

From Compliance to Transformation: Rethinking Quality Assurance in African Universities

By Alimah Komuhangi, Acksam Nsubuga, Michael Kuteesa, and Joyce Nabalisa

Across Africa and the world, higher education is undergoing a profound transformation driven by rapid technological advancement, shifting labour market demands, and the increasing globalisation of knowledge production.¹ Digital technologies are reshaping not only how knowledge is produced and disseminated, but also how it is accessed, assessed, and applied in society. The traditional model of higher education, characterised by physical lecture halls, fixed academic calendars, and geographically bounded campuses, is gradually giving way to more flexible, technology-enabled learning environments. Universities are no longer confined to brick-and-mortar institutions; learning increasingly occurs across virtual classrooms, cloud-based learning management systems, mobile learning applications, and global academic networks that connect learners, researchers, and institutions across continents. These changes have expanded access to education for many previously excluded populations while simultaneously introducing new complexities related to academic quality, digital inclusion, and institutional accountability. In this rapidly evolving landscape, quality assurance systems must adapt if universities are to remain relevant, credible, and responsive to the needs of twenty-first century learners.

For decades, quality assurance (QA) in higher education has largely focused on ensuring institutional compliance with minimum standards established by national regulatory authorities and accreditation bodies. These traditional systems typically assess institutions based on structural and procedural inputs such as physical infrastructure, faculty qualifications, staffing ratios, governance arrangements, and the availability of formal documentation related to academic programmes and institutional policies. Such mechanisms have played an important role in safeguarding academic integrity, protecting students from substandard education, and ensuring that institutions meet baseline requirements for the provision of higher education. However, these approaches were largely designed for a higher education system in which teaching and learning occurred primarily within physical classrooms and where institutional change occurred relatively slowly.²

The rapid digitalisation of higher education is now challenging many of these traditional models of quality assurance. The emergence of online learning platforms, hybrid and blended learning environments, artificial intelligence-assisted teaching tools, and micro-credential programmes has fundamentally altered how educational experiences are designed and delivered. Universities increasingly operate within complex digital ecosystems that integrate learning management systems, virtual laboratories, open educational resources, and data-driven learning analytics that track student engagement and progression in real time. In such contexts, quality can no longer be assessed solely through periodic audits of infrastructure or documentation. Instead, effective quality assurance must become more dynamic, continuous, and evidence-driven, incorporating real-time data on learning outcomes, student participation, and institutional performance. As higher education institutions across Africa seek to expand access while maintaining academic standards, the challenge for policymakers, regulators, and university leaders is therefore to reimagine quality assurance frameworks that can respond effectively to the opportunities and risks presented by digital transformation.

The Rise of Digital Tertiary Institutions

The concept of digital tertiary institutions is becoming increasingly visible across the globe. Students today can enrol in courses offered thousands of kilometres away, access lectures asynchronously and obtain micro-credentials that

¹ Badat, S 'The challenges of transformation in higher education and training institutions in South Africa' (2010) Development Bank of Southern Africa.

²D Teferra 'African higher education: Challenges for the 21st century' (2016) *International Higher Education*.

can be stacked into larger qualifications. Online platforms and partnerships between universities and global digital providers are expanding access to education beyond traditional geographical boundaries.

These developments align with broader trends identified by African higher education scholars who emphasise the need for institutions on the continent to adopt innovative learning models. According to Teferra, African universities must rethink their academic structures to remain competitive in a rapidly globalising knowledge economy.³ Similarly, Materu argues that quality assurance frameworks in Africa must move beyond rigid regulatory compliance and instead support institutional improvement and innovation.⁴

Digitalisation therefore presents both opportunities and risks. On one hand, it allows universities to expand access to learners who may not otherwise participate in higher education. On the other hand, it introduces new concerns regarding academic integrity, data governance and the quality of digital learning experiences.

Why Traditional Quality Assurance Is No Longer Enough

Historically, quality assurance reviews in higher education were conducted periodically, often every five or ten years, through external audits and institutional evaluations. While these approaches served an important regulatory function, they were designed for relatively stable educational environments. In contemporary digital learning ecosystems, where teaching, assessment, and student engagement are mediated through online platforms and data systems, such long review cycles are increasingly insufficient.⁵ Learning management systems, digital assessment tools, and academic analytics platforms now generate continuous streams of information on student participation, progression, and learning behavior. When effectively analysed, this information enables institutions to detect emerging patterns, identify students at risk, and introduce timely academic or pedagogical support mechanisms before challenges become entrenched.

Scholars such as Goolam Mohamedbhai emphasize that African higher education systems must therefore move toward more responsive and adaptive quality assurance approaches that reflect technological transformation and shifting workforce expectations. Rather than limiting evaluation to traditional indicators such as infrastructure, staffing levels, or programme documentation, contemporary quality assurance must also examine the relevance and effectiveness of learning outcomes, the competencies graduates develop, and the broader contributions universities make to society. This perspective recognizes that universities operate within dynamic economic and social contexts where knowledge, skills, and professional roles are continually evolving.⁶

This evolution in quality assurance mirrors a broader rethinking of the purpose of higher education itself. Employers across multiple sectors increasingly seek graduates who possess not only disciplinary knowledge but also digital fluency, problem-solving ability, collaborative skills, and the capacity to adapt to complex and rapidly changing environments. As a result, universities are called upon to design learning environments that integrate theory with practice, encourage interdisciplinary thinking, and cultivate innovation and ethical responsibility. In doing so, higher education institutions contribute not only to workforce readiness but also to the development of thoughtful, responsible leaders capable of navigating the uncertainties of the twenty-first century.

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Quality Assurance

³D Teferra (n 1 above).

⁴ P Materu *Higher Education Quality Assurance in Sub-Saharan Africa* (World Bank: Washington DC 2007).

⁵ Zeleza, P. T. (2018). *The transformation of global higher education, 1945–2015*. Palgrave Macmillan.

⁶ G Mohamedbhai 'Quality assurance in African higher education: The challenges of the 21st century' (2014) *International Journal of African Higher Education*.

Artificial intelligence is also beginning to play a role in higher education quality processes. AI systems can assist with plagiarism detection, automated feedback, predictive learning analytics and assessment evaluation. These technologies offer the potential to improve efficiency and enhance student support.

However, the use of AI in education also raises important ethical questions. Issues related to algorithmic bias, transparency, data privacy and accountability must be carefully addressed. African scholars such as Mutula and Wamukoya caution that digital governance frameworks must accompany technological adoption to ensure that innovations serve educational equity rather than reinforce existing inequalities.⁷

Quality assurance systems must therefore evolve to include ethical oversight of digital technologies, ensuring that AI tools are used responsibly and transparently. In digital learning environments, the student experience depends not only on curriculum content but also on the design of digital platforms. Accessibility, usability and digital inclusion become central elements of educational quality.

African higher education institutions face unique challenges in this regard, particularly in relation to infrastructure gaps and unequal internet access. Yet the continent also has the potential to leapfrog traditional models of higher education by adopting innovative and flexible learning systems. As Cloete, Maassen and Bailey observe, African universities have an opportunity to develop new institutional models that respond more directly to the continent's development needs.⁸ Student-centred digital quality assurance therefore requires institutions to design learning environments that are accessible, inclusive and responsive to diverse learner needs.

From Compliance to Transformation

Perhaps the most significant insight emerging from contemporary discourse on quality assurance is the gradual shift from compliance-driven approaches toward transformative quality cultures within higher education institutions. Traditional compliance-oriented systems primarily focus on determining whether institutions meet minimum regulatory standards and accreditation requirements. While such mechanisms remain important for safeguarding academic integrity, they are increasingly insufficient in addressing the complex and rapidly evolving demands placed on modern universities. In contrast, a transformative approach to quality assurance emphasizes continuous improvement, institutional learning, innovation, and the capacity of universities to generate meaningful societal impact.

This paradigm shift fundamentally redefines the role of internal quality assurance units within universities. Rather than functioning solely as administrative structures responsible for coordinating accreditation processes and compliance documentation, quality assurance units must increasingly operate as strategic partners in institutional development. In this expanded role, they are expected to support evidence-based decision-making through the analysis of institutional data, promote innovation in teaching and learning, and guide universities in adapting to technological advancements that are reshaping higher education globally. By fostering a culture of reflection, accountability, and continuous improvement, internal quality assurance mechanisms can contribute significantly to strengthening institutional resilience and academic excellence.

Within the African context, this transformation carries particular significance. Although many higher education institutions across the continent continue to face challenges such as infrastructure limitations, resource constraints, and evolving regulatory environments, Africa also possesses a unique opportunity to reimagine quality assurance

⁷ S Mutula & J Wamukoya 'Digital governance and information ethics in Africa' (2019) *Information Development*.

⁸ N Cloete, P Maassen & T Bailey *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education* (African Minds: Cape Town 2015).

systems in ways that are innovative and future oriented. Unlike regions constrained by deeply entrenched legacy systems, African universities have the potential to design agile, technology-enabled quality assurance frameworks that leverage digital tools, learning analytics, and emerging technologies to enhance institutional performance. With appropriate investments, supportive policy environments, and strong institutional leadership, such systems can expand access to higher education while simultaneously safeguarding academic standards and strengthening the contribution of universities to Africa's broader development agenda.

A Framework for Digital Quality Assurance

Moving forward, quality assurance in African higher education must be guided by a transformative framework (Fig.1) built on five key pillars: (1) Digital Governance and Ethical Oversight, (2) Data-Driven Quality Intelligence, (3) Learner-Centered Digital Design, (4) Industry-Integrated Curricula, and (5) Continuous Innovation and Risk Management. This Digital Quality Assurance Framework provides a strategic pathway for strengthening quality assurance in an era increasingly shaped by digital technologies and artificial intelligence. It calls for a shift from traditional compliance-driven models toward adaptive, technology-enabled systems that continuously enhance teaching, learning, and institutional performance. At its foundation, Digital Governance and Ethical Oversight ensures clear digital policies, responsible use of artificial intelligence, and strong data protection mechanisms. Data-Driven Quality Intelligence further strengthens institutional decision-making through the use of learning analytics and AI-supported monitoring tools that generate evidence for improving educational outcomes, while Learner-Centered Digital Design prioritizes inclusive digital pedagogy, accessible learning platforms, and meaningful student learning experiences.

Equally important, Industry-Integrated Curricula ensure that academic programmes remain responsive to evolving workforce needs through strategic partnerships, experiential learning opportunities, and engagement with industry and communities. Continuous Innovation and Risk Management encourages institutions to adopt agile quality assurance systems, adapt to emerging technologies, manage digital risks, and foster a culture of continuous improvement. Together, these pillars position African higher education institutions to leverage technology responsibly, uphold ethical standards, and build resilient systems that enhance the relevance and quality of education in a rapidly evolving global knowledge economy.

Continental initiatives such as the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance further emphasize the importance of governance, accountability, and harmonised quality frameworks to strengthen higher education across Africa.⁹ These continental efforts reflect a growing recognition that effective quality assurance must extend beyond regulatory compliance to support institutional effectiveness, academic integrity, and continuous improvement in teaching and learning. Strong governance and institutional management systems are particularly critical in ensuring that quality assurance mechanisms function effectively within African higher education institutions. As highlighted by Nabaho, Kiiza, and Andama, robust governance structures and effective institutional management systems are essential for strengthening quality assurance across the African higher education landscape.¹⁰

At the institutional level, quality assurance frameworks must remain adaptive and responsive to emerging technological, economic, and societal transformations shaping contemporary higher education. In an era increasingly defined by digital innovation, shifting labour markets, and evolving societal expectations, universities are required to

⁹ Nabaho L. An exploration of the African Union's perspective of quality assurance in higher education: latent voices in the African Quality Rating Mechanism. *Tuning Journal for Higher Education*. 2019;6(2):253–275. [https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe-6\(2\)-2019pp253-275](https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe-6(2)-2019pp253-275)

¹⁰ Nabaho, L., Kiiza, A. K., & Andama, F. (2020). Quality assurance of higher education governance and management in the African higher education landscape. *African Educational Research Journal*, 8(2), 302–310. <https://doi.org/10.30918/AERJ.82.20.059>.

strengthen quality assurance systems that support continuous improvement, institutional agility, and the responsible integration of new technologies into teaching and learning processes.¹¹ Such adaptive quality frameworks enable institutions to maintain academic standards while ensuring that educational programmes remain relevant within rapidly changing knowledge economies.¹²

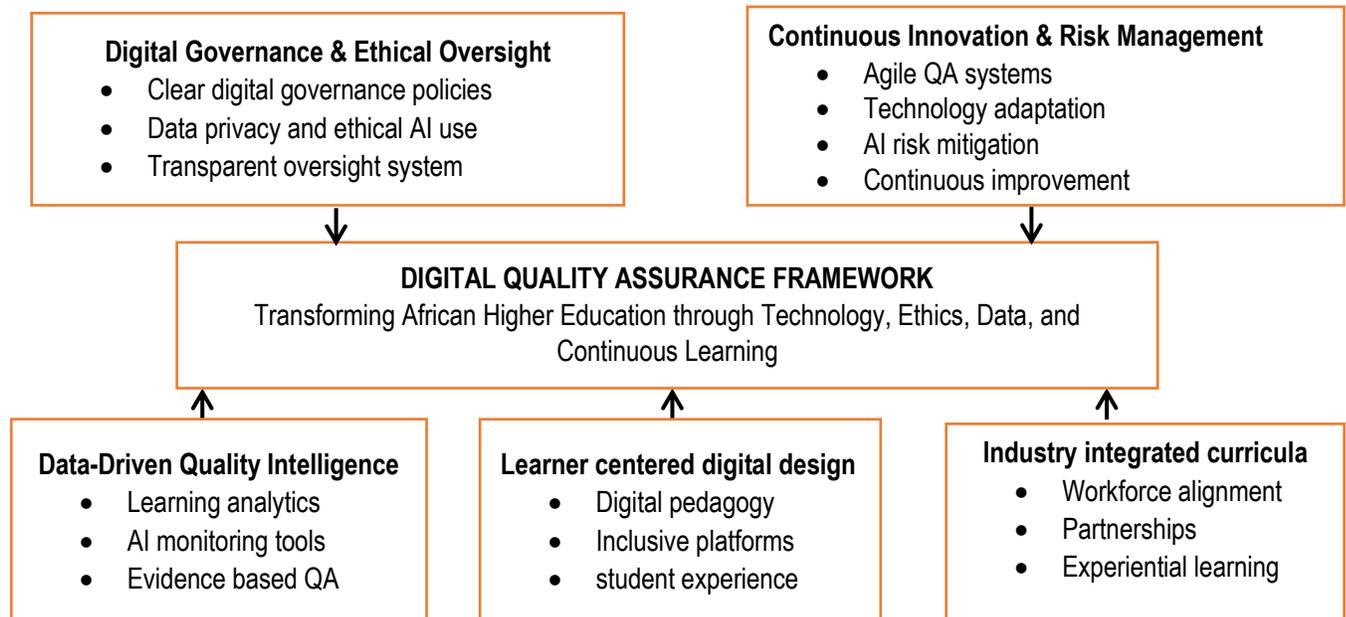


Fig. 1: Proposed Digital Quality Assurance Framework for Transformative African Higher Education

Conclusion

Quality assurance must evolve from a bureaucratic compliance exercise into a strategic instrument for institutional transformation, enabling African universities to expand equitable access, strengthen learning outcomes, and prepare graduates who can respond to the complex social, economic, and technological challenges shaping Africa's future. This transformation requires a deliberate commitment from institutions, regulators, and policymakers to build quality systems that are adaptive, transparent, and responsive to the realities of a rapidly digitalizing knowledge ecosystem. Rather than merely verifying compliance, quality assurance should guide innovation, inform institutional decision-making, and foster a culture of continuous improvement within universities.

From an Africentric perspective, as advanced by Ahaki Institute¹³, quality assurance must also affirm Africa as a producer of knowledge rather than a passive recipient of external models. This means grounding quality systems in African realities, values, and development priorities while integrating indigenous knowledge systems, community engagement, and locally relevant solutions into teaching, research, and learning processes. An Africentric approach recognizes that the ultimate measure of quality is not only academic rigor, but also the extent to which higher education contributes to social justice, human dignity, and sustainable development across African communities. By aligning technological innovation with ethical leadership and African-centered knowledge production, universities can cultivate

¹¹ Ansah, F. (2017). Balancing the focus of quality assurance frameworks in African universities. In M. Y. T. Teixeira & J. C. Shin (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of international higher education systems and institutions*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_108-1

¹² Mulenga, I. M. (2020). *Rethinking quality assurance in curriculum development*. University of Zambia.

¹³ Seggane Musisi (2022): *Afrocentricity: A Historical Perspective*. Afya na Haki Institute. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63010/j48nfur>

graduates who are not only globally competent but also deeply rooted in the responsibility to advance Africa's collective wellbeing.

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