

Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms for Teaching and Learning, Research, and Community Engagement in Higher Education: A Critical Examination

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms that higher education institutions use to govern teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. Drawing on a documentary analysis of peer-reviewed scholarly literature, it identifies and evaluates key IQA instruments: student evaluation of teaching, peer observation of teaching, programme and departmental reviews, performance appraisals, internal quality assurance cells, research ethics committees, research output assessments, and community partnership frameworks. The analysis reveals a persistent tension between the developmental and accountability-oriented functions of IQA. Teaching-focused instruments are frequently co-opted for administrative surveillance rather than pedagogical improvement; research quality assurance remains heavily output-driven, with limited attention to process integrity; and community engagement, though increasingly recognised as a core mission, lacks robust internal metrics for assessing impact and reciprocity. The paper argues for an integrated, culture-based approach to IQA that aligns quality mechanisms with institutional mission, fosters professional trust, and positions internal quality assurance as a catalyst for transformation rather than mere compliance. Recommendations include strengthening formative feedback loops, decoupling evaluative metrics from punitive administrative decisions, and developing context-sensitive indicators for community engagement.

Keywords: Internal Quality Assurance, Higher Education, Teaching and Learning, Research Governance, Community Engagement, Quality Culture.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions operate in an increasingly complex environment characterised by massification, funding constraints, global competition, and heightened expectations for accountability (Cardoso, Rosa, & Stensaker, 2016; Prakash, 2018). While external quality assurance mechanisms such as accreditation, audits, and rankings attract considerable attention, the internal dimension of quality assurance remains the locus where quality is ultimately enacted, experienced, and improved (Bendermacher, oude Egbrink, Wolfhagen, & Dolmans, 2017). Internal quality assurance (IQA) refers to the policies, structures, and processes that institutions voluntarily establish to monitor, evaluate, and enhance their core functions (Kamusoko, 2020, p. 99). This paper examines IQA mechanisms as they apply to three interrelated university missions: teaching and learning, research, and community engagement.

The conceptualisation of quality in higher education is contested terrain (Calamet, 2022, p. 2). Scholarship distinguishes quality as excellence, fitness for purpose, value for money, transformation, and threshold, each carrying

divergent implications for how IQA mechanisms are designed and experienced (Prakash, 2018). These distinctions are not merely academic; they shape whether academics perceive IQA as a supportive developmental tool or as a mechanism of managerial control (Tavares, Sin, Videira, & Amaral, 2017). When quality is understood as transformation, the focus shifts to student development and institutional improvement; when it is operationalised as measurable performance, the emphasis shifts to compliance (Cardoso et al., 2016).

Teaching and learning host the most mature IQA mechanisms: student evaluation of teaching (SET), peer observation, programme reviews, and internal quality assurance cells (Cardoso, Rosa, Videira, & Amaral, 2017). Yet critical scholarship questions whether these instruments genuinely enhance teaching or merely produce performative compliance, particularly where formative tools are deployed for summative decisions (Stroebe, 2016; Tavares et al., 2017). Research quality assurance has historically relied on output-oriented metrics whose perverse incentives are well documented (de Rijcke, Wouters, Rushforth, Franssen, & Hammarfelt, 2016). Community engagement, despite its

policy prominence, lacks standardised metrics and robust internal evaluation traditions (Wanjiru & Liu, 2021). Against this backdrop, the paper pursues three purposes: to identify the principal IQA mechanisms across the three missions; to critically evaluate their effectiveness and limitations; and to propose recommendations for strengthening IQA as a genuinely transformative institutional practice.

In African higher education, these dynamics acquire additional salience (Osei-Tutu et al., 2025). Quality assurance infrastructures have expanded rapidly, often through externally driven accountability regimes, while institutional capacity, funding, and staffing lag behind (Mgaiwa, 2021). Where internal systems are imposed as ‘one size fits all’ templates without adaptation to local academic cultures, academics perceive them as performative rituals, and the developmental purposes of IQA are the first casualties (Cardoso, Rosa, Videira, & Amaral, 2017; Rahnuma, 2020). The three missions also carry distinct weight in African contexts: community engagement is not an optional third stream but a core institutional mandate tied to developmental legitimacy, which makes the weakness of its quality assurance especially consequential (Wanjiru & Liu, 2021).

The remainder of the paper is organised into literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, conclusion, and recommendations sections.

➤ *Conceptualising Internal Quality Assurance in Higher Education*

The literature distinguishes external quality assurance, imposed by outside bodies, from internal quality assurance, the self-regulatory processes institutions design and control (Cardoso, Rosa, Videira, & Amaral, 2017). IQA is best understood not as a single activity but as an ecosystem of interrelated practices spanning strategic planning, academic processes, and outcomes assessment (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Prakash, 2018). A recurring theme is the tension between quality assurance as improvement and quality assurance as accountability (Cardoso, Rosa, & Stensaker, 2016). Improvement-oriented IQA emphasises formative feedback, professional development, and iterative enhancement; accountability-oriented IQA emphasises standardisation, measurement, and reporting (Langfeldt, 2001, p. 917). When accountability dominates, academics experience “quality fatigue”—a cynical disengagement from quality processes perceived as bureaucratic rituals (Rahnuma, 2020; Tavares et al., 2017).

A further distinction matters for implementation: the reach of new public management (NPM) logics into universities (Jarvis, 2014). Where NPM-style steering dominates, IQA systems are designed primarily as instruments of performance control, and academics report that quality procedures intensify administrative workload without improving the student experience (Agasisti, Barbato, Dal Molin, & Turri, 2019; Cardoso, Rosa, & Stensaker, 2016). Where collegial traditions remain stronger, IQA is more likely to be experienced as peer-regulated improvement (Bendermacher et al., 2017).

In African universities, internal systems frequently operate under conditions of resource scarcity and externally prescribed standards, and their effectiveness hinges on leadership capacity and staff ownership rather than procedural completeness (Mgaiwa, 2021). Studies of emerging quality cultures show that they evolve through negotiation between management and academics, and that trust—not audit intensity—is the scarce resource that determines whether IQA matures into improvement or stagnates as compliance (Rahnuma, 2020).

➤ *Internal Quality Assurance for Teaching and Learning*

Student evaluation of teaching is the most ubiquitous IQA instrument (Hysa & Rehman, 2019, p. 557). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that student ratings correlate weakly, if at all, with actual learning, and can reward teaching styles that produce favourable impressions rather than deep learning (Uttl, White, & Gonzalez, 2017; Stroebe, 2016; Deslauriers, McCarty, Miller, Callaghan, & Kestin, 2019). SETs are also vulnerable to gender bias: identical teaching receives lower ratings when instructors are presented as women (MacNell, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2015; Mengel, Sauermann, & Zölitz, 2019; Mitchell & Martin, 2018). When quantitative SET scores feed promotion, tenure, or contract decisions, they become high-stakes metrics that distort pedagogical priorities (Tavares et al., 2017).

Peer observation of teaching is widely mandated but varies in quality (Yerznkyan et al., 2025). Where it is embedded in teaching centres, supported by observer training and protected time for reflective dialogue, it functions as collaborative professional learning; where imposed as compliance without developmental follow-up, it is perceived as intrusion and performs accountability rather than improvement (Wingrove, Jones, Haines, Cowley, Dunbar, & Young, 2018). Programme and departmental reviews can surface systemic issues, yet they are frequently criticised for generating voluminous documentation with limited connection to actionable improvement (Lindsay, 1985). Performance appraisals, though framed developmentally, are often experienced as surveillance that individualises structural constraints on teaching quality (Cardoso et al., 2016; Agasisti, Barbato, Dal Molin, & Turri, 2019). Internal quality assurance cells (IQACs) have become institutional fixtures, but their effectiveness depends on staffing, mandate clarity, and credibility with academic departments: cells led by senior academics with budgetary autonomy foster quality cultures, while purely administrative cells function as compliance offices (Cardoso, Rosa, Videira, & Amaral, 2017; Mgaiwa, 2021).

➤ *Internal Quality Assurance for Research*

Research quality assurance combines ethics governance with output evaluation (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2021, p. 4). Research ethics committees review proposals for methodological rigour, informed consent, risk management, and data protection; however, their templates are often derived from biomedical research and adapt poorly to humanities and community-engaged scholarship (de Rijcke et al., 2016). Beyond ethics, internal audits, bibliometric monitoring, and pre-submission reviews have improved

procedural compliance at documented cost: indicator-driven evaluation incentivises strategic journal selection, salami slicing of publications, and the marginalisation of outputs that resist counting (de Rijcke et al., 2016). Quality frameworks typically silo research from teaching despite their interconnection in academic practice (Tavares et al., 2017).

➤ *Internal Quality Assurance for Community Engagement*

Community engagement has been elevated to a core university mission, particularly in African higher education, yet its internal quality assurance remains underdeveloped (Mgaiwa, 2021; Wanjiru & Liu, 2021). Unlike teaching and research, engagement lacks standardised metrics; evaluation typically relies on narrative reporting rather than systematic impact assessment (Nkonki-Mandleni, 2021, p. 6). Indicator frameworks for the third mission privilege countable outputs such as partnerships, contracts, and events, while struggling to capture reciprocity, co-production, and sustained community benefit (Secundo, Perez, Martinaitis, & Leitner, 2017). Community-based evaluation lenses argue that assessment must address three domains together—strategic purpose, relational process, and community impact—and must involve community partners themselves in defining indicators (Wanjiru & Liu, 2021). Without such frameworks, universities risk reporting activity rather than assessing quality, reciprocity, or impact (Moriau et al., 2021, p. 787).

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative documentary research design, analysing existing documents—peer-reviewed scholarly articles and, where relevant, institutional policy frameworks—to generate knowledge about IQA as a social phenomenon. Documentary and narrative review designs are appropriate where the objective is to analyse conceptual developments and evaluative logics in a mature field rather than to synthesise experimental results (Snyder, 2019). Document selection was purposive: literature was sourced from educational research databases using terms such as “internal quality assurance,” “student evaluation of teaching,” “peer observation,” “research evaluation,” and “community engagement assessment,” prioritising peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2026 to ensure contemporary relevance.

Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis, coding documents inductively around IQA instruments, their stated purposes, perceived effectiveness, and the improvement–accountability tension (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Coding was organised by the three domains of teaching and learning, research, and community engagement, and critical perspectives of academics reported in the literature were incorporated to balance institutional policy claims with frontline experience. The study acknowledges limitations: documentary research relies on textual representations that may sanitise practice, purposive sampling is not exhaustive, and the analysis is interpretive. Nonetheless, the approach provides a robust foundation for mapping the architecture of IQA mechanisms and identifying patterns across institutional and national contexts.

The study’s limitations should be stated plainly. Documentary research captures representations of practice rather than practice itself (Bueger, 2013, p. 402), and peer-reviewed literature frequently highlights critical perspectives on these processes, which may contrast with routine institutional experience (Cartwright, 2007). The purposive sample, while appropriate for depth, cannot support claims of exhaustiveness. Finally, the analysis is interpretive and shaped by the researcher’s theoretical commitment to viewing quality assurance as socially constructed and politically contested. These limitations qualify, but do not negate, the paper’s central findings, which recur across independent literatures and national contexts.

III. FINDINGS

➤ *Teaching and Learning*

The analysis reveals a dense but unevenly legitimate ecosystem of IQA instruments. SETs are near-universal, typically Likert-scale ratings of instructor organisation, clarity, and accessibility. A consistent pattern emerges: academics value qualitative student comments for formative improvement but distrust aggregated quantitative scores when used for promotion or contract renewal (Matthews, 2025, p. 11). Efforts are sometimes made to separate formative from summative streams, though boundaries often remain blurred in practice. Peer observation ranges from genuinely collaborative inquiry—supported by observer training, reciprocal partnerships, and protected dialogue time—to perfunctory box-ticking; effectiveness depends on post-observation dialogue quality and the absence of summative judgment (Archvadze et al., 2025; Rodríguez & Seedhouse, 2020, p. 1078). Programme reviews and appraisals frequently produce documentation without actionable follow-through, and appraisal systems that attribute outcomes solely to instructor effort, ignoring class size and resources, generate defensive behaviour rather than growth (McGivern & Ferlie, 2007). IQACs exist in all reviewed contexts and serve a strategic role as improvement partners by supporting curriculum development and faculty empowerment (Mohapatra, 2026).

A recurring finding across the teaching domain is the weight of quantification. Aggregated SET scores travel easily into league tables, probation reviews, and promotion files precisely because they are administratively convenient; the qualitative comments that academics find genuinely useful, by contrast, rarely enter decision-making channels in systematic form (Lacy et al., 2026; Winch, 2021, p. 77). The documented gender bias in SETs adds an equity dimension to this quantification: where ratings influence employment decisions, biased instruments transmit bias into career outcomes (Chávez & Mitchell, 2019, p. 271; Mitchell & Martin, 2018, p. 652).

➤ *Research*

Research governance is dominated by ethics review and output evaluation. Ethics committees are effective in procedural compliance but are frequently slow and poorly adapted to humanities, creative practice, and participatory research (Macnamara, 2024, p. 144). Internal audits and

bibliometric monitoring have improved compliance and output quantity, but replicate external metric-driven logics—emphasising publication counts, citation indices, and grant values over intellectual significance or social utility (Daraio et al., 2025). Research development offices offer a more developmental orientation but reach limited populations. Research and teaching quality assurance remain institutionally siloed with separate committees and metrics despite policy rhetoric about their nexus (Maassen & Stensaker, 2010, p. 765).

The developmental counterweight to audit-oriented research IQA is visible but fragile. Research development offices, writing support, and mentorship structures serve early-career researchers effectively where they exist, yet coverage is uneven and rarely connected to quality evaluation cycles (de Rijcke et al., 2016). The result is a two-tier internal regime: formative support for those who seek it, summative auditing for everyone, with limited institutional memory linking the two.

➤ *Community Engagement*

Community engagement is the least developed IQA domain. Most institutions report engagement through annual narrative accounts of activities, partnerships, and estimated beneficiaries—documentation without rigorous assessment of quality, reciprocity, or sustained impact (Wanjiru & Liu, 2021). Where partnership agreements exist, they are often drafted administratively with limited community input, producing asymmetric arrangements (Nwaneri & Szent-Iványi, 2025) (Nwaneri & Szent-Iványi, 2025, p. 791). Service-learning courses show promise through partner feedback forms and reflective journals, but these instruments are rarely aggregated institutionally. Impact assessment remains the largest gap: engagement lacks validated indicators comparable to citations or student performance data, and experiments with partner satisfaction surveys and social return analyses remain resource-intensive exceptions (Wanjiru & Liu, 2021).

The findings also indicate that the absence of metrics is not merely a technical gap but an epistemic one. The qualities that define excellent engagement—reciprocity, co-production, sustained trust, and community-defined benefit—are relational and longitudinal, whereas institutional reporting cycles are annual and administrative (Wanjiru & Liu, 2021). Indicator frameworks imported from the third-mission literature count partnerships and outputs but systematically undervalue process quality, leading institutions to optimise what is counted rather than what communities value (Molas-Gallart & Castro-Martínez, 2007, p. 322).

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a paradox: institutions have never had more elaborate mechanisms for monitoring quality, yet the link between these mechanisms and genuine improvement remains uncertain (Law, 2010). This paradox is illuminated by the literature on indicator-driven evaluation, which shows that verification practices, initially designed to ensure

trustworthiness, can become ends in themselves—generating ritual compliance without substantive change (de Rijcke et al., 2016). In teaching, the misalignment between formative potential and summative deployment is critical: SETs and observations used simultaneously for improvement and control achieve neither effectively (Stroebe, 2016; Tavares et al., 2017). Institutions that mandate observation without investing in training, time, and reciprocity are performing quality theatre—visible processes signalling accountability while doing little to enhance practice (Wingrove et al., 2018).

In research, output metrics have improved procedural compliance at the cost of intellectual diversity and risk-taking; community-engaged scholarship is particularly marginalised by metric systems despite its alignment with developmental university missions (Wendling, 2023, p. 10). Community engagement exposes the deepest deficit: universities are demonstrably better at announcing partnerships than assessing their quality, because engagement lacks the disciplinary infrastructure that supports teaching and research evaluation, and its epistemic diversity resists standardised measurement (Barton et al., 2024). Evaluation here requires qualitative, narrative, and participatory methods capturing reciprocity, relationship quality, and sustained benefit (Henschke & Roberts, 2017, p. 4).

These domain-specific failures compound at system level (Williams, 2026). Because IQA data feed accreditation, funding, and reputation, academics face convergent incentives to manage impressions: teaching to the evaluation, selecting journals for metrics rather than fit, and drafting engagement reports that emphasise visibility over veracity (de Rijcke et al., 2016; Stroebe, 2016). The literature on quality culture suggests this is not remedied by more auditing; intensifying surveillance under conditions of low trust deepens strategic compliance rather than reducing it (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Rahnuma, 2020).

A cross-cutting theme is fragmentation. Teaching, research, and engagement are artificially separated in IQA architectures despite their interconnection in academic practice; an academic supervising a service-learning project teaches, researches, and engages simultaneously, yet faces three incompatible evaluation regimes (Hare et al., 2019, p. 154). Finally, the literature converges on quality culture as the decisive variable: IQA mechanisms are necessary but insufficient—what matters is the climate of trust, departmental autonomy, and shared ownership in which they operate (Yuzkiv et al., 2022, p. 100). Where academics trust that evaluation data will be used constructively, they engage authentically; where they expect surveillance, they comply strategically.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined IQA mechanisms across teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. The landscape is sophisticated but uneven: teaching instruments are compromised by purpose confusion and bureaucratic overload (Tavares et al., 2016); research assurance reinforces metric-driven cultures that marginalise

intellectual risk and social relevance; and community engagement IQA remains embryonic, reliant on narrative reporting rather than systematic impact assessment. The central conclusion is that IQA is not merely a technical or administrative challenge but an organisational and cultural one: effectiveness depends less on structural complexity than on trust, clarity of purpose, and professional autonomy. Furthermore, the three missions must be integrated in IQA design, because fragmentation misrepresents the integrated nature of academic work and obstructs holistic quality cultures. Repositioning quality assurance from a compliance function to a cultural commitment—embedded in daily academic life rather than imposed upon it—is the condition for IQA to serve transformation rather than ritual.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed for institutions seeking to strengthen internal quality assurance:

- Decouple formative and summative evaluation. Institutions should establish clear boundaries between developmental feedback instruments (qualitative student comments, peer observation) and high-stakes decisions (promotion, contract renewal). Separate reporting streams and anonymised formative processes can restore the developmental integrity of IQA tools (Leeuwenkamp et al., 2017, p. 96).
- Invest in peer observation as professional learning. Observation should be resourced as collaborative inquiry—observer training, protected reflective dialogue, reciprocal partnerships, and explicit exclusion of summative judgment—preferably hosted by teaching centres or academies (Wingrove et al., 2018) (Ribosa et al., 2023, p. 2).
- Diversify research quality indicators beyond bibliometrics. Internal audits should incorporate qualitative assessment of intellectual significance, methodological innovation, ethical integrity, and social impact, formally recognising non-traditional outputs—community-engaged research, policy briefs, creative works—in promotion and funding criteria (de Rijcke et al., 2016) (Gagliardi et al., 2023, p. 2).
- Develop participatory evaluation frameworks for community engagement. IQA should move beyond narrative reporting to incorporate community partner feedback, longitudinal outcome tracking, and participatory methods, with community stakeholders involved in designing evaluation criteria organised around purpose, process, and community impact (Wanjiru & Liu, 2021) (Fawcett et al., 2003).
- Integrate IQA across the three missions. Committee structures, reporting lines, and criteria should be reviewed to eliminate artificial separations between teaching, research, and engagement, evaluating academic contributions holistically (Prakash, 2018; Bendermacher et al., 2017) (Colbeck, 2002).
- Strengthen IQAC capacity and academic credibility. IQACs should be led by senior academics with teaching and research credibility, dedicated budgets, improvement-

focused mandates, and formal channels feeding evaluation findings into strategic planning (Cardoso, Rosa, Videira, & Amaral, 2017; Mgaiwa, 2021) (Mohapatra, 2026).

- Foster a quality culture grounded in trust and dialogue. Leaders should model vulnerability by submitting their own teaching to peer review, create safe spaces for honest discussion of quality challenges, and ensure assurance data support rather than punish academics—because quality culture cannot be mandated; it must be cultivated (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Rahnuma, 2020) (Rahnuma, 2020, p. 60).

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