 2023).

**Document analysis:** Analyzed institutional documents, including QA policies, TESCEA workshop reports, strategic plans, NCHE compliance reports, and curriculum guidelines. These texts provided insights into both the official discourse and the evolution of QA frameworks. Document analysis offered a way to triangulate interview findings and understand the institutional logic behind QA reforms (Yin, 2023). It is particularly useful in higher education studies to examine alignment (or misalignment) between policy rhetoric and implementation.

**Non-participant observation:** Conducted where feasible (e.g., observing video records of QA workshops, curriculum review meetings, and TESCEA activities). Observations focused on stakeholder interactions, decision-making processes, and inclusion/exclusion dynamics. Observation enriched the data by revealing relational dynamics that participants might not articulate in interviews (Creswell and Poth, 2024). It also helped assess the participatory quality of TESCEA's interventions.

## Data analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying patterns and meanings across rich, textual data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and institutional documents. This approach was chosen because it aligns with the study's aim of capturing the complex, context-specific experiences of stakeholders involved in Quality Assurance (QA) reforms under the TESCEA project. Thematic analysis allows for flexibility in interpreting both surface-level and latent meanings, making it particularly appropriate for research focused on institutional change and stakeholder engagement (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Onyango et al., 2023).

A hybrid coding approach was employed using deductive codes derived from the research objectives (e.g., "stakeholder participation," "compliance pressure") and inductive codes that emerged organically from the data (e.g., "box ticking," "hope fatigue," "ownership erosion"). Codes were organized into themes through iterative refinement, supported by triangulation across data sources to enhance credibility. The analytical process was further strengthened through reflexive memoing, audit trails, and peer debriefing, in line with best practices for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2024). Interpretation of themes was informed by recent theoretical work on institutional isomorphism and QA standardization in African higher education contexts (Patel and Sibanda, 2023; Meho, 2025), enabling a deeper understanding of the tensions between locally driven reform and externally imposed accountability frameworks. This analytical approach allowed the study to move beyond descriptive reporting and offer critical insights into how QA reforms are navigated, resisted, or adapted within a university setting in the Global South.

## Quality control measures

To enhance the credibility, trustworthiness, and rigor of the study, the following strategies were to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Triangulation across interviews, documents, and observations allowed cross-verification of findings, strengthening the robustness of interpretations (Yin, 2023). Member checking involved participants reviewing summaries of their interviews to validate interpretations and correct misrepresentations (Marshall and Rossman, 2024). An audit trail documented all coding decisions, theme development, and analytic memos, promoting dependability and transparency (Patel and Sibanda, 2023). Additionally, peer debriefing with academic colleagues not directly involved in the project enabled critical reflection and minimized potential bias. Collectively, these practices reflect current best practices in qualitative educational research, emphasizing co-constructed knowledge and researcher reflexivity (Onyango et al., 2023; Meho, 2025).

## Ethical considerations

The study obtained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee, and several protocols were implemented to ensure ethical conduct. Informed consent was obtained from all participants through detailed information sheets and signed consent forms. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing sensitive data on encrypted devices. Voluntary participation was emphasized, with participants reminded of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The researcher also ensured cultural sensitivity, being attentive to local norms and respectful of institutional hierarchies, consistent with recommendations for ethical research in African university settings (Adeyemi and Banda, 2024). These safeguards align with broader calls in the literature for context-sensitive, participant-centered ethical practices in African higher education research (Kanyike et al., 2024).

## FINDINGS

### **Stakeholder-driven QA policy: Collaboration, shared responsibility, and bridging the design–implementation gap**

The initial stages of TESCEA at Gulu University were characterized by high levels of stakeholder engagement, with faculty, administrators, students, and local employers actively participating in the redesign of QA frameworks. Analysis of interview data, policy documents, and observation notes revealed that this participatory approach generated shared responsibility and alignment with the university's mission. Faculty and QA officers consistently described the process as inclusive and energizing. For example, one faculty member reflected, "The workshops really brought us together; everyone had a voice, from students to employers" (FA1), while a QA officer observed, "This framework wasn't just imposed; it was created by us, reflecting who we are and what our community needs" (QA1). These insights, corroborated by document analysis showing co-authored QA guidelines and meeting minutes from stakeholder committees, indicate that participatory policy design fostered a sense of ownership and local relevance.

Observational data from workshops and planning meetings further highlighted active deliberation and consensus-building, suggesting that stakeholder-driven approaches not only facilitated input but also enabled negotiation of priorities, particularly around employability, gender responsiveness, and community engagement. A faculty participant noted, "The focus on gender and community relevance gave hope for authentic reform" (FM5). The integration of these socially relevant priorities demonstrates how TESCEA went beyond formal compliance to embed context-sensitive innovations in QA policies.

Triangulating across instruments, the findings suggest that participatory QA design contributed to bridging the design–implementation gap. By involving stakeholders from the outset, the project helped ensure that policies reflected institutional realities and community needs, rather than being externally imposed. This aligns with Onyango et al. (2023) and Kanyike et al. (2024), who argue that shared decision-making and participatory governance are critical for translating QA reforms into sustainable practice. In sum, TESCEA’s early phase illustrates that collaborative, mission-driven policy design can create momentum for meaningful QA reform, combining legitimacy, context sensitivity, and actionable outcomes.

### **Perceptions of QA policy and framework design**

Across interviews, document analysis, and observations, stakeholders consistently valued the participatory approach to QA policy and framework design under TESCEA. Faculty and administrative staff emphasized that active involvement in co-creating curricula and QA frameworks fostered ownership and professional satisfaction. One lecturer stated, “Being involved in curriculum development increased satisfaction and gave us a sense that our voices mattered” (FM2, 2021). TESCEA project documents reinforced this emphasis, highlighting employability, gender responsiveness, and community engagement as guiding principles and stressing participatory policy development as a core methodology. Observations of initial workshops showed high engagement, with faculty and staff actively contributing to discussions on curriculum reform and QA procedures, suggesting that participatory mechanisms were operationalized effectively.

However, interviews revealed that the participatory design process was constrained by external compliance requirements. Staff reported difficulty translating qualitative goals, such as community engagement or gender-sensitive teaching, into measurable outputs required for accreditation or donor reporting. As one QA officer explained, “Some aspects are hard to prove on paper, causing anxiety and resistance” (QA3, 2020). This tension between mission-driven objectives and externally imposed standards illustrates how innovative QA policy can be both empowering and constraining.

Participatory QA design enhances stakeholder engagement and alignment with institutional mission. Yet systemic compliance pressures can limit the translation of innovative frameworks into meaningful practice, reflecting a common challenge in Global South higher education, where external accountability often overshadows local priorities (Hazelkorn, 2015; Ball, 2003).

### **Implementation of QA practices**

While initial TESCEA workshops fostered collaboration and reflective dialogue, interviews, document analysis, and observations collectively indicated that

implementation increasingly shifted toward proceduralism. Faculty reported feeling compelled to prioritize reporting and metrics over innovation: “Deadlines and audits forced us to focus on producing reports, not improving teaching” (SH3, 2021). Project documentation mirrored this trend, showing that progress reports and QA logs emphasized outputs, checklist compliance, and measurable indicators, while qualitative achievements such as community projects or gender-responsive initiatives were inconsistently recorded. Observational notes similarly highlighted that later workshops focused primarily on documentation review and audit preparation, with reduced interactive problem-solving and discussion.

The triangulation of data from all instruments confirms a clear pattern: external compliance pressures redirected focus from mission-driven innovation to box-ticking activities. Faculty engagement declined as the novelty and collaborative spirit of TESCEA workshops gave way to procedural demands.

These findings align with global research on performativity in higher education, demonstrating that metric-driven QA systems can unintentionally suppress creativity and undermine meaningful participation (Harvey and Newton, 2007; Patel and Sibanda, 2023).

### **Impact of compliance pressures on innovation and mission alignment**

Interviews, document checks, and observations revealed that external pressures, especially national accreditation standards and global rankings, contributed to mission drift. Faculty and administrators reported that globally benchmarked metrics often overshadowed transformative goals. “The original mission is being eclipsed by accreditation checklists,” lamented one senior leader (SH3, 2021). TESCEA progress reports confirmed that innovative initiatives were inconsistently documented, largely because qualitative outcomes were harder to quantify. Observations further demonstrated that meetings and workshops increasingly emphasized reporting procedures rather than pedagogical discussions, limiting opportunities for innovation.

The convergence of evidence shows that compliance pressures fostered proceduralism and constrained innovation, with qualitative goals deprioritized in favor of measurable outputs. This created stress and disengagement among stakeholders, reducing the transformative potential of QA reforms.

These dynamics illustrate institutional isomorphism, wherein universities emulate globally recognized QA models at the expense of local priorities and social relevance (Meho, 2025). External accountability mechanisms, while intended to ensure quality, can paradoxically undermine mission-driven objectives.

### **Enablers of sustained, mission-aligned QA reform**

Despite the pressures, several enablers emerged that

supported continued engagement and mitigated the negative effects of compliance. Interviews highlighted the role of strong leadership in sustaining QA momentum: “Strong leadership made a real difference in keeping staff motivated and engaged” (QA6, 2021). Stakeholder involvement in curriculum co-design reinforced purpose and satisfaction, and TESCEA’s emphasis on social justice, gender equity, and employability acted as a guiding framework for meaningful work. As one QA team member reflected, “The social change goals helped us resist over-standardization and reminded us why this work matters” (QA1, 2021). Observational data confirmed that workshops maintaining participatory and reflective approaches sustained higher levels of engagement compared to sessions dominated by reporting or compliance review.

Leadership support, participatory engagement, and mission-aligned goals emerged as critical buffers against procedural capture, allowing pockets of innovation to persist despite external pressures.

Sustaining meaningful QA reform in environments dominated by compliance requires intentional support structures, active stakeholder participation, and values-based guiding principles. When these enablers are present, even highly regulated systems can accommodate innovation and mission-driven outcomes (Nyathi and Chirwa, 2023).

### **Synthesis across instruments**

Collectively, interviews, document analysis, and observations reveal a nuanced trajectory of QA reform at Gulu University under TESCEA. Participatory design initially fostered engagement, ownership, and innovation, but external accountability pressures gradually shifted the focus toward proceduralism and compliance. Stakeholder fatigue, partial mission drift, and diminished innovation were evident across all instruments. Yet strong leadership, active stakeholder involvement, and adherence to TESCEA’s social justice and employability goals acted as enabling factors, sustaining meaningful engagement where these supports existed.

The findings underscore the complex interplay between innovation and compliance in Global South higher education. Effective QA reform requires balancing external accountability with institutional mission, participatory engagement, and contextual relevance. Without such a balance, QA risks becoming performative rather than transformative.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Participatory QA policy design and the design-implementation gap**

The study demonstrates that the initial stages of

TESCEA at Gulu University were marked by strong collaboration, shared ownership, and participatory QA reform. Faculty, QA officers, students, and external stakeholders, including local employers, were actively involved in co-creating a QA framework aligned with the university’s mission and regional realities. Stakeholders’ inclusion fostered motivation, optimism, and a sense of ownership, confirming the argument by Onyango et al. (2023) and Kanyike et al. (2024) that participatory governance promotes context-sensitive and effective educational reform.

When compared to the literature, these findings extend earlier studies in the African higher education context. For example, Nyathi and Chirwa (2023) found that participatory QA design at several Southern African universities increased stakeholder engagement but noted that emotional and normative investment in QA was often limited by bureaucratic constraints. In contrast, TESCEA at Gulu University shows that participatory design can foster substantive stakeholder influence, rather than symbolic engagement, particularly when reforms are closely tied to social justice, employability, and community relevance. This suggests that the depth of participation, not just its existence, is critical for achieving meaningful reform, echoing Adeyemi and Banda’s (2024) emphasis on stakeholder empowerment in shaping QA substance.

From a Theory of Change (ToC) perspective, these findings corroborate the literature that intentional interventions and alignment of inputs, processes, and outcomes are essential for transformative institutional change (Vogel, 2012). Where prior studies (e.g., Onyango et al., 2023; Nyathi and Chirwa, 2023) highlighted participation primarily as an input or procedural step, TESCEA demonstrates that participatory engagement can generate both instrumental and intrinsic outcomes: it not only informs QA frameworks but also strengthens legitimacy, emotional commitment, and perceived value of the reform.

Furthermore, the findings contrast with studies from other Global South contexts where participation was often limited to consultation or compliance exercises (Patel and Sibanda, 2023). At Gulu University, stakeholders reported that their contributions shaped substantive content in curricula and QA frameworks rather than being merely performative. This suggests that embedding mission-driven objectives such as gender equity, employability, and community engagement within participatory processes enhances both engagement and the likelihood of sustainable QA outcomes, reinforcing Vogel’s (2012) argument that alignment between processes and outcomes is critical in ToC.

In sum, the Gulu University experience affirms the broader literature on participatory QA while offering new insights: meaningful participation is contingent on the degree to which stakeholders can influence content, rather than just process, and when participatory design is tied to socially relevant, mission-aligned goals, it

fosters deeper commitment, legitimacy, and potential for institutional transformation.

### **Collision between innovative QA and external compliance pressures**

The study found that the implementation of the TESCEA QA framework was undermined by tensions between locally meaningful innovations and externally imposed compliance requirements. Faculty, QA officers, and administrators reported that national accreditation standards and donor audits prioritized measurable outputs over qualitative dimensions such as community engagement and gender responsiveness, central to TESCEA's mission. One participant observed, "The national standards don't capture community work or gender responsiveness well" (Project Staff 2, 2020).

These findings align with Patel and Sibanda (2023), who note that QA frameworks emphasizing quantifiable metrics often marginalize locally valued goals, reinforcing conformity to global norms. Similarly, Meho (2025) highlights how universities in the Global South experience institutional isomorphism, adopting practices aligned with international ranking and accreditation standards even when these are misaligned with local missions. TESCEA's experience demonstrates that innovation, while encouraged in theory, became a liability in practice due to its perceived lack of measurability.

From a Theory of Change (ToC) perspective, this underscores a misalignment between intended outcomes and the processes shaped by external pressures. While TESCEA designed participatory and values-driven QA as a mechanism for social transformation, rigid accreditation standards and donor expectations interfered with the causal pathways envisioned in the ToC framework, limiting the framework's transformative potential (Vogel, 2012). This finding echoes global QA literature, which warns that innovation often suffers in contexts dominated by metric-driven accountability (Hazelkorn, 2015; Dill and Beerkens, 2010).

### **Proceduralism, disengagement and mission drift**

A further finding is the shift from meaningful QA engagement to proceduralism. Faculty and staff described a "box-ticking" culture, reflecting well-documented trends in African higher education where compliance eclipses educational enhancement (Adeyemi and Banda, 2024; Nyathi and Chirwa, 2023). At Gulu University, repeated audit-driven reporting and rigid documentation requirements led to fatigue, frustration, and a sense of "hope fatigue." Participants articulated fears of mission drift, observing that external pressures were undermining community engagement and socially transformative initiatives: "The original mission is being eclipsed by accreditation checklists"

(SH3, 2021).

This aligns with Critical Policy Sociology (CPS), which emphasizes that policies embody power relations and shape institutional priorities (Ball, 2003; Shah and Nair, 2013). In TESCEA's case, externally defined QA metrics privileged standardization over locally meaningful outcomes, structurally sidelining institutional mission. Comparatively, Onyango et al. (2023) and Nyathi and Chirwa (2023) similarly note that African universities subjected to global ranking regimes often experience disengagement and demotivation among staff when reforms are misaligned with local goals. The Gulu University case further confirms that procedural compliance, without alignment to institutional mission, leads not only to reduced innovation but also to systemic emotional strain among stakeholders.

From a ToC lens, proceduralism reflects a disruption in the feedback loops essential for learning and adaptive transformation. Inputs and processes stakeholder participation, reflective practice, and curriculum co-design were decoupled from outcomes, limiting TESCEA's intended social impact. The study, therefore, illustrates how external accountability mechanisms can distort the causal logic of mission-driven QA reform (Vogel, 2012).

### **Resilience factors: Leadership, social mission and adaptive participation**

Despite these challenges, the study identifies enablers that mitigated the negative effects of compliance pressures. Strong, transparent, mission-aligned leadership was repeatedly cited as essential in sustaining staff engagement and morale. Faculty reported that leadership support provided clarity and motivation, consistent with Kanyike et al. (2024), who emphasize leadership's catalytic role in navigating tensions between reform and compliance.

TESCEA's explicit grounding in social justice, employability, and community development provided intrinsic motivation that helped staff persist despite bureaucratic constraints. Faculty who remained actively involved in participatory curriculum design reported increased ownership and satisfaction, echoing Meho (2025) on the role of affective alignment in sustaining reform. Additionally, stakeholders employed adaptive strategies selective engagement, peer support, and internal advocacy, which reflect agency within constrained systems, a concept highlighted in CPS literature (Ball, 2003; Shah and Nair, 2013).

These resilience factors also reinforce ToC principles: when inputs (leadership support, participatory mechanisms) and processes (adaptive strategies, alignment with social mission) are coherently maintained, intended outcomes sustained engagement, innovation, and social relevance, can be partially realized despite external pressures (Vogel, 2012). This finding adds nuance to prior literature, which often emphasizes compliance-driven constraints but

underexplores stakeholder strategies for preserving mission-aligned reform (Patel and Sibanda, 2023; Nyathi and Chirwa, 2023).

### Broader implications and theoretical synthesis

The study highlights the delicate balance African universities must maintain between global QA pressures and mission-driven innovation. TESCEA demonstrates that participatory, socially relevant QA frameworks can drive meaningful change, but external compliance pressures through accreditation, donor reporting, and ranking regimes can undermine innovation, foster proceduralism, and erode stakeholder engagement.

By integrating theoretical perspectives, several insights emerge: Theory of Change shows that alignment of inputs, processes, and outcomes is essential, but external pressures can disrupt causal pathways, limiting transformative impact (Vogel, 2012). Institutional Isomorphism explains conformity to global standards, often at the expense of local mission and innovation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meho, 2025). Critical Policy Sociology reveals the power dynamics embedded in QA policy, demonstrating how externally imposed definitions of quality marginalize locally meaningful outcomes and constrain stakeholder agency (Ball, 2003; Shah and Nair, 2013).

The Gulu University case underscores that sustainable QA reform in African higher education requires flexible accreditation systems, recognition of multiple forms of educational value, mission-aligned leadership, and participatory mechanisms that extend beyond policy design into implementation and review. Without such enablers, QA risks becoming performative rather than transformative (Patel and Sibanda, 2023; UNESCO, 2023; HAQAA3, 2023).

### Contributions to existing theory

This study advances theoretical understanding of participatory quality assurance (QA) by demonstrating that stakeholder ownership and affective alignment are central to sustaining reform processes in higher education. Grounded in the lived experiences of African university actors, the research shows how locally developed QA systems can be shaped and sometimes undermined by external pressures, linking institutional isomorphism (Meho, 2025) with real-world implementation challenges. Using a Theory of Change (ToC) lens, the study illustrates that the alignment of inputs (participatory workshops, stakeholder consultations), processes (co-design, reflection), and outcomes (employability, gender equity, community relevance) is critical for reform momentum. When external compliance mechanisms conflict with institutional values, intended outcomes are compromised, leading to mission drift and hope fatigue, but sustained emotional and ideological investment can

partially buffer reforms, reinforcing the importance of intrinsic motivation and mission-aligned participation.

### Contributions to the existing body of research

Empirically, this study enriches the limited literature on African-led QA innovation by providing micro-level insights from faculty, QA officers, and university leaders about the implementation of participatory, socially responsive QA reforms under TESCEA. It documents how procedural compliance, misaligned metrics, and global ranking pressures can compromise intended outcomes, while highlighting adaptive strategies employed by stakeholders, such as selective engagement, peer support networks, and internal advocacy maintain reform ideals. By linking these findings to Theory of Change principles, the study shows how local actors can preserve partial causal pathways and sustain mission-driven outcomes despite systemic constraints, offering a nuanced understanding of the emotional, professional, and organizational dynamics of QA reform. This contributes to filling a gap in the literature on the interplay between participatory design, external compliance, and the resilience of reform initiatives in African higher education contexts.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and theoretical insights from this study, sustainable and mission-aligned quality assurance (QA) in African higher education requires reforms at multiple levels. National QA agencies and donors should revise frameworks to recognize context-specific indicators, such as community engagement, gender inclusion, and employability, moving beyond rigid metric-driven compliance to mixed-method evaluations that capture locally meaningful outcomes (Vogel, 2012; Meho, 2025). Universities should institutionalize participatory governance by embedding regular curriculum co-design, involving external stakeholders, and establishing mechanisms for feedback and recognition to sustain engagement, thereby strengthening stakeholder ownership and affective alignment (Onyango et al., 2023). Donor expectations should be aligned with institutional missions through flexible timelines, reduced emphasis on standardized audits, and prioritization of long-term capacity building, while leadership development should focus on adaptive management to balance innovation with external accountability (Kanyike et al., 2024). Additionally, universities and QA experts should develop tools to measure “soft” indicators such as gender equity, community-based learning outcomes, and student engagement, piloted through participatory workshops, and future research should prioritize marginalized voices to ensure inclusive reforms. Collectively, these recommendations address both structural and procedural challenges, ensuring QA processes are

genuinely transformative, contextually responsive, and aligned with institutional mission.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that participatory QA design under the TESCEA project enhanced stakeholder ownership, engagement, and legitimacy, particularly in advancing employability, gender equity, and community relevance. However, external compliance pressures from national accreditation, donor audits, and global ranking regimes often undermined these innovations, resulting in proceduralism, mission drift, and reduced motivation. The findings illustrate how institutional isomorphism can lead universities to prioritize conformity over local mission, while strong, mission-aligned leadership and affective alignment helped sustain engagement and preserve elements of reform. Stakeholders employed adaptive strategies, such as selective engagement and internal advocacy, to navigate competing demands, demonstrating the capacity for agency within constrained systems. Ultimately, the study highlights that sustainable, transformative QA in African higher education requires context-sensitive, mission-aligned frameworks that balance external accountability with locally meaningful outcomes, participatory processes, and adaptive leadership to ensure reforms are both compliant and genuinely impactful.

## REFERENCES

- Adeyemi, T., & Banda, D. (2024). Inclusive quality assurance frameworks as tools for social justice in African higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 46(1), 12–29.
- Adeyemi, T., & Banda, S. (2024). Gender responsiveness and stakeholder engagement in African higher education quality assurance. *African Journal of Educational Development*, 12(1), 45–62.
- Almeida, L., & da Silva, J. F. (2025). Participatory evaluation and continuous QA cycles: Accountability and commitment in higher education. *Frontiers in Education*, 10, Article 847.
- Asamoah, D., Ofori, D., & Afful, R. (2025). *Quality assurance practices and institutional performance in public universities in Ghana*. National Council for Tertiary Education.
- Attree, P., & Bista, K. (2025). Sustaining participatory quality assurance in higher education: Lessons from continuous improvement cycles. *Frontiers in Education*, 10, 115–132.
- Attree, P., Smith, L., & Johnson, R. (2025). Sustaining stakeholder participation in accreditation: Collaborative processes, transparency, and continuous-improvement. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 33(1), 67–85.
- Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043065>
- Berkat, A. (2025). Internal quality assurance in African universities: Leadership and participation. *African Higher Education Review*, 9(2), 75–91.
- Berkat, R. (2025). Internal quality assurance systems in the Global South: Leadership, participation, and sustainability. *Higher Education Review*, 58(3), 301–320.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Claretah, W., Abooki, N., & Muriisa, R. (2025). Negotiating QA mandates in Ugandan universities: Symbolic compliance and institutional agency. *African Journal of Higher Education Studies*, 12(2), 145–163.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2024). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- DAAD (2023). HAQAA3: Strengthening higher education quality assurance in Africa. German Academic Exchange Service.
- Daudi, H., Nakitto, V., & Kiguli, S. (2023). The implementation gap: Quality assurance reforms in East African universities. *East African Journal of Higher Education*, 7(2), 45–63.
- de Boer, H., & Huisman, J. (1999). The paradox of success and failure in European higher education policy. *European Journal of Education*, 34(2), 115–131.
- Dill, D. D., & Beerkens, M. (Eds.). (2010). *Public policy for academic quality: Analyses of innovative policy instruments*. Springer.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>
- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) (2023). *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG 2023). ENQA.
- Gibbs, P., Hordósy, R., & Varga, J. (2024). Protecting innovation from bureaucracy: Adapting quality assurance tools in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(4), 523–540.
- HAQAA Initiative. (2020). *Users' guide for the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA)*. <https://doi.org/10.60763/africanxiv/18>
- HAQAA Initiative. (2023). *African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) in higher education: Interpretation and users' guide*. HAQAA3.
- HAQAA Initiative. (2025). *African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) in higher education: Interpretation and users' guide* (F. K. Lenga, Ed.). HAQAA3.
- Harvey, L., & Newton, J. (2007). Transforming quality evaluation: Moving on. *Quality in Higher Education*, 13(2), 153–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538320701638642>
- Hazelkorn, E. (2015). *Rankings and the reshaping of higher education: The battle for world-class excellence* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Imbulgoda, A. (2020). Symbolic compliance in higher education quality assurance: Moral capacity and local negotiation. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 74(3), 248–269.
- Imbulgoda, A. (2022). Moral agency and institutional change: Reinterpreting QA mandates in South Asian universities. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 20(1), 102–118.
- Kanyike, C., Onyango, A., & Muwanga, M. (2024). Participatory governance and sustained engagement in East African universities. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, 16(1), 78–95.
- Kanyike, D., Onyango, M., & Patel, R. (2024). Leadership, participation, and adaptive quality assurance in East African universities. *African Journal of Higher Education Policy*, 6(1), 33–50.
- Kuagbedzi, J. (2025). Co-creation and local adaptation of quality assurance in African universities. *Higher Education Studies*, 15(1), 1–19.
- Lucas, L. (2014). Academic reactions to quality assurance: Critique, resistance, and strategic compliance. *Quality in Higher Education*, 20(3), 234–249.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2024). *Designing qualitative research* (7th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Materu, P. (2007). *Higher education quality assurance in Sub-Saharan Africa*. World Bank.
- Matsebatlela, E. M. (2015). *The effect of the Higher Education Quality Committee's institutional audits on public higher education institutions* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Pretoria.
- Meho, L. (2025). Institutional isomorphism in African higher education: Compliance and adaptation. *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*, 17(1), 44–62.
- Mohamedbhai, G. (2014). Challenges of quality assurance in African higher education. *International Journal of African Higher Education*, 1(1), 1–21.
- Morley, L. (2003). *Quality and power in higher education*. Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Morrish, L. (2019). Pressure vessels: The epidemic of poor mental health among higher education staff. *Higher Education Policy Institute*.
- Muriisa, R., Claretah, W., & Abooki, N. (2025). Navigating regulatory

- and contextual pressures: QA strategies in Ugandan universities. *East African Higher Education Review*, 13(1), 95–112.
- Mutebi, A., & Ferej, A. (2023). Compliance and fragmentation: QA reforms in East African universities. *African Journal of Educational Policy and Practice*, 9(2), 45–60.
- Neema-Abooki, P. (2024). *Quality assurance in African higher education: Trends, issues, and reforms*. Springer Nature.
- Nguyen, T. (2023). Bureaucratisation and faculty experiences in higher education quality assurance. *Journal of Higher Education Policy*, 36(4), 401–419.
- Nguyen, T., & Silva, M. (2023). Bureaucratisation and QA: Emotional strain among academics in higher education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 51(5), 780–798.
- Nowell, L., Norris, J., White, D., & Moules, N. (2024). *Quality teaching and leadership in higher education: Building cultures of continuous improvement*. Routledge.
- Nyathi, P., & Chirwa, M. (2023). Stakeholder participation and sustainability in African QA reforms. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 42(3), 459–477.
- Onyango, A., Kanyike, C., & Muwanga, M. (2023). Stakeholder engagement in higher education QA in East Africa. *International Journal of Quality Assurance in Education*, 12(2), 122–138.
- Onyango, M., Kanyike, D., & Adeyemi, T. (2023). Participatory governance and quality assurance in East African universities. *African Journal of Higher Education Research*, 8(2), 55–77.
- Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (PAQAA). (2024). *Regional consultation synthesis report for HAQAA3*. African Union Commission & OBREAL Global.
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2023). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, 50(3), 265–276.
- Patel, R., & Sibanda, M. (2023). Metric-driven quality assurance and mission drift in African universities. *Quality in Higher Education*, 29(1), 10–30.
- Patel, R., & Sibanda, S. (2023). Metrics and compliance: Quality assurance pressures in African universities. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 97, 102648.
- Shah, M., & Nair, C. (2013). External quality audit: Has it improved quality assurance in universities? *Quality in Higher Education*, 19(3), 299–311.
- Shah, M., & Nair, C. (2013). *Globalization, accountability, and quality assurance in higher education*. Routledge.
- Silva, M., Nguyen, T., & Others. (2023). Administrative overload and emotional labour in QA processes. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 42(6), 1520–1535.
- Shanziwe, A. M., Daka, H., Mulenga-Hagane, L., Bwembya, I., Banda, B., & Chazanga, F. (2025). *Challenges in the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms at the University of Zambia*. University of Zambia Press.
- Trowler, P. (1998). Academics responding to managerialism: New higher education frameworks. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 52(1), 28–46.
- UNESCO (2023). *Trends in higher education quality assurance in Africa*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- van der Wende, M. A., & Krooi, M. (2024). *The future of quality assurance in European higher education: Balancing innovation, trust, and accountability*. European University Association.
- Vogel, I. (2012). *Review of the use of 'Theory of Change' in international development: Review report*. Department for International Development (UK). <https://www.gov.uk/research-for-development-outputs/review-of-the-use-of-theory-of-change-in-international-development-review-report>
- Weenink, D. (2024). Symbolic compliance and values-based resistance in global higher education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 22(4), 501–518.
- Yin, R. K. (2023). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

---

**Citation:** Lamaro, G., Ndyomugenyi, E. K., and Openjuru, G. L. (2025). Performing quality or chasing rankings? Rethinking compliance-driven quality assurance in universities through the TESCEA transformative approach. *African Educational Research Journal*, 13(4), 472-485.

---