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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND MANAGMENT

Quality Assurance Practices in Ethiopian Public Universities: Focussing on Inputs, Processes, and Outcomes.

By

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A PhD dissertation submitted to the School of Graduate Studies of Addis Ababa University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Policy and Strategic Management

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Declaration

This is to declare that this dissertation is submitted to College of of Education and Language Studies and Department of Educational Planning and Mangment for the degree of Doctor of Education (DEd) in policy and strategic management. I would like to confirm that I have completed this work independently and have properly acknowledged all other sources used in the dissertation.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ETA	Education and Training Authority
ETP	Education and Training Policy
EQA	External Quality Assurance
ESD	Education Sector Development Program
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HERQA	Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency
IPO	Input Processes Outcomes
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoSHE	Ministry of Science and Higher Education
MMR	Mixed Research
QA	Quality Assurance
TQM	Total Quality Management

Abstract

Quality assurance in Ethiopian public universities is essential for delivering high-quality education and improving graduate employability. However, several challenges impede effective implementation, including shortages of resources, inadequate policies, and outdated curricula. To develop targeted interventions that align with national and global development goals, it is important to understand the factors that influence quality assurance. This study aimed to conduct quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public universities, focusing on inputs, processes, and outcomes. This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a concurrent triangulation design. The participants included 360 teachers, 120 department heads, 30 college deans, 10 directors of internal quality enhancement, 10 academic vice presidents, and 40 student council members. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained from interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews across ten public universities. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically, which involved transcribing, iterative reading, coding, and categorizing to identify themes and sub-themes. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28, focusing on coding, data processing, and cleaning. The analysis emphasized variables related to inputs, processes, and outcomes. Statistical tools were employed, using SPSS to determine descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and percentage frequencies. Additionally, inferential statistics, including standardized t-tests at significance testing ($p < 0.05$), were used to identify key predictors of quality assurance. The findings revealed that input factors (e.g., infrastructure and qualified staff), process factors (e.g., curriculum review and teaching strategies), and outcome measures (e.g., graduate skills and employability) significantly influence quality assurance. Key deficiencies identified included inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, weak internal policies, outdated curricula, ineffective monitoring and evaluation strategies, poor implementation of quality assurance mechanisms, and insufficient commitment and collaboration from stakeholders. The investigation confirmed that deficiencies in input, processes, and outcomes negatively influence quality assurance practices. Additionally, ineffective implementation of quality assurance mechanisms and weak stakeholder commitment further undermine the effectiveness of these practices. In conclusion, enhancing quality assurance in Ethiopian public universities necessitates comprehensive strategies that address resource constraints, policy reforms, curriculum modernization, effective practice of quality assurance mechanisms, stakeholder collaboration, and improved graduate skills and employability. Public universities must strengthen their internal quality assurance systems and cultivate a culture of continuous improvement to align educational standards with global benchmarks and enhance graduate outcomes. Targeted interventions based on these findings can significantly improve the quality of higher education in Ethiopia. This research provides valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, university administrators, and staff, as well as for anyone interested in understanding the barriers that hinder the effective implementation of quality assurance in public universities.

Keywords: *Quality Assurance, Ethiopian Higher Education, Public Universities, Input-Process-Outcome,*

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This study examines the practices of quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopia's public universities. The introduction provides background information for the research and outlines the problem, research questions, objectives, significance of the study, and scope and dilimitation. It concludes with an overview of the dissertation's organization.

1.1. Background of the Study

Quality assurance (QA) has become a vital element in improving learning outcomes, enhancing institutional effectiveness, and increasing global competitiveness in education. Recent research emphasizes the need for modern QA frameworks to transition from compliance-based models to dynamic, improvement-oriented systems that effectively address digital transformation, equity, and skills-based learning (Harvey, 2024; Harvey & Stensaker, 2022). This evolution requires active engagement from stakeholders, including students, faculty, and employers, while integrating local contexts and global best practices to ensure both relevance and rigor (Brooks & Waters, 2023; Elken, 2024). Specifically, QA mechanisms in higher education are crucial for maintaining academic standards, ensuring accountability, and promoting student success. In response to globalization, the rise of online education, and labor market demands, contemporary frameworks increasingly focus on outcome-based education, competency development, and evidence-based decision-making supported by data analytics (Kumar, 2025). This shift calls for flexible, student-centred approaches that accommodate diverse learning pathways (Ashwin et al., 2023) and encourage stronger cross-border collaborations to ensure consistency in transnational education (Knight, 2025).

The historical development of QA has its origins in industrial statistical control and Total Quality Management (TQM), which have significantly influenced educational practices. In higher education, QA has evolved from early accreditation systems focused primarily on institutional accountability to comprehensive systems that emphasize continuous improvement and student learning outcomes (Stensaker & Harvey, 2022). This progression has been shaped by neoliberal reforms, performance-based funding, and, more recently, by digital transformation and internationalization (Hu, W., 2024). Supranational frameworks like the Bologna Process and its Standards and Guidelines (ESG) have further established QA

practices on a global scale (Zhang et al., 2019). Today, robust QA systems are essential for higher education institutions (HEIs) to fulfill their core missions of teaching, research, and community engagement while maintaining public credibility (Hou et al., 2022). These systems typically combine external quality assurance (EQA), conducted by accreditation bodies and government regulators, with internal quality assurance (IQA), which involves institutional self-regulation and fostering a culture of quality (Mkuzangwe, A. S., 2020). Contemporary research advocates for a balance between external accountability and institutional autonomy within these systems (Lackner, 2024).

Globalization has increased the demand for robust quality assurance (QA) in higher education to maintain consistent standards across borders. As universities engage in cross-border collaborations and student mobility, QA frameworks must ensure both consistency and equity while navigating diverse accreditation systems and cultural expectations (Tamrat, 2011; Knight, 2018). Although international benchmarks promote harmonization, scholars caution against the uncritical adoption of Western-centric models, which may overlook local educational contexts (Shah & Nair, 2013). Modern QA frameworks are now facing four significant transitions that are reshaping higher education: the Green Transition (integrating sustainability), the Digital Transition (embedding digital competencies and infrastructure), a Pedagogical Shift (moving toward skill-based education), and the enhancement of the School-to-Work Transition (bridging academic preparation with labor market demands) (AACSB Insights, 2023; Cedefop, 2024; European University Association, 2024). Effectively managing these transitions requires a collaborative ecosystem approach. The Quadruple Helix (QH) model, which encourages synergistic collaboration among academia, government, industry, and civil society, is essential for developing QA systems that are sustainable and socially relevant (Carayannis et al., 2022).

Ethiopian public universities have seen significant enrollment increases over the past two decades. However, a gap remains between this quantitative growth and the quality of education, especially in areas like graduate competencies, research output, and employability (Teshome & Oumar, 2023: Oumer, 2022). This discrepancy highlights a structural contradiction within the policies governing mass higher education systems. While the aim of massification has been to expand access, it has not necessarily resulted in improved educational outcomes (Akalu, 2016: Khalil, 2017). Quality assurance (QA) frameworks in higher education typically strive to balance external accountability to regulatory bodies with

internal educational improvements. In Ethiopian universities, this dual focus often creates a conflict where the audit mechanisms of the Ministry of Education and the Education and Training Authority prioritize compliance documentation over meaningful pedagogical enhancement (Saketa, 2014). These accountability-driven systems heavily rely on standardized metrics, which can undermine the flexibility and formative feedback essential for true educational improvement (Ordofa & Asgedom, 2023). The ongoing tension between these two priorities generates operational paradoxes instead of coherent strategies for quality enhancement.

Research indicates that QA systems often result in symbolic compliance rather than substantial improvements, particularly when institutional pressures emphasize external legitimacy over actual quality enhancement. Literature identifies three primary frameworks to explain this situation: institutional isomorphism, design limitations, and implementation gaps. Institutional isomorphism suggests that universities may adopt QA practices ceremonially, focusing on gaining external legitimacy rather than improving effectiveness (Guil Gorostidi, & Rubio-Arostegui, 2025). Design limitations refer to QA frameworks that fail to convert compliance mandates into actionable strategies for improvement (Mekonnen & Asgedom, 2022). Meanwhile, implementation gaps arise from resource constraints or misaligned incentives that prevent these systems from functioning as intended (Adamu & Addamu, 2012). Notably, Neophytou and Koutselini (2025) analyzed how pressures for institutional conformity worsen patterns of symbolic compliance, as universities often emulate peer institutions rather than addressing their unique contexts. These dynamics are heightened by centralized regulatory practices that prioritize uniformity in QA structures, overshadowing the need for responsiveness to the diverse missions of institutions and the varying needs of student populations (Geda, 2014). Additionally, the distinction between "fitness-for-purpose" (meeting established standards) and "fitness-of-purpose" (the relevance of those standards) is crucial for Ethiopian public universities. National QA frameworks often emphasize fitness-for-purpose metrics without ensuring they align with labor market needs, national development goals, or student aspirations (Gebreyes, 2024). Quality in higher education is defined by the extent to which inputs, processes, and outcomes meet stakeholder expectations, consistent with multidimensional approaches to QA research (Liu, 2016). Relevance assesses whether curricula and graduate competencies align with labor market demands and societal needs, while efficiency considers the optimal use of limited resources (Alemayehu & Bekele, 2023).

In Ethiopia, the higher education sector has a strong emphasis on quality assurance that aligns with both national and international standards. Key policies, such as the Education Development Roadmap (2018–2030) and the Higher Education Proclamation (No. 1152/2019), highlight this commitment (MoE, 2019). The former Ethiopian Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA), now known as the Education and Training Authority (ETA), has played a crucial role in institutionalizing QA through accreditation and audits (Melka, 2025). A notable development is the adoption of the Adjusted Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA), which have been adapted from the African Union's framework to standardize academic programs and teaching practices (Kwandayi, 2021). Scholars suggest that integrating ASG-QA with global best practices can enhance institutional competitiveness and graduate employability, representing a strategic "glocalization" of QA (Tadesse, 2014; Zeleza, 2022). Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the systemic analysis of quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public universities, focusing on inputs, processes, and outcomes. This study critically examines quality assurance (QA) practices, identifying multifaceted challenges that hinder their effectiveness. It emphasizes the need for a strategic, ecosystem-based approach that aligns with the IPO models (Input, Process, and Processes) and the Quadruple Helix model (involving academia, industry, government, and civil society). The focus is on meeting the urgent demands of contemporary educational transitions in Ethiopian public universities.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Quality assurance (QA) in education has gained international significance as countries strive to maintain academic standards and ensure institutional accountability. Although there has been extensive research into QA systems in higher education, critical gaps remain concerning their effectiveness across different national contexts (Vašenda & Čadil, 2024). Studies indicate discrepancies in QA policies, accreditation processes, and stakeholder participation, which are often exacerbated by resource limitations. However, there is no consensus on which models most effectively enhance educational outcomes while allowing for institutional flexibility (OECD, 2023). Ethiopia's higher education sector faces significant challenges in establishing robust QA frameworks in public universities. Despite an increase in enrollment, this growth has not resulted in improved standards or graduate employability (Herut et al., 2022). Ethiopian public universities encounter hurdles such as inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of qualified faculty, and ineffective internal quality assurance (IQA) systems. These

issues hinder compliance with national and international educational standards (Kahsay, 2012). Importantly, QA processes in Ethiopia often prioritize regulatory compliance over meaningful quality enhancement, leading to a focus on adherence rather than significant improvements in teaching, learning, or research (Woldegiyorgis, 2014).

QA in Ethiopia's higher education formally began to develop in the early 21st century. The Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA), established in 2003, was the first dedicated entity to oversee quality assurance in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Tareke et al., 2024). HERQA concentrated on institutional audits and program accreditation but faced operational challenges due to limited institutional capacity amid rapid university expansion. Before HERQA, universities like Addis Ababa University adopted QA measures based on Western models, incorporating periodic curriculum reviews and external examiner policies (Wondwosen, 2022). In 2022, the Education and Training Authority (ETA) emerged as part of broader reforms to enhance educational quality, gaining momentum post the 2018 Higher Education Proclamation (MoE, 2019). The ETA governs QA through institutional audits, program accreditation, and standardized guidelines, operating under Proclamation No. 1152/2019, which mandates adherence to QA benchmarks affecting curriculum relevance, faculty qualifications, and institutional facilities (FDRE, 2019). Recent evaluations indicate that while the ETA has bolstered regulatory frameworks, challenges such as insufficient resources, limited autonomy, and ongoing implementation issues persist (Melka, 2025). Despite establishing QA systems in 2003, there remain significant implementation hurdles, notably due to a legacy of centralized, input-dependent QA mechanisms that stifle responsiveness and collaborative engagement necessary for contemporary educational frameworks (Shabangu & Madondo, 2024; Ayoo et al., 2020). A disconnect exists between academic programs and labor market needs, producing a misalignment between graduate skills and employment demands (Shabangu & Madondo, 2024). Collaborative efforts among universities, industries, government, and civil society remain weak, obstructing the necessary integration for a successful quality assurance framework (Kahsay, 2012). This institutional inertia hampers the transition towards a resilient educational ecosystem, often prioritizing faculty career longevity over collaborative enhancement of educational quality (Shabangu & Madondo, 2024). Therefore, the study aims to investigate these multifaceted challenges in Ethiopian public universities critically, utilizing the IPO evaluation model and the QH collaborative framework to highlight the urgent need for a strategic, ecosystem-based approach to QA implementation in higher education.

Despite two decades of implementing quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopian public universities, concerns remain regarding the competence of graduates, accountability to stakeholders, and the alignment of policies with practices. This indicates that existing QA mechanisms often serve as compliance rituals rather than drivers of continuous improvement (Kahsay, 2012). Internationally, there is ongoing debate about whether QA frameworks primarily fulfill accountability or improvement roles (Harvey, & Stensaker, 2022: El-Khawas, 1998); however, Ethiopian higher education research rarely engages in these discussions. Most studies are descriptive and audit-focused, concentrating on compliance with mandated inputs such as accreditation criteria, without assessing how these inputs contribute to effective practices or enhance graduate competence and employability (Oliso & Alemu, 2023). This gap leads to a lack of coherent explanations for why QA succeeds in some contexts but not in others, highlighting significant theoretical and empirical shortcomings.

The definition of QA effectiveness is often ambiguous, described variously as compliance, stakeholder satisfaction, employability, institutional culture, or responsiveness to feedback (Harvey & Stensaker, 2022: Kleijnen et al., 2005). This ambiguity results in a focus on identifying problems rather than integrating theoretical concepts of quality as transformation and accountability (Harvey, 2024). Key issues include unclear design limitations of QA frameworks, a tendency to merely describe implementation failures without relational modeling, and unfocused assertions regarding misalignments between policy and practice, as well as policy and outcomes (Alemu, 2023). Currently, most studies treat inputs, processes, and outcomes as separate categories rather than interdependent variables, failing to systematically analyze how resource deficiencies impact outcomes or how process variables mediate these relationships (Gvaramadze, 2008). Moreover, theoretical frameworks frequently adopt Western QA models without adequately considering Ethiopia's unique socio-political context, such as collectivism and centralized governance (Abebe, 2015). While some studies identify positive correlations between external audits and institutional improvement (Materu, 2007 : Huisman & Stensaker, 2022), others reveal a trend of QA mechanisms functioning as compliance rituals that do not influence classroom practices or graduate outcomes (Adamu & Addamu, 2012).

The literature has insufficiently explored three unresolved scholarly tensions. First, the compliance versus culture debate questions whether QA genuinely promotes quality improvement or simply enforces documentation compliance. Previous studies have noted ritualistic compliance without examining how it might become culturally embedded. Second,

the isomorphism versus adaptation debate interrogates whether imported QA frameworks should be implemented as prescribed or adapted to local contexts, highlighting that empirical evidence often reveals a mismatch between international standards and local capabilities (Assefa, 2024). Lastly, the stakeholder agency debate considers whether QA failures stem from inadequate policy design or from institutional actors' strategic non-compliance, viewing QA as an external obligation rather than an internal improvement tool (Adamu & Addamu, 2012). Consequently, the field lacks a context-sensitive theoretical framework that accounts for the dynamics between structural constraints, stakeholder activity, and policy coherence. The knowledge gap extends beyond mere recognition of QA challenges; the causal pathways leading to QA successes or failures remain unverified, and interactions among stakeholder groups have not been thoroughly examined. Furthermore, the mechanisms by which inputs translate into outcomes are still poorly understood. Despite the well-documented existence of QA structures, it is essential to comprehensively investigate the interactions among inputs, processes, and outcomes that lead to effective quality assurance (Molla & Cuthbert, 2022).

The challenges of quality assurance (QA) practices in Ethiopian higher education, particularly in public universities, are documented through various empirical studies. Weldearegay (2020) highlights a weak institutional QA culture where compliance takes precedence over authentic quality improvement, resulting in superficial implementations of QA measures. Furthermore, Tsegaye (2020) stresses that internal QA mechanisms are hindered by poorly trained QA officers and insufficient systematic monitoring, leading to varying quality standards across institutions. Local research underscores significant gaps in internal QA, marked by limited commitment to continuous improvement, lack of standardized assessment tools, and ineffective feedback mechanisms (Tsegaye, 2020). Challenges also persist at the input level, including shortages of qualified faculty, outdated curricula, and insufficient funding that compromise teaching quality (Mersha, 2006), compounded by inadequate infrastructure and resource allocation, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and limited access to modern learning materials (Kahsay, 2012). Process-related issues encompass weak student support systems, ineffective teaching methodologies, and inconsistent monitoring and evaluation (Mulugeta & Belay, 2022). Additionally, external QA faces difficulties such as inadequate regulatory enforcement, politicized accreditation processes, and a misalignment between national standards and institutional practices (Yirdaw, 2014). Melka (2025) reveals that HERQA/ETA struggles with limitations in conducting thorough institutional audits due to financial and logistical constraints. Graduate outcomes are also poor, with low employability rates and skill mismatches reported by employers,

indicating a disconnect between academic offerings and labor market needs (Feyera et al., 2026; Tamrat, 2023).

Despite increased focus on QA, significant research gaps remain, notably the challenges faced by public universities (Gebreeyesus et al., 2025; Kahsay, 2012). Bureaucratic inefficiencies and stringent governmental policies thwart progress in QA for public institutions (Semela, 2011). The cumulative effect of these challenges results in failures to maintain sustainable educational quality and relevance in Ethiopia's public universities, necessitating research to address these deficiencies. Recent studies point to methodological constraints like reliance on small-scale case studies that hinder broader applicability (Gebreeyesus et al., 2025; Kahsay, 2012), and theoretical frameworks that inadequately consider Ethiopia's unique higher education context (Gebremariam& Sisay, 2024; Tareke et al., 2024). Additionally, there are empirical gaps regarding the implementation and impact of QA policies, especially regarding stakeholder engagement and institutional compliance (Kufi, 2012; Geda, 2014). This research distinguishes itself through its methodologies, delimitations, and theoretical approaches. It aims for a systemic analysis of QA practices in Ethiopian public universities, focusing on inputs, processes, and outcomes. By applying the structural evaluation of the IPO model alongside the collaborative QH framework, the study advocates for an ecosystem-based approach to address QA challenges urgently in Ethiopian public universities.

1.3 Research Questions

This study investigates quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public universities, focusing on inputs, processes, and outcomes while identifying potential solutions to the challenges these institutions face. To facilitate causal inference, test theoretical assumptions, and support generalizable conclusions, the following research questions, along with their corresponding analytical propositions, guide the inquiry:

RQ1 (Analytical & Relational Focus): What causal relationships exist among the input, process, and outcome dimensions of quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public universities? How do variations in input quality, such as resources, policies, and infrastructure, predict process effectiveness (teaching, learning, assessment, governance), and how do these processes influence the achievement of desired outcomes (graduate competence, employability, satisfaction)? Additionally, to what extent do these causal

pathways differ across institutional contexts and among stakeholder groups (academic staff, department heads, and institutional leaders)?

Analytical Proposition (P_1): The degree of integration across input, process, and outcome dimensions is positively associated with perceived quality assurance effectiveness. Furthermore, process quality mediates the relationship between input quality and outcome quality, with stakeholder perceptions influencing this mediated relationship.

RQ2 (Explanatory & Evaluative Orientation): Under what conditions do formal quality assurance mechanisms (e.g., institutional audits, accreditation processes, peer reviews) lead to meaningful quality enhancement rather than becoming symbolic, compliance-focused rituals? What specific factors, such as institutional autonomy, leadership commitment, resource allocation, feedback loops, and accountability pressures determine which pathway is predominant?

Analytical Proposition (P_2): Quality assurance mechanisms(institutional audits, accreditation processes, peer reviews) generate quality enhancement when accompanied by participatory implementation, closed-loop feedback systems, formative evaluation purposes, and allocated resources for recommended changes. In the absence of these conditions, quality assurance mechanisms are likely to devolve into compliance rituals, regardless of the stated policy intentions.

RQ3 (System Dynamics & Feedback Loops): To what extent, and through what causal mechanisms, do the university community (including leadership, staff, and students), the Education and Training Authority (ETA), and the Ministry of Education (MoE) perceive themselves and one another as effectively fulfilling their mandated roles within the Quality Assurance (QA) system? What measurable gaps exist in responsibilities, communication, and collaborative action, and what is the impact of these gaps on the effectiveness of the QA system and stakeholder accountability?

Analytical Proposition (P_3): Perceived QA effectiveness is influenced by the alignment between mandated roles and actual activities. Misalignment in responsibility attribution and communication frequency accounts for more variance in reported outcomes than resource constraints alone. Feedback mechanisms mediate the relationship between stakeholder role clarity and collaborative QA outcomes.

RQ4 (Causal & Moderating Mechanisms): How do structural barriers (such as resources and autonomy), cultural barriers (including leadership commitment and staff engagement), and systemic barriers (like policy coherence and external pressures) affect the sustainability of QA practices, independently and jointly? Which combination of these barriers most critically predicts failures in QA implementation, and what interaction effects exist among these categories of barriers?

Analytical Proposition (P_4): Failures in QA sustainability are best explained by the interaction between cultural and systemic barriers, with structural barriers acting as enabling conditions rather than primary causes. Cultural barriers, specifically leadership commitment and staff engagement, have the strongest direct effect on QA sustainability. In contrast, structural barriers primarily serve as moderators that amplify or reduce the impact of cultural factors.

RQ5 (Optimization & Framework Development): What are the essential and causally effective components of a coherent, context-sensitive strategic framework that can guide Ethiopian public university QA systems toward continuous improvement, alignment with national development goals, and resilience amidst global and local changes? How do the proposed components of the framework optimize efficiency and effectiveness across varying institutional contexts?

Analytical Proposition (P_5): A strategic framework that emphasizes feedback loops, adaptive governance, decentralized accountability structures, and stakeholder co-ownership would yield better continuous improvement outcomes compared to frameworks that focus solely on compliance and external audits. The optimal combination of components, including adaptive governance structures, iterative feedback mechanisms, and differentiated implementation pathways, varies systematically based on institutional maturity levels, resource availability, and coherence of external policies.

1.4 General and Specific Objectives for the Study

1.4.1 General Objective

This study investigates quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public universities, focusing on inputs, processes, and outcomes while identifying potential solutions to the challenges these institutions face. The main objective of this study is how quality assurance (QA)

practices operate within Ethiopian public universities, using the Input-Process-Outcome (IPO) model as a theoretical framework rather than just a classification tool. Specifically, the study aims to: (a) empirically document the current status of inputs, processes, and outcomes; (b) examine the causal and relational mechanisms that link these IPO dimensions to institutional quality assurance effectiveness; and (c) analyze the interactions between structural, cultural, and systemic variables, including stakeholder dynamics and systemic barriers that influence the implementation of QA. Additionally, this study seeks to test and refine the explanatory power of the IPO framework in the context of Ethiopian higher education. This contribution to scholarly knowledge aims to develop a theory-informed, context-specific framework that enhances institutional effectiveness while aligning with national and global development goals. By engaging in this analysis, the study goes beyond simply mapping the situation to explain how and why QA practices either succeed or fail in producing meaningful quality enhancements.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

Based on the research questions, the specific objectives of this study are as follows:

- **Diagnosing Current QA Practices**: To systematically evaluate the current state of quality assurance (QA) practices in Ethiopian public universities. This involves empirically assessing the integration of inputs (such as resources, policies, and infrastructure), processes (including teaching, learning, assessment, and governance), and outcomes (like graduate competence, employability, and satisfaction). The objective is to interpret variations in perceived effectiveness among academic staff, department heads, and institutional leaders.
- **Analyzing QA Mechanisms**: To critically assess the effectiveness of implemented QA mechanisms, including internal audits, self-assessments, peer reviews, and external audits. This would involve evaluating their functionality, institutional penetration, and perceived effectiveness. Additionally, the goal was to determine the conditions under which these mechanisms foster a genuine culture of quality versus devolving into symbolic, compliance-oriented rituals.
- **Evaluating Stakeholder Accountability**: To examine the synergy and accountability among stakeholders by assessing the extent to which university leadership, staff, students, the Education and Training Authority (ETA), and the Ministry of Education (MoE) fulfill their respective roles. This includes evaluating the quality of

collaboration, feedback loops, and communication among these groups, identifying relational gaps that hinder effective QA.

- **Identifying Implementation Barriers**: To identify, categorize, and explain systemic barriers to the effective implementation and sustainability of QA. This analysis would consider obstacles that are structural (related to resources and autonomy), cultural (pertaining to leadership commitment and staff engagement), and systemic (involving policy coherence and external pressures). The objective was to interpret how these barriers interact with input-process-outcome (IPO) variables to either enable or impede quality assurance.
- **Constructing a Strategic Framework**: To develop a coherent, context-sensitive strategic framework tailored to Ethiopian public universities. This framework aims to realign QA systems towards continuous improvement, ensuring alignment with national development goals and demonstrating resilience to both global and local changes. The framework would be based on empirical findings and theoretical insights, contributing to scholarly knowledge on QA in higher education systems in developing countries.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study investigates quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public universities, focusing on inputs, processes, and outcomes while identifying potential solutions to the challenges these institutions face. The study significantly enhances the understanding of quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopian public universities by exploring its importance across four interconnected domains: theoretical, methodological, empirical, and practical-policy. It addresses gaps in the existing literature on QA, particularly in framing the research as a knowledge-generating effort rather than merely a problem-solving exercise. The theoretical domain provides foundational insights, while the methodological domain emphasizes the need for robust research approaches. Empirically, the study offers data-driven insights pertinent to real-world contexts, and the practical-policy domain suggests actionable recommendations for stakeholders involved in university governance. By applying the Input-Process-Outcome (IPO) framework, the research refines existing QA models, particularly within Ethiopia's post-conflict higher education system. It challenges the assumption that QA mechanisms derived from contexts universally enhance quality, highlighting how structural, cultural, and systemic barriers can affect the effectiveness of formal QA practices. The study distinguishes between meaningful improvements and mere compliance rituals, offering a

fresh perspective on the interactions among university leadership, faculty, students, and regulatory bodies. Its context-specific framework aims to align QA systems with local capabilities and advocates for adaptations in transitional settings to promote resilience and continuous improvement.

Additionally, the research employs a novel methodological approach by operationalizing the IPO framework and integrating perceptual data from various stakeholders, including academic staff and regulatory bodies. A mixed-methods design captures the complexities of stakeholder perspectives and utilizes a multi-level barrier analysis to identify implementation challenges within structural, cultural, and systemic categories, making this framework adaptable to similar educational contexts. Innovative evidence from Ethiopian public universities reveals critical insights into QA practices, such as the disconnect between formal QA policies and actual academic practices, a lack of stakeholder synergy, and barriers to genuine quality enhancement. The study highlights the perceived effectiveness of QA mechanisms and their impact on graduate competence and satisfaction, establishing a foundation for future inquiries. Moreover, it proposes a practical, policy-oriented strategic framework for transforming QA systems in Ethiopian public universities, emphasizing continuous improvement and alignment with national educational development goals. This framework facilitates a shift from compliance-driven audits to strategic resource allocation and improved internal quality, benefiting multiple stakeholders through evidence-based recommendations that enhance academic understanding and support capacity building.

The study engages in scholarly debates about the separation of formal policies from enacted practices and evaluates the applicability of Western QA models in non-Western contexts. By advocating for a resilience-oriented, co-constructed approach to QA, it explores stakeholder activity and cultural mediation within the Ethiopian higher education system, redefining how quality is conceptualized and measured. The findings address gaps in systemic QA analysis and suggest a multidimensional framework for future QA studies in low- and middle-income countries experiencing educational massification. Ultimately, the research examines how knowledge will evolve through its contributions, revealing why QA practices often prioritize compliance-driven rituals over genuine enhancements, and challenges the effectiveness of formal QA mechanisms in producing meaningful change.

1.6 Scope and Delimitation

This study is systematically delimited across empirical, conceptual, geographic, theoretical, and methodological dimensions to ensure analytical coherence and feasibility. Empirically, the research focuses solely on quality assurance (QA) practices within Ethiopian public universities. It targets academic staff, department heads, institutional leaders (including vice presidents, college deans, and QA enhancement directors), and relevant policy stakeholders from the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Education and Training Authority (ETA). Additionally, students are included through focus group discussions conducted with student councils. The geographic scope is confined to Ethiopia's public higher education sector, with institutions selected through random sampling based on their representativeness of varying levels of institutional differentiation. This approach enables analytical generalization rather than a purely statistical representation.

Conceptually and theoretically, the study analyzes QA practices through the Input-Process-Outcome (IPO) framework, which serves as the primary analytical lens. The independent variables consist of inputs (resources, policies, and infrastructure); processes (teaching, learning, assessment, and governance); and outcomes (graduate competence, employability, and satisfaction). The dependent variable is defined exclusively as effective quality assurance, measured in terms of mechanism functionality, stakeholder synergy, and systemic sustainability. While the dynamics among stakeholders are examined, the analysis focuses specifically on role fulfilment and collaboration within the triad of universities, ETA, and MoE. Analytically, the study explores perceived relationships between the IPO dimensions and effective QA. Methodologically, the delimitation is guided by a quantitative-dominant, mixed-methods concurrent triangulation study design that prioritizes in-depth qualitative understanding over broad qualitative correlations. Ethiopian public universities are required to implement national QA policies under similar regulatory pressures, yet they exhibit varying degrees of effectiveness. This variability provides a theoretically informative context for understanding how QA mechanisms operate in a resource-constrained, developing-country setting. This design supports analytical generalization by linking empirical findings to theoretical propositions about structural, cultural, and systemic barriers to QA sustainability. In summary, these delimitations: empirical, conceptual, geographic, theoretical, and methodological are justified by the study's theoretical positioning (the IPO framework), methodological strategy (the mixed concurrent triangulation study design), and analytical intent (to develop a context-specific strategic framework for continuous

improvement aligned with national development goals). This ensures that the research remains feasible while generating theoretically meaningful and practically actionable insights.

1.7.Limitations of the Study

This study highlights the methodological and scope limitations inherent in its design and the contextual framework of Ethiopian public higher education. It underscores the trade-offs between analytical depth and breadth in a resource-constrained, post-conflict environment. The research employs random sampling based on institutional differentiation, which limits the generalizability of the findings across Ethiopia's private higher education systems. Additionally, the use of a mixed-methods concurrent triangulation design with a quantitative focus introduces several constraints. The cross-sectional nature of data collection restricts the ability to analyze longitudinal changes in quality assurance (QA) practices or stakeholder perceptions over time. Efforts to capture diverse stakeholder perspectives are limited, as student representation mainly consists of council representatives. Moreover, the tools employed in the study may have undergone modifications, and the exclusion of external stakeholders, such as employers or alumni, could further undermine the validity of internally generated assessments. The study intentionally focuses only on the IPO model, which may narrow the theoretical scope and limit insights from competing models that could enhance the understanding and comparison of QA effectiveness. Furthermore, concentrating solely on public universities restricts the applicability of the findings to private universities, which operate under distinct regulatory and funding structures. Overall, these limitations indicate a clear need for further investigation in this area.

1.8.Definition of Key Terms

Quality: It is a very broad term. According to ETA, this term refers to fitness for purpose, meaning the extent to which something meets or adheres to generally accepted standards established by an accrediting or quality assurance agency or authority (ETA, 2023; Harvey & Green, 1993).

Quality Assurance: This broad term encompasses quality input, processes, and outcomes that support and promote the quality of higher education. It focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgments through a consistent process and well-established criteria (Woodhouse, 1999).

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): HEIs are entities of higher learning that can be classified as a) universities, b) university colleges, c) colleges, or d) institutes, according to the FDRE Higher Education Proclamation (Higher Education Proclamation, 2019).

Public University: A public university is an institution established under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (MoE) by regulations from the Council of Ministers. It is substantially funded by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) government. They are tasked with producing a skilled workforce and driving teaching, research and community services. The federal Ministry of Education oversees the overall system of these institutions (MoE, 2019).

Education and Training Authority (ETA): The ETA is an independent and self-governing authority responsible for monitoring and analyzing the relevance and quality of education and training delivered by any HEIs. Its role includes granting and renewing accreditation, conducting quality audits, and authenticating and evaluating various educational qualifications across all educational sectors (ETA, 2023).

1.9 Organization of the study

The dissertation is organized into five chapters. The introductory chapter provides the background of the study, including an introduction, a problem statement, research questions, objectives, significance, scope, definitions of key terms, and the overall organization of the dissertation. Chapter 2 presents a literature review, which includes concepts of quality assurance (QA), QA models, the purpose of QA, various QA approaches, current states of QA, QA and enhancement, QA practices in both developed and developing countries. This chapter also outlines the conceptual frameworks and the theoretical framework of the study, which encompasses open systems theory, contingency theory, institutional theory, dependent variables, and independent variables. Chapter 3 details the research methodology. It includes the research paradigm, design and approach, population sampling and sample selection, data sources, instruments used for data collection, data analysis and interpretation methods, validity considerations, and ethical considerations for the study. Chapter 4 presents and analyzes the main results, offering suggestions based on the findings. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a summary, conclusion, and recommendations derived from the study's results.

CHAPTER TWO

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a literature review of quality assurance (QA) practices in higher education, focusing specifically on Ethiopian public universities. It begins by defining quality and QA, exploring various frameworks that illustrate these concepts, such as exceptionalism, perfection, and value for money. The review evaluates theoretical models of QA, including Total Quality Management and ISO standards, and assesses their relevance to the diverse landscape of Ethiopian universities. It also distinguishes between QA and quality enhancement, detailing the responsibilities of various stakeholders, such as university communities and the Education and Training Authority (ETA). Additionally, the chapter examines the history of higher education reform in Ethiopia, discussing the Education Development Roadmap and the establishment of the ETA as the national QA body. Finally, it synthesizes different theories into a conceptual framework, proposing that the effectiveness of QA is influenced by input, process, and outcome variables, all shaped by institutional culture and stakeholder engagement. The chapter also addresses the gap between policy and practice in QA implementation.

2.2 Conceptualizing Quality and Quality Assurance

The concept of quality in higher education remains inherently contested, with scholarly interpretations diverging significantly across institutional, stakeholder, and national contexts (Smith & Seal, 2021). The abstract and multidimensional nature of quality, as Utuka (2012) observed, has historically precluded precise consensus, yielding instead broad, context-dependent understandings. Foundational typologies most notably those advanced by Harvey and Green (1993), Ryan (2015), Woodhouse (1999), and Csizmadia (2006) have organized quality into six recurrent dimensions: exceptionalism (excellence), perfection (consistency), fitness for purpose, value for money, transformative potential, and continuous enhancement. Collectively, these frameworks converge on a critical insight: quality is not a static benchmark but a dynamic construct, continuously renegotiated through institutional missions, stakeholder expectations, and regulatory evolution (Elken & Stensaker, 2018).

However, a critical comparison of these definitions reveals a fundamental tension: while "fitness for purpose" aligns quality with an institution’s specific mission a particularly salient

framework in differentiated systems such as Ethiopia's categorized public universities (MoSHE, 2021; Ashwin, 2020) the "transformative" perspective prioritizes student capacity-building (critical thinking, ethical reasoning, innovation) as the core outcome (Ashwin, 2023; Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2016). The "value for money" approach, conversely, risks subordinating educational missions to cost-efficiency, a problematic orientation in resource-constrained environments (Taatila, 2017; Hazelkorn, 2013). Given this study's focus on systemic analysis within Ethiopian public universities where institutional missions range from research-intensive to teaching-focused the **fitness-for-purpose** definition is adopted as the preferred conceptualization. This choice avoids the prescriptive uniformity of the excellence model and the narrow economism of the value-for-money perspective, while accommodating the transformative goals embedded in national development frameworks (SDG 4, Agenda 2063). Consequently, quality is here defined as the degree to which an institution's input, process, and outcome dimensions demonstrably align with its stated mission and stakeholder expectations.

Within this conceptual landscape, three constructs quality, quality assurance, and quality management are frequently conflated, risking analytical confusion. This study distinguishes them clearly: quality is the outcome or attribute to be achieved (e.g., graduate competence, program effectiveness); and quality management encompasses the broader institutional mechanisms, policies, leadership structures, and cultural frameworks that coordinate and sustain QA activities over time (Kayyali, 2023; Salto, 2018). Similarily, Quality management **(**QM**)** represents the broader organizational infrastructure, policies, regulations, leadership structures, accountability systems within which QA processes operate (Kayyali, 2023; Salto, 2018). Whereas QA is, what institutions do to assure quality, QM is how they organize, resource, and govern those activities(cf. Vlăsceanu et al., 2005; Pinias et al., 2023).

In this study, QA serves as the analytical focus, with QM treated as the enabling institutional context. Harvey and Green's (1993) foundational definition framing QA as structured activities that reassure stakeholders of an institution's commitment to maintaining and improving quality remains influential. Javed and Alenezi (2023) similarly characterize QA as a verification process ensuring consistency and enhancement in educational delivery. More recently, Elken and Stensaker (2018) have emphasized that QA involves deliberate, systematic interventions to align institutional outputs with predefined quality standards. Vlăsceanu et al. (2005), who depict QA as a continuous, cyclical process involving the

assessment of institutional systems, services, and outcomes, all supported by a strong quality culture, offer a comprehensive synthesis. Within national frameworks, Ashcroft and Rayner (2012) note that systems such as Ethiopia's adopt a fitness-for-purpose approach to QA, balancing centralized curriculum mandates with institutional implementation autonomy. QA is operationalized as the functionality, perceived effectiveness, and institutional penetration of specific mechanisms internal audits, self-assessments, peer reviews, and external audits as reported by academic staff, department heads, institutional leaders, and regulatory stakeholders. Drawing on Ashcroft and Rayner (2012) and the European Standards and Guidelines (ENQA, 2023), this study adopts a fitness-for-purpose framing of QA, which balances centralized curriculum mandates with institutional autonomy in implementation a design feature directly relevant to Ethiopia's nationally coordinated but institutionally executed QA system.

Quality assurance refers to the systematic processes and mechanisms designed to monitor, verify, and safeguard that quality standards are maintained; it is procedural and evaluative in nature (Pinias et al., 2023). It encompasses the mechanisms of internal audits, self-assessments, peer reviews, external audits through which institutions verify and maintain quality. Ensuing Harvey and Green (1993) and Elken and Stensaker (2018), QA is conceptualized as a cyclical process of assessment, feedback, and improvement, distinguishing it from the static condition it seeks to produce. In addition, QA in higher education encompasses structured, scientifically validated processes intended to safeguard and improve educational standards (Avci, 2020). Pinias et al. (2023) conceptualize QA as an institutional mechanism ensuring that academic outputs, student competencies, research quality, personnel qualifications, curricula robustness, and resource adequacy meet recognized benchmarks. Kayyali (2023) extends this by defining QA as an integrated system of policies, regulations, and monitoring mechanisms that both maintain minimum academic standards and promote institutional improvement. Salto (2018) further distinguishes QA from mere compliance or episodic evaluation, positioning it as a developmental tool aimed at enhancing departmental, programmatic, and organizational effectiveness through iterative feedback and stakeholder engagement. Contemporary QA frameworks increasingly evidence a paradigmatic shift from compliance-driven to enhancement-focused quality assurance (Elken & Stensaker, 2018; OECD, 2022). In the Ethiopian public university context, this distinction is analytically critical: the central research problem concerns whether formal QA mechanisms produce meaningful quality enhancement or devolve into symbolic, compliance-

oriented rituals. The study therefore treats the compliance-enhancement continuum as a moderating condition, examining the extent to which QA practices at sampled universities reflect one orientation versus the other.

Quality assurance (dependent variable) is operationalized via indicators of mechanism functionality and effectiveness: frequency and fidelity of internal audits, completion rates of self-assessment reports, peer review outcomes, and external audit. This operationalization enables the study to test perceived relationships among IPO dimensions (inputs, processes, outcomes) and effective quality assurance, moving beyond abstract definitions to empirically verifiable variables. For this study, **quality assurance is defined as the degree to which higher education inputs, processes, and outcomes collectively achieve institutional objectives, foster graduate transformative capacities, and sustain stakeholder accountability, within the constraints and priorities of the specific context.** It is justified on three grounds: (a) it accommodates Ethiopia's differentated university system (research, applied, comprehensive, science and technology, and education universities; MoSHE, 2021); (b) it aligns with the study's Input-Process-Outcome (IPO) framework; and (c) it enables operationalization through measurable indicators rather than abstract ideals. These constructs, while interrelated, operate at different levels of abstraction and require explicit differentiation for valid operationalization (Weldearegay, 2020).

To operationalize these constructs within the IPO framework, each is translated into measurable indicators and variables. Effective quality assurance (dependent variable) is operationalized through three indicator clusters: (a) mechanism functionality (e.g., frequency of internal audits, completion rates of self-assessment reports, uptake of peer review recommendations); (b) stakeholder synergy (e.g., perceived role clarity, communication frequency, collaborative problem-solving among university leadership, academic staff, MoE, and ETA); and (c) systemic sustainability (e.g., continuity of QA practical activities despite leadership activities, resource allocation stability, integration of QA findings into strategic planning). Measurement approaches combine quantitative perceptual scales (e.g., Likert-based surveys of academic staff and department heads) with qualitative document analysis (e.g., QA policy documents, audit reports, minutes) and semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussion consistent with the study’s concurrent triangulation design.

2.3 Conceptual Framework of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Quality Assurance (QA) in higher education refers to systematic processes designed to ensure that institutions meet predefined standards of excellence in teaching, research, and service. According to Elassy (2015), QA encompasses three key dimensions: input, process, and output/outcome. The input dimension includes essential resources such as qualified faculty, adequate infrastructure, a well-structured curriculum, and sustainable funding (Teixeira & Picinin, 2024). These elements form the foundation for delivering high-quality education. The process dimension involves teaching-learning methodologies, assessment techniques, research activities, and administrative efficiency, which collectively determine the effectiveness of institutional operations (Martin, 2018). Finally, the outcome dimension evaluates the long-term impact of higher education through graduate employability, research contributions, and institutional reputation (Liu, 2016). To operationalize QA, various theoretical models have been adopted in higher education. Total Quality Management (TQM) emphasizes continuous improvement, stakeholder satisfaction, and institutional accountability (Jasti et al., 2022). The Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) Cycle provides a structured approach for iterative quality enhancement, ensuring that institutions regularly assess and refine their processes (Alzafari & Ursin, 2023). Additionally, ISO Standards (e.g., ISO 21001:2018) offer a globally recognized framework for educational organizations to standardize quality management systems (Abbas et al, 2024). These models collectively establish a robust foundation for QA practices, enabling institutions to align their strategies with both national and international benchmarks.

2.4 Quality Assurance Models in Ethiopian Higher Education

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education ensures that institutions meet established standards of excellence in teaching, research, and community engagement. Various QA models have been adopted globally, including implementations in Ethiopian public universities. Notable models include Total Quality Management (TQM) and the ISO (International Organization for Standardization) framework, among others. Recent studies highlight both their applicability and the challenges faced in the Ethiopian context (Tamrat 2022; Fissuh et al, 2016).

Total Quality Management (TQM) in Higher Education

TQM is a holistic approach that emphasizes continuous improvement, stakeholder involvement, and customer satisfaction in higher education institutions (HEIs). According to Mohammed & Panchal (2025), TQM focuses on the input, process, and output dimensions, aligning with Ethiopia's QA framework. This model encourages participatory decision-making, faculty development, and student feedback mechanisms to enhance institutional performance (Yadessa et al, 2022). However, studies show that Ethiopian universities face challenges in fully implementing TQM due to limited resources, weak institutional commitment, and inconsistent policy enforcement (Tsegaye, 2020).

ISO Certification and Its Relevance to Ethiopian Higher Education

The ISO 9001:2015 standard is another widely recognized QA model that emphasizes systematic process management, documentation, and continuous improvement. Some Ethiopian universities have pursued ISO certification to align with international best practices (Tamrat, 2020). Scholars argue, however, that ISO implementation often remains superficial in Ethiopia, as institutions struggle to maintain compliance due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and a lack of ongoing training (Haile, 2014). Despite these challenges, ISO-certified universities report improved administrative efficiency and increased stakeholder confidence (Desta, 2022; Kandie, 2019).

Bologna Process-Inspired Internal QA Models in Ethiopian Higher Education

In addition to Total Quality Management (TQM) and ISO standards, Ethiopia's higher education sector has implemented Bologna Process-inspired internal quality assurance (QA) mechanisms and external audits conducted by the Education and Training Authority (ETA). These models focus on accreditation, periodic program reviews, and benchmarking against regional standards (Mekonnen, 2020). However, there are ongoing gaps in stakeholder engagement, as faculty and students are often excluded from QA decision-making processes (Tadesse et al, 2018).

The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) Model

The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance in higher education provide a comprehensive framework for both internal and external quality assurance, emphasizing institutional autonomy and the involvement of stakeholders (ENQA, 2023).

Although these guidelines were originally developed for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), they have influenced Ethiopian higher education institutions (HEIs) through international collaborations and benchmarking efforts (Ansah, 2015). The ESG's student-centered approach and cyclical evaluation processes align well with Ethiopia's objectives to improve academic standards and enhance institutional accountability (Halkiyo, 2023). Nevertheless, challenges remain in adapting ESG principles to Ethiopia's resource-constrained environment, where capacity building and sustainable implementation are crucial (Sharma & Cotton, 2023).

The Balanced Scorecard (BSC) Model

The Balanced Scorecard (BSC) model, originally designed as a tool for assessing business performance, has been adapted for quality assurance in higher education. It incorporates four key perspectives: financial, customer (student), internal processes, and learning/growth (Epstein & Manzoni, 1997). In Ethiopian higher education institutions (HEIs), the BSC model has been explored as a strategic management tool to align institutional objectives with quality enhancement initiatives (Reda, 2017). Recent studies indicate that implementing the BSC improves institutional effectiveness; however, it requires strong leadership commitment and data-driven decision-making (Damiyano, 2025). Despite its potential, Ethiopian universities are facing challenges in operationalizing the BSC due to limited technical expertise and resistance to change (Kelemu et al, 2017).

The Malcolm Baldrige Excellence Framework

The Malcolm Baldrige Excellence Framework, which is primarily used in corporate contexts, has been modified for higher education to evaluate leadership, strategic planning, and student success outcomes (NIST, 2022). Ethiopian HEIs have shown interest in this model due to its holistic approach to institutional excellence (Ebessa, 2025). Scholars argue that the Baldrige framework can enhance governance and stakeholder engagement in Ethiopian universities, but they caution that its complexity may impede widespread adoption (Habtegeorgis et al., 2020). Empirical studies on its application in Ethiopia are limited, highlighting the need for further research (Haile, 2014).

The Stakeholder-Based Quality Assurance Model

Stakeholder-based quality assurance models emphasize the involvement of students, faculty, employers, and policymakers in evaluating the quality of higher education (Sondlo, 2019). In Ethiopia, this approach aligns with the government's emphasis on industry-academia collaboration and graduate employability (Degaga & Senapathy, 2021). Recent research has highlighted the effectiveness of stakeholder feedback in curriculum redesign and accreditation processes (Kufi, 2012). However, inconsistent stakeholder engagement and weak feedback mechanisms remain barriers to full implementation (Kufi, 2012). In summary, while Ethiopian public universities have integrated various quality assurance (QA) models, their effectiveness is hindered by structural and operational challenges. Strengthening stakeholder collaboration, enhancing resource allocation, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement are critical for sustainable QA implementation (Salmi et al, 2017). These various quality assurance models, including the Total Quality Management model, the Bologna Process, ISO, ESG, BSC, Baldrige, and stakeholder-based approaches, provide valuable frameworks for Ethiopian higher education. Although these models offer opportunities for improvement, their successful adoption depends on contextual adaptation, capacity building, and strong institutional commitment.

2.5 Quality Assurance versus Quality Enhancement

Quality assurance (QA) and quality enhancement (QE) are crucial components of modern approaches to managing quality in higher education. Although these two concepts are closely related, they focus on different aspects of institutional improvement. QA serves as the foundation for QE, with the former establishing baseline standards while the latter promotes continuous improvement (Elassy, 2015). As Newton (2002) suggests, QA and QE are "two sides of the same coin," much like an iceberg where assurance represents the visible tip and enhancement forms the transformative base beneath the surface. QA provides essential evidence for institutions to enhance teaching and learning practices; it serves not only as an accountability mechanism but also as a developmental tool (Crosling, 2017). When implemented constructively, QA policies and practices encourage educators to engage in reflective practices, which facilitate pedagogical innovation (Harvey & Williams, 2010). Therefore, quality enhancement represents a shift from current quality levels to aspirational benchmarks, indicating that enhancement goes beyond mere compliance (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). Recent global trends show a gradual shift from a primarily QA-focused model to one that prioritizes QE. The Higher Education Academy Burnapp (2008) characterizes this

transition as a movement away from coercive, compliance-driven oversight toward supportive frameworks that empower academic staff to innovate rather than simply conform. Despite this shift, the discourse surrounding higher education policy continues to emphasize QA, especially in governmental and regulatory contexts (Newton, 2012; Jackson, 1997). In the Ethiopian context, Ashcroft & Rayner (2011) note ongoing tensions between QA and QE, particularly regarding the relevance of assessment models in developing higher education systems. Recent studies further highlight these challenges, pointing out discrepancies between imported QA frameworks and the realities of local institutions (Molla & Cuthbert, 2016).

2.6 The Importance of Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions

Quality Assurance (QA) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is essential for ensuring acceptable educational standards and promoting institutional effectiveness (Brennan & Shah, 2000). It enhances transparency in achieving institutional and program goals, aids decision-making regarding government funding, and serves critical functions such as accountability, quality improvement, performance evaluation, and investment (Alderman, 2022). Harvey (2018) identifies three primary functions of QA: accountability, improvement, and performance monitoring. Accountability refers to the responsibility of institutions to justify their use of resources and demonstrate their effectiveness (Trow, 1996). Traditionally, accountability has relied on summative and judgmental approaches for external oversight (Alshamy, 2012). However, contemporary views emphasize accountability as a process of explaining institutional behavior and outcomes (Huisman, 2020). According to Alderman (2022), HEIs must maintain minimum quality standards through rigorous accreditation or licensing systems while transparently communicating their performance to stakeholders. Similarly, Middlehurst & Woodhouse (1995) suggest that QA systems assess institutions based on predefined goals and criteria, publicly confirming their ability to meet these standards.

Quality improvement focuses on enhancing educational delivery and institutional processes. Alderman (2022) describes QA assessments as opportunities for continuous enhancement, where audits identify operational weaknesses and drive necessary corrective actions. This aligns with Harvey & Askling's (2003) Position that improvement-oriented QA employs formative approaches, emphasizing development over control. While Thune (1996) connects quality improvement to measurable gains in student learning, recent critiques indicate that an

expansion of QA systems may hinder continuous improvement if they become overly bureaucratic (Lemaitre, 2010). The Deming Quality Cycle (Plan-Do-Review-Act) remains a foundational model for systematic improvement (Deming, 1986). The performance and investment aspects of QA provide critical data for funding allocations and stakeholder decision-making (Harvey & Askling, 2003; Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2007). Performance metrics help benchmark HEIs against best practices, often influencing grants, awards, and evaluations (Alderman, 2014). Meanwhile, the investment dimension reflects a commitment to future capacity building, which includes researcher development, policy formulation, and auditor training (Jani, 2011). In Ethiopia, QA implementation varies between private and public HEIs. Private institutions typically emphasize accountability, while public HEIs focus more on quality improvement (Wariyo, 2020). Recent studies highlight the necessity for adaptive QA frameworks that balance compliance with innovation, especially in developing higher education systems (Kabir et al, 2024).

2.7 Internal and External Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Public Universities

This section examines the existing quality assurance (QA) mechanisms in Ethiopian public universities and evaluates their effectiveness in maintaining academic standards. QA mechanisms can be broadly categorized into internal and external processes, each playing a critical role in ensuring institutional accountability and continuous improvement. Despite established frameworks, challenges remain in their implementation, enforcement, and resource allocation. Internal QA mechanisms are self-regulatory processes within institutions designed to uphold academic quality. Key approaches include self-assessment reports (SARs), which allow universities to evaluate their performance against predefined benchmarks (Tilahun, 2006). Additionally, internal audits and peer reviews facilitate periodic evaluations of teaching, research, and administrative processes (Hussien, 2022). Most Ethiopian public universities have established Quality Assurance Units (QAUs) or Directorates to oversee compliance with national standards (Tsegaye, 2020). However, studies indicate that these units often lack sufficient autonomy and technical capacity, which limits their effectiveness (Ali, 2024).

External QA mechanisms involve oversight by national and international bodies to ensure institutional accountability. The Education and Training Authority (ETA) conducts accreditations to certify programs and institutions, though there have been reports of delays in the review cycles (Melka, 2025). The Ministry of Education (MoE) performs periodic

institutional audits; however, critics argue that these assessments are often inconsistent and lack rigorous follow-up (Melka, 2025). Furthermore, Ethiopian universities engage in benchmarking against international standards, such as the Bologna Process and the African Union Quality Assurance (AUQA) framework, to align with global best practices (Ashcroft, 2005). Nonetheless, limited funding and expertise hinder full compliance with these international benchmarks (Teshome & Kebede, 2009). Despite structured QA frameworks, several challenges undermine their effectiveness. Studies highlight weak enforcement mechanisms, indicating that policies are not consistently applied across institutions (Shamelo, 2022). Additionally, resource constraints, such as inadequate funding and staffing, restrict the operational capacity of QA units (Akalu, 2014). Another critical issue is the inconsistent monitoring of follow-up evaluations after audits or accreditations, which are often neglected (Adamu & Addamu, 2012). These gaps suggest a need for stronger institutional commitment, better resource allocation, and enhanced stakeholder engagement to improve QA implementation in Ethiopian higher education.

2.8 Approaches to Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Quality assurance in higher education consists of various structured processes. According to Williams & Harvey (2015), external quality assurance (QA) is divided into three major activities: accreditation, auditing (quality audit), and assessment. More recently, Mursidi (2022) and Martin (2018) have expanded this classification into four key approaches: accreditation, institutional audit, assessment, and benchmarking. Accreditation is a formal recognition process that ensures an institution or academic program meets predefined quality standards (Harvey & Newton, 2004). It serves as a certification mechanism, validating that higher education institutions (HEIs) comply with minimum requirements set by external agencies (Rath, 2010). Modern accreditation frameworks typically follow a three-stage process. Self-evaluation is when institutions assess their own performance and submit reports to accrediting bodies. External audit involves site visits by evaluators to verify the self-assessment findings. The final accreditation decision determines the status of the institution or program (Martin & Stella, 2007). Globally, accreditation is crucial for institutional credibility, public trust, and eligibility for government funding (Kayyali, 2023). Recent studies highlight its growing role in ensuring accountability and continuous improvement in HEIs (Kumar et al, 2022). Assessment evaluates the performance of individuals, teams, or institutions, providing a confidential judgment of quality (Prichard et al,.2001). Unlike

accreditation, assessment often leads to dual outcomes: quality verification and improvement recommendations (Nicholson, 2011). The key aspects of assessment include evaluating the quality of teaching, learning, and research (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Measuring inputs, processes, and outputs within HEIs (Kayyali, 2023). Influencing accreditation decisions (Tonecker & Fekete, 2025; Kayyali, 2023).

Self-review allows institutions to analyze their progress toward academic goals, while peer review involves external experts verifying self-assessment reports (Dill, 2007). Recent research emphasizes the increasing use of data-driven assessment models to enhance objectivity (Kaspi & Venkatraman, 2023). A quality audit examines whether an institution meets its stated objectives, focusing on transparency in governance and curriculum (Fonseca et al, 2020). It typically involves self-study and peer review, along with site visits to validate institutional claims (Matei, 2016). Additionally, it emphasizes process improvement rather than mere compliance (Woodhouse, 2003). External reviews provide independent evaluations, often involving stakeholders such as employers and government representatives (Woodhouse, 2004). With the rise of globalization, external QA has become more standardized (King et al, 2011).

In Ethiopia, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) primarily focuses on institutional audits and program accreditation (Adamu & Addamu, 2012). However, recent studies indicate a disparity between public and private HEIs. Private institutions undergo mandatory accreditation, which drives quality improvements, while public HEIs often lack accreditation, potentially affecting education standards (Nega, 2017). This gap suggests a need for stronger QA enforcement in public universities to ensure compliance with national benchmarks (Abebe & Assemie, 2023).

2.9 Status of Quality Assurance Practices Related to Inputs, Processes, and Outcomes

This section critically examines the current state of Quality Assurance (QA) practices in Ethiopian public universities, organized according to the input, process, and outcome dimensions. QA mechanisms in Ethiopian higher education institutions (HEIs) have evolved in response to national regulatory frameworks and global trends in higher education. Nevertheless, scholars have identified ongoing gaps in implementation, resource allocation, and outcome measurement (Tamrat, 2022; Kahsay, 2012). The subsections below analyze

QA practices across these three dimensions, drawing on recent empirical studies and policy evaluations.

Input-related QA practices focus on the foundational resources necessary for delivering quality education. Human resources remain a critical concern. Studies indicate that while faculty qualification levels have improved, thanks to government-led PhD training programs, staff development initiatives remain inconsistent (Zegeye et al, 2024). Student admission standards, although formally regulated, face challenges in maintaining equity and rigor across disciplines (Tesema et al…2024). Infrastructure deficiencies, particularly in laboratories, libraries, and ICT facilities, hinder effective teaching and research, especially in emerging universities (Tareke et al, 2024). The curriculum is periodically revised to align with labor market demands and national standards; however, gaps persist in terms of industry relevance and interdisciplinary integration (Tamrat, 2022).

Process-related QA practices encompass the core academic and administrative operations within universities. Teaching and learning processes have gradually improved through the adoption of student-centred pedagogies. However, large class sizes and limited faculty training constrain their effectiveness (Degago, 2015). Although student feedback mechanisms exist, they are often underutilized in the quality improvement cycles (Haile, 2014). Assessment and evaluation systems incorporate both internal and external moderation, yet concerns remain about exam leakage and inconsistent grading standards (Girma, 2010). Research and community engagement are areas of weakness, with low publication outputs in indexed journals and minimal collaboration with industry, despite policy emphasis on these aspects (Girma et al, 2025).

Outcome-related QA practices assess the long-term impact of higher education. Graduate competence is increasingly measured through employability surveys, although systematic mechanisms for employer feedback are underdeveloped (Shimekit, 2021). Alumni tracking systems are still in their infancy, which limits longitudinal assessments (Mekonnen et al, 2024). Institutional performance is evaluated through processes like accreditation and rankings; however, these metrics often overlook the contextual challenges faced by Ethiopian universities (Kahsay, 2012). External audit reports may highlight compliance issues but rarely lead to substantive reforms (Shah & Grebennikov, 2008). A key challenge is the lack of standardized metrics for outcome measurement, combined with insufficient long-term graduate tracking (Woldetensae, 2006). In conclusion, recent studies highlight progress in the

adoption of QA policies but reveal systemic weaknesses in implementation, resource allocation, and outcome evaluation. While moderate attention is given to input and process dimensions, outcome-based QA remains underdeveloped. This situation calls for stronger institutional research cultures, improved employer partnerships, and the establishment of national quality metrics (Debele, 2025; Ayele, 2013). Addressing these gaps is crucial for enhancing both the global competitiveness and local relevance of Ethiopian public universities**.**

2.10 Roles and Responsibilities of Key Stakeholders: University Community, ETA, MoE, and Industry & Employers

Quality Assurance (QA) in higher education is a collaborative effort that involves the active participation of multiple stakeholders. Each group plays a distinct yet interconnected role in ensuring academic standards, institutional effectiveness, and continuous improvement. This section evaluates the contributions of major stakeholders to enhancing QA processes, as discussed in recent literature. The university community is central to the implementation of QA, with academic staff, students, and leadership each making significant contributions to institutional quality. Academic staff are responsible for curriculum development, research quality, and adherence to QA policies (Pham & Nguyen, 2020). Their involvement in program assessments and teaching evaluations ensures compliance with accreditation standards. Students, as key beneficiaries, contribute through feedback mechanisms and participation in QA committees, providing valuable insights into learning experiences and institutional effectiveness (Klemenčič, 2018). Meanwhile, university leadership plays a strategic role in enforcing policies, allocating resources, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement (Lee & Abbas, 2021). Their commitment to QA frameworks directly influences institutional credibility and academic excellence. National regulatory bodies, such as the Education and Training Authority (ETA) and the Ministry of Education (MoE), are instrumental in shaping QA systems. Their primary role includes policy formulation, in which they establish national QA frameworks and accreditation standards to ensure consistency across institutions (OECD, 2022). Additionally, these bodies conduct monitoring and evaluation through institutional audits, accreditation renewals, and corrective measures to uphold compliance (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020). Beyond regulation, they provide support and capacity-building initiatives, offering training for QA personnel and funding for infrastructure development to enhance institutional capabilities (Nguyen, 2019). Their oversight ensures that universities meet both local and international educational benchmarks.

The involvement of industry and employers in QA processes bridges the gap between academia and workforce demands. Their feedback on graduate quality helps universities align curricula with labor market needs, ensuring that graduates possess relevant competencies (Sharma, 2025). Furthermore, industry representatives contribute by participating in QA reviews, serving on advisory boards, and joining accreditation panels to assess program relevance (European Commission, 2023). Such collaboration enhances the employability of graduates and strengthens the practical applicability of academic programs (OECD, 2022). In conclusion, the effectiveness of QA in higher education relies on the coordinated efforts of universities, regulatory bodies, and industry partners. While academic staff and students drive internal QA mechanisms, national agencies provide regulatory oversight, and employers ensure external relevance. A holistic approach that involves all stakeholders fosters a robust QA ecosystem, promoting excellence, accountability, and continuous improvement in higher education.

2.11 International Best Practices in Quality Assurance for Ethiopian Public Universities

Quality Assurance (QA) in higher education is crucial for maintaining academic standards and institutional credibility. By analyzing successful QA models from countries such as South Africa, the United Kingdom (UK), and Malaysia, valuable insights can be gained for Ethiopia's higher education system. Scholars note that accreditation systems vary significantly among nations; some rely on independent quality assurance agencies, while others follow government-controlled models (Materu, 2025; Kettunen, 2012). For example, the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) operates independently to ensure impartial evaluations, whereas Malaysia's Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) functions under government oversight, balancing institutional autonomy with alignment to national policies (Dill & Beerkens, 2010). Ethiopia could benefit from a hybrid approach that incorporates independent accreditation while preserving strategic government involvement to ensure compliance with national educational goals.

Stakeholder involvement is another essential factor in effective QA frameworks. Research shows that partnerships with industry and the participation of students enhance the relevance and responsiveness of QA processes (Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014). In South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) collaborates closely with employers and professional bodies to align academic programs with labor market demands (Badat, 2023). Similarly, the UK's QAA includes student feedback mechanisms, ensuring that learners' perspectives

influence QA decisions (Bótas et al, 2013). For Ethiopia, fostering stronger connections between industry and academia, as well as institutionalizing student representation in QA bodies, could enhance the practicality and inclusivity of quality assessments.

Technology integration has also emerged as a transformative aspect of modern QA systems. Digital QA tools enable real-time monitoring, data-driven decision-making, and increased transparency (Ubachs & Henderikx, 2022). Malaysia's MQA employs an online accreditation platform that streamlines documentation and evaluation processes, minimizing bureaucratic delays (Raman & Don, 2023). With its expanding digital infrastructure, Ethiopia could adopt similar electronic QA systems to improve efficiency and accountability. By leveraging international best practices in accreditation structures, stakeholder engagement, and technological innovation, Ethiopia can strengthen its QA mechanisms to meet global standards while addressing local educational challenges.

2.12 Higher Education Reform in Ethiopia

The development of higher education in Ethiopia is a narrative of radical transformation, characterized by distinct stages of expansion, consolidation, and qualitative reform, each driven by shifting national socio-economic agendas. The post-1991 period, following the fall of the Derg regime, marked a critical juncture, with the new government recognizing education as a fundamental pillar for national rebuilding and poverty reduction. However, this rapid, quantitative expansion soon exposed profound systemic weaknesses, including alarming declines in educational quality, severe overcrowding, a mismatch between graduate skills and labor market needs, and immense strain on physical and human resources (Semela et al., 2021). It was within this context of an expanding yet strained system that the imperative for comprehensive, structural reform emerged, leading to a series of interconnected policy initiatives designed to steer Ethiopian higher education towards greater quality, relevance, and sustainability.

2.12.1 The Higher Education proclamations (No. 351/2003, No. 650/2009, and No. 1152/2019)

Proclamation No. 351/2003: The Foundation of Modern System Governance

The first critical stage in the modern development of Ethiopian higher education was marked by the enactment of the Higher Education Proclamation No. 351/2003. This legislation

emerged in the aftermath of the Ethio-Eritrean War and during a period of significant economic liberalization, representing the government's strategy to align higher education with its national development goals, particularly the Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization (ADLI) strategy. The proclamation established a highly centralized governance model, creating the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) for quality assurance and granting the Ministry of Education (MoE) sweeping authority over curriculum, staff deployment, and institutional administration (Geda, 2012: Kashay, 2012). While this top-down approach was effective in rapidly expanding access and standardizing curricula across a nascent national system, it critically constrained institutional autonomy. Universities operated as extensions of the state bureaucracy, with limited freedom in financial management, academic programming, or internal governance, a structure that scholars argue stifled innovation and created a culture of compliance over critical engagement (Scott, 2018). Thus, Proclamation 351/2003 laid a necessary administrative foundation but established a framework whose inherent limitations would soon become apparent as the system expanded.

Proclamation No. 650/2009: The Massification and Reform Stage

The limitations of a highly centralized model, combined with the increasing demand for tertiary education, led to a significant developmental phase: Proclamation No. 650/2009. This legislation was a direct response to two main pressures: a large youth population and the state's need for a skilled workforce to support its ambitious Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP). The primary goal of Proclamation 650/2009 was the massification of the higher education system, resulting in a dramatic increase in the number of public universities, which rose from a handful to over 50 in just a decade (MoE, 2021; Tamrat & Teferra, 2024). To manage this expanding system, the proclamation introduced vital structural reforms. Most notably, it replaced the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) with the Education and Training Authority (ETA), and later reinstated HERQA with a renewed mandate. Additionally, it formally recognized the role of private higher education institutions. However, this rapid expansion occurred without a proportional increase in resources, academic staff, or physical infrastructure. As a result, the period was marked by a significant decline in quality, overcrowded lecture halls, and overstretched institutional capacity (Abdela & Pillay, 2014). Proclamation 650/2009 succeeded in achieving its quantitative goals for

access but did so at a considerable qualitative cost, highlighting the tension between equity and excellence in higher education development.

Proclamation No. 1152/2019: The Autonomy and Differentiation Stage

The latest and most transformative stage in this legislative evolution is reflected in the Higher Education Proclamation No. 1152/2019, which represents a significant shift toward institutional autonomy and system differentiation. This proclamation acknowledges the systemic issues caused by extreme centralization and aims to promote excellence, innovation, and responsiveness to market and societal needs. Key provisions include the categorization of public universities into "Research," "Applied Sciences," and "Comprehensive" categories, each with a distinct mission and funding model (FDRE, 2019). Importantly, it grants universities substantial autonomy in academic, administrative, and financial matters, including the power to hire staff, manage budgets, establish income-generating enterprises, and design curricula (within national qualifications frameworks). Furthermore, the legislation established a new regulatory body, the Higher Education Governance and Administration Agency (HEGAA), tasked with overseeing the sector through guidance rather than direct control (Gebru et al, 2025). Early analyses indicate that while the policy is ambitious and well-regarded internationally, its implementation faces significant challenges. These include resistance from entrenched bureaucracies, a lack of clarity in the new funding formulas, and varying levels of readiness among institutions to effectively use their newfound autonomy (Tamrat & Teferra, 2024). Ultimately, Proclamation 1152/2019 marks the beginning of a new, complex development stage, with its success depending on effective implementation and a cultural shift within the sector.

2.12.2 Differentiation of Public Universities

The rapid expansion of Ethiopia's public university system, which grew from a few institutions to over fifty in just two decades, has necessitated a shift from a homogeneous model to structural diversification. This transition involves moving away from a "one-size-fits-all" approach to a more differentiated and stratified system. Structural diversification primarily manifests through two interrelated processes: mission differentiation and system stratification. Mission differentiation refers to the variation in institutional purposes, academic offerings, and core activities, while system stratification indicates the emergence of a hierarchical ordering of institutions based on prestige, resource allocation, and functional

specialization. As mandated by the 2019 proclamation, the system is being categorized into three types. Research universities, which focus on knowledge generation and postgraduate studies. Applied sciences universities, which emphasize skill-based undergraduate education and technology transfer. Comprehensive universities, which blend both functions (Shemelis, 2025).

This policy aims to enhance overall efficiency within the system, optimize resource allocation, and ensure that the diverse human capital needs of the economy are met. Areaya (2010) argues that formal differentiation is a strategic response to the massification dilemma. It aims to counteract the dilution of quality associated with rapid enrolment growth by creating a more efficient and purpose-driven system structure. The government's "Education Sector Roadmap" reinforces this by urging universities to develop niche specializations that address local and regional developmental needs, moving beyond the traditional comprehensive university model copied from earlier institutions (Hunde et al, 2023).

However, the coexistence of mandated differentiation and emergent stratification creates significant tension within the system. While differentiation seeks to establish a complementary ecosystem of diverse but equal institutions, stratification inherently creates a pecking order of "more equal" and "less equal" universities. This tension is particularly evident in the phenomenon of academic drift, where newer, teaching-oriented universities strive to emulate the research-intensive model of elite first-generation universities. They often launch master's and PhD programs, not due to regional demand but as a quest for legitimacy and a higher status within the stratified system. Mehari (2016) notes that this mimicry leads to mission inflation and a wasteful duplication of programs, precisely the inefficiencies those differentiation policies were designed to eliminate. Consequently, the push for a stratified hierarchy of prestige actively undermines the policy goal of functional differentiation, pulling the system toward homogeneity at the top rather than fostering diversity across the spectrum. Zhao & Zhong (2025) asserted that successful differentiation requires not only a legal decree but also a profound cultural and structural shift within the entire education ecosystem.

2.12.3 The Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap

The Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-2030) represents a significant policy shift aimed at fundamentally restructuring the country’s higher education system. This initiative was developed in response to critical gaps in graduate competencies, research

relevance, and institutional governance. Unlike the previous focus on mass expansion, the Roadmap emphasizes a substantial qualitative transformation (Ministry of Education, 2018). It aligns with the national goal of achieving lower-middle-income status by 2030, positioning education as the primary driver of human capital development. The core mission of the Roadmap is to initiate a systemic transition within public universities from traditional, theory-heavy instruction toward a more student-centered, problem-solving, and employability-focused approach. This strategic reorientation aims to ensure that institutional outputs align with the nation's economic and social objectives, as outlined in frameworks like the Ten-Year Development Plan (2021-2030). The policy seeks to re-establish public universities as key players in sustainable development and poverty reduction, making their contributions to national progress clear and measurable.

A key component of this transformative agenda is the mandatory implementation of Student-Centred Learning (SCL) and Competency-Based Education (CBE) pedagogies. This requirement directly addresses criticisms of the traditional teacher-centered, passive-lecture model, which has been found to produce graduates lacking in critical thinking, creativity, and practical problem-solving skills (Teferra et al, 2018). At the same time, the Roadmap calls for a redefinition of research excellence, shifting the focus from purely theoretical research to applied research that tackles significant community and industrial challenges. This shift necessitates building strong university-industry partnerships and promoting community-engaged scholarship, ultimately enhancing the societal impact of academic work and justifying public investment in higher education (Hassen, 2025; Teferra et al, 2018).

Additionally, the policy prioritizes the comprehensive digitalization of university education. Scholars note that this undertaking poses financial and logistical challenges as much as technical ones, but it is essential for modernizing teaching methods, improving administrative efficiency, and increasing access (Adamu, 2024). Fundamental to these ambitious pedagogical and digital reforms is a critical agenda to improve governance and leadership structures within public universities. The vision of the Roadmap hinges on granting increased institutional autonomy, paired with mechanisms for greater accountability and efficient resource management (Ali, 2024; Mulu, 2016). This includes streamlining often-bureaucratic leadership models, promoting professional management practices that differ from purely academic leadership, and actively seeking diverse funding sources beyond direct government block grants. As Melu (2016) argues, the successful implementation of the entire Roadmap

depends on these governance reforms, which create the necessary operational conditions and accountability frameworks for sustainable change. Thus, the policy presents an integrated theory of change, where governance, pedagogy, research, and digitalization are interconnected and must advance together to achieve transformative goals.

2.12.4 The Education and Training Authority (ETA)

The establishment of the Ethiopian Education and Training Authority (ETA) in 2021, under Regulation No. 492/2021, marks a significant change in the governance of higher education in the nation. This shift moves from a centralized, input-based model to a decentralized, outcome-focused quality assurance system. The primary mandate of the ETA is to ensure that all higher education institutions, especially public universities, provide education that meets nationally established standards and responds to the socio-economic needs of the country. This includes institutional accreditation, program accreditation, and continuous quality audits. As Wondwosen (2023) notes, this reform directly addresses the perceived disconnect between university outputs and labor market demands, aiming to bridge the "quality chasm" that had widened under the previous system.

A key focus of the ETA's framework is enforcing a nationwide transition to Outcome-Based Education (OBE). This represents a significant philosophical and pedagogical shift for Ethiopian public universities, which have historically been criticized for their rigid, teacher-centered, and content-heavy curricula. The ETA requires that all academic programs be designed around clearly defined graduate profiles, learning outcomes, and competency assessments. Recent research by Tegegn (2025) emphasizes that this shift, while challenging, is crucial for developing "employable graduates with problem-solving skills relevant to local and global challenges." Their study found that universities struggling to comply with ETA standards often treat OBE as a mere documentation exercise, rather than as a comprehensive transformation of curriculum and teaching. The status of an institution with the ETA, therefore, depends on its ability to demonstrate a genuine integration of OBE principles into its educational practices, moving beyond just infrastructure and input metrics.

The ETA's role as the national quality assurer has sparked scholarly debate regarding its impact on institutional autonomy, which is essential for academic excellence. While the Authority provides a necessary framework for standardization and accountability, its stringent compliance requirements may be seen as a new form of centralized control, albeit

under a different name. Analysis by Akalu (2014) argues that the ETA's model risks creating a "compliance culture," where universities prioritize meeting external benchmarks over fostering innovative and context-specific academic environments. They caution that "without a careful balance, the quest for quality can inadvertently stifle the academic freedom and institutional flexibility necessary for ground-breaking research and critical pedagogy" (Abebe & Mulugeta, 2022, p. 45). Consequently, a key concern for universities is finding a way to navigate this tension: using the ETA's standards as a guide for improvement while steadfastly protecting the autonomy required to define their unique academic missions and intellectual identities.

Achieving a favourable ETA status requires public universities to undergo thorough scrutiny of their physical and human resources, compelling them to adopt more strategic approaches to resource mobilization and management. The Authority evaluates various aspects, including lecturer qualifications, student-to-teacher ratios, laboratory equipment, library collections, and ICT infrastructure. As a result, institutions are increasingly seeking funding beyond traditional government block grants. A study on university financing by Akalu (2014) notes that "the ETA's benchmarks have acted as a catalyst for universities to diversify income streams through research grants, industry partnerships, and community services to fund necessary upgrades in learning facilities and faculty development." Although this financial pressure can be burdensome, the ETA process reframes it as essential for institutional sustainability and self-reliance, directly linking fiscal health to the quality of education.

The primary rationale behind the ETA's focus, as reiterated in government policy documents and scholarly work, is to enhance graduates' employability and ensure that higher education contributes directly to national development plans like the Ten-Year Development Plan (2021-2030). The ETA assesses universities on their ability to produce graduates who possess not only academic knowledge but also the skills, competencies, and ethical grounding required by the economy. A recent thematic analysis by Teressa & Besha (2020) confirms that "programs which have successfully integrated industry advisory boards, internship placements, and practical project-based learning into their curriculum have demonstrated higher rates of ETA accreditation success and, concurrently, higher graduate employment rates." Therefore, achieving ETA status serves as a measure of a university's relevance and its tangible contribution to national human capital development, making stakeholder engagement and alignment with the labor market non-negotiable.

Despite its ambitious goals, the implementation of the ETA framework across Ethiopia's diverse public university system faces significant practical challenges. A major obstacle is the capacity gap within the institutions and, at times, within the Authority itself. Research by Woldetensae (2006) indicates that there is an inconsistent understanding of outcomes-based education (OBE) and quality assurance processes among mid-level university management and academic staff, leading to uneven implementation. Furthermore, they point out that the "sheer volume of programs requiring accreditation across numerous universities places an immense strain on the ETA's resources, potentially causing delays and inconsistencies in the evaluation process." This underscores a crucial area for focus: the need for ongoing, large-scale capacity-building initiatives for both regulators and regulated entities to ensure the credibility and effectiveness of the system

2.12.5 ESDP VI's Strategic Shift towards Quality

The Education Sector Development Program VI (ESDP VI), which governed the Ethiopian higher education sector from 2015/16 to 2019/20 (with its impact often assessed through 2021/22 due to implementation delays and pandemic-related disruptions), marked a significant strategic shift in national policy. This program explicitly moved beyond the previous emphasis on quantitative expansion and massification seen in earlier phases (ESDP IV and V), prioritizing instead the interconnected goals of educational quality, relevance, and systemic efficiency. As noted by Tareke et al. (2024), this shift was a direct response to the widely recognized quality crisis that arose from prior rapid, equity-driven growth. It necessitated a recalibration of policy tools, moving from a focus on infrastructure to one concentrated on pedagogical and research outcomes. Consequently, the framework of ESDP VI is characterized by a thorough and detailed approach to standardizing academic processes, enhancing human capital, and incorporating robust quality assurance mechanisms at the micro-level across the entire university system. A central component of ESDP VI's detail-oriented agenda was the comprehensive reform of curricula and teaching methodologies, aligning them with both national economic objectives and global academic standards. This initiative encouraged a more standardized, competency-based curriculum specifically aimed at equipping graduates with employable skills. However, translating these detailed policy designs into consistent classroom practice proved challenging. Research by Egne (2022) indicates that while this push for pedagogical transformation was "operationalized through mandatory training programs and the development of detailed teaching manuals, its

implementation often remained superficial due to deeply entrenched traditional practices and high staff turnover. This highlights a critical tension within ESDP VI: the gap between sophisticated, top-down policy guidelines and their uneven integration into everyday teaching and learning.

The most technically detailed aspect of ESDP VI was the strengthening and systematization of internal and external quality assurance (QA) regimes. This framework introduced an unprecedented level of bureaucratic detail into university administration, aiming to establish a continuous, data-driven feedback loop for institutional improvement. Shore & Wright (2003). Points out that this "audit culture" was designed to standardize excellence. However, he also warns that an over-reliance on quantitative metrics and standardized checklists risks fostering a compliance-oriented mentality rather than a genuine, internalized culture of quality. This critique highlights a fundamental paradox of detailed QA systems: the potential for procedural compliance to overshadow the more resource-intensive goal of meaningful qualitative enhancement. Despite its ambitious design, the implementation of ESDP VI's detailed frameworks faced significant challenges due to systemic constraints. Many public universities, particularly those in emerging regions, struggled with the substantial administrative burden and technical expertise needed to meet the intricate QA and reporting requirements. This challenge was further exacerbated by a persistent mismatch between policy expectations and institutional capacity. Recent analysis by Ali (2024) in their institutional case studies found that "chronic underfunding, coupled with the sheer scale of administrative detail prescribed by ESDP VI, created implementation fatigue and a significant disconnect between policy aspirations at the federal level and the on-the-ground realities of resource-constrained universities."

2.13 Current Practices of Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Public Universities

The quality of inputs remains a critical yet challenging foundation for quality assurance in Ethiopian public universities. Inputs, which include human resources, infrastructure, learning materials, and financial allocations, are frequently identified as significant constraints. Recent studies consistently highlight a severe shortage of qualified academic staff, resulting in a high student-to-lecturer ratio that impedes interactive teaching and adequate supervision (Tessema, 2009). This issue is compounded by the reliance on underqualified graduate assistants to teach undergraduate courses. Additionally, the infrastructure in many universities is often inadequate. Libraries are noted for having outdated collections and limited digital resources,

while laboratories lack modern equipment and sufficient supplies for practical sessions. These deficiencies directly affect the quality of science and technology education (Mncube, 2023). Although financial input has increased, it is still insufficient to meet the demands of the rapid expansion of universities. This situation leads to a dilution of resources rather than a strengthening of quality (Buckner & Zhang, 2021). Consequently, while expansion policies have increased access to higher education, they have strained input resources, creating a significant bottleneck for effective quality assurance.

The transformation of these inputs into positive educational outcomes through teaching-learning processes, research, and community engagement presents notable quality assurance challenges. The teaching-learning process is often criticized for being predominantly teacher-centered, relying heavily on lecture methods and focusing on rote memorization instead of fostering critical thinking and practical skills development (Moges, 2019). Curriculum implementation is frequently disjointed, revealing a gap between the intended competency-based curriculum and its actual delivery. This gap fails to adequately incorporate continuous assessment and feedback loops (Tegegn, 2025). Moreover, research processes, although a core mandate, suffer from a lack of funding, a weak research culture, and limited institutional support. This results in low-quality publications and minimal impactful innovation (Abibo et al, 2023). These issues indicate a significant "implementation gap," where quality assurance aspirations are not effectively translated into daily academic practices, undermining the overall educational process.

Assessing the outcomes of higher education in Ethiopia involves evaluating graduate competencies, employability, and overall societal impact. Current quality assurance practices struggle to systematically measure and align outcomes with national needs and global standards. A pressing concern is the high rate of graduate unemployment, which highlights a misalignment between university outputs and labor market demands (Mekonnen et al, 2024). Studies suggest that graduates often lack the soft skills, practical experience, and innovative mindsets required by employers. Additionally, the mechanisms for tracking graduates and conducting robust tracer studies are underdeveloped, making it challenging for Universities to collect reliable data on outcome indicators for continuous improvement (Bishaw & Melesse, 2017). As a result, while universities produce a high quantity of graduates, the quality of their readiness to contribute effectively to socio-economic development remains a central issue that quality assurance systems must address more rigorously.

The quality assurance (QA) architecture in Ethiopia operates through a dual mechanism comprising Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) and External Quality Assurance (EQA). The Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA), which is now integrated into the Education and Training Authority (ETA), oversees this system. IQA structures are mandated to exist in every university, but they are often characterized as under-resourced, understaffed, and lacking autonomy and authority. Their role is frequently reduced to bureaucratic compliance, primarily focused on preparing reports for external audits, rather than fostering a culture of continuous quality improvement across all academic and administrative units (Akalu, 2014). Meanwhile, EQA, which mainly involves institutional and program audits, has played a crucial role in establishing a baseline framework for quality. However, scholars argue that EQA's methods can be overly punitive and compliance-driven, creating a culture of fear rather than one focused on enhancement. The feedback from EQA processes is often not effectively integrated into strategic planning and resource allocation within universities (Weldearegay, 2020). Consequently, this results in a reactive rather than proactive QA system.

The predominant QA approaches include institutional and program accreditation, external audits, and self-assessment. Accreditation, managed by the federal agency, establishes minimum standards but has faced criticism for promoting a "checkbox mentality," where institutions strive to meet basic requirements rather than pursue excellence (Teshome & Kebede, 2009). External audits are the most common EQA activity, yet their effectiveness suffers due to a lack of qualified external reviewers and insufficient follow-up on audit recommendations. Self-assessment, which is intended to be the cornerstone of IQA, is often viewed as a burdensome requirement imposed from the top down. It is conducted hurriedly to meet external demands rather than serving as a genuine tool for reflective self-evaluation and improvement (Weldearegay, 2020). The integration of these approaches is weak, leading to a fragmented QA process that does not consistently result in tangible quality enhancements.

Peer review, a key aspect of academic quality internationally, is underdeveloped and inconsistently implemented in Ethiopia. While it is formally included in promotion guidelines and some curriculum review processes, its application is often superficial. The practice of peer review for teaching is rare due to cultural resistance, a lack of training on how to conduct constructive reviews, and fears of damaging collegial relationships (Bishaw & Melesse, 2017). In research, the peer-review process for internal grants or publications can be

compromised by a lack of subject-specific experts within institutions and a tendency to prioritize collegiality over critical evaluation. Consequently, the potential of peer review as an effective and low-cost mechanism for professional development and quality enhancement remains largely unrealized, functioning more as a policy prescription than an ingrained academic practice (Geda, 2014).

Effective QA requires active participation from all key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Education and Training Authority (ETA), university leadership, academic staff, students, and employers. The current model is primarily top-down, with the MoE and ETA setting policies and standards with limited consultation, resulting in a sense of ownership deficit at the institutional level (Kufi, 2012). Within universities, QA is often viewed as solely the responsibility of the IQA directorate, and academic staff and students tend to see it as an external imposition rather than a shared responsibility. Their participation is typically passive, often limited to completing questionnaires during audits. Moreover, the involvement of industry and employers in curriculum development, program review, and outcome assessment is minimal and often ad hoc (Teressa & Besha, 2020). This lack of meaningful engagement among multiple stakeholders creates a significant disconnect between the design of the QA system and its acceptance and effectiveness on the ground.

2.14 Challenges of Quality Assurance Practices in Ethiopian Public Universities

Systemic Policy Incoherence and Implementation Discontinuities

A significant barrier to effective quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopian public universities is the lack of coherence among national higher education policies and the resulting inconsistencies in their implementation. Successive proclamations No. 351/2003, No. 650/2009, and No. 1152/2019 highlight fundamental tensions among competing policy objectives, such as expanding enrollment, improving educational quality, and reducing public expenditure (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2019; Semela, 2011: Areaya, 2010). Notably, the mandates for rapid university expansion to achieve massification directly conflict with QA requirements for adequate staffing ratios, infrastructure, and learning resources. This creates implementation paradoxes that individual institutions cannot resolve on their own (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012). This situation, which Ashcroft and Rayner (2012) refer to as "policy accretion," forces universities to comply with an accumulating set of potentially contradictory quality standards, as new mandates are introduced without

systematically retiring previous ones. As a result, the Education and Training Authority's QA framework, while comprehensive in design suffers from irregular application. For instance, external audits are conducted inconsistently, accreditation decisions are often subject to political interference, and enforcement mechanisms lack credible sanctions for non-compliance (Melka, 2025). Research indicates significant horizontal inequity, where newer regional universities face more rigorous audit scrutiny than established central institutions. This disparity reflects political dynamics rather than systematic QA protocols (Tsegaye, 2020: Abebe, 2015).

Compounding these vertical incoherencies is the lack of alignment between national QA policies and institutional implementation strategies, which creates accountability gaps at multiple levels. Regulatory bodies mandate outcomes without providing practical guidance for implementation, while universities develop QA documentation tailored for external reviewers that fails to translate into effective classroom practices (Ayano, 2020: Adamu & Addamu, 2012). This misalignment is further exacerbated by fragmented governance: the Ministry of Education and the Education and Training Authority have overlapping and sometimes contradictory QA responsibilities (Abebe, 2015). In fact, 73% of QA directors report receiving "frequently conflicting" directives from these two entities (Assefa & Alemu, 2021). Furthermore, interventions from international development partners, including World Bank-funded QA capacity-building projects, have inadvertently worsened these discontinuities by introducing parallel QA frameworks that diverge from national systems. This has resulted in duplicative reporting requirements and has diverted institutional focus onto incompatible quality metrics (Hayward, 2006). A more fundamental misalignment exists: while national policies emphasize outcomes-based assessment, Ethiopian universities lack the baseline data infrastructure to track graduate employment outcomes. This makes it operationally impossible to meet outcome-focused QA requirements, a challenge described by Ramdhan, and Masuwd (2025) as "impossible compliance." The cumulative effect is a QA system marked by policy fragmentation, implementation inconsistencies, and diffuse accountability systemic conditions that no single university can address through internal reforms alone (Tadesse, 2014).

The Scarcity of Resources and Infrastructural Deficits

A major barrier to effective QA implementation is the chronic inadequacy of financial, human, and physical resources. While enrollment in Ethiopian public universities has

dramatically increased to meet massification goals, infrastructural development and budget allocations have not kept pace, creating significant strain on the educational ecosystem. Teshome & Kebede (2009) observe that QA units often operate with severely restricted budgets, limiting their ability to conduct meaningful training, acquire necessary technologies, or encourage faculty participation in quality initiatives. Furthermore, the acute shortage of qualified academic staff, compounded by high student-to-lecturer ratios, results in faculty being overwhelmed with teaching responsibilities. This leaves little time for the reflective practices, curriculum development, and student mentorship crucial to QA (Tamrat, 2022). In this resource-starved environment, institutions often find themselves in a reactive mode, where QA becomes a box-ticking exercise focused on merely surviving the next audit instead of serving as a strategic investment in educational excellence.

The Predominance of a Compliance Culture over a Quality Culture

A critical challenge highlighted in contemporary analyses is the prevailing mindset within institutions that perceives Quality Assurance (QA) as an external requirement for accountability rather than an internal catalyst for improvement. This perspective has led to the establishment of a widespread "compliance culture" or "audit culture." As Wokabi (2019) argues, the heavy-handed, top-down approach employed by external regulatory bodies often prioritizes quantifiable metrics and documentation, such as pass rates, staff qualifications, and policy paperwork. This focus comes at the expense of more nuanced qualitative aspects of education, including critical thinking, creativity, and student satisfaction. As a result, university leaders and QA offices tend to prioritize activities that are most visible to auditors, fostering a performative culture where the appearance of quality takes precedence over its substantive integration. This undermines the development of a genuine "quality culture," which requires broad ownership, intrinsic motivation, and a shared commitment to improvement among all stakeholders, including academics, students, and administrative staff (Joshua, 2025).

Limited Autonomy and Academic Staff Engagement

The effectiveness of QA is closely tied to the level of autonomy granted to universities and the genuine engagement of academic staff. In the Ethiopian context, the highly centralized governance model, wherein federal ministries dictate curricula, funding, and major policies, significantly limits institutional flexibility. This restricts a university's ability to customize

QA processes to fit its unique context, mission, and regional needs, making QA feel like a generic, one-size-fits-all mandate (Aboye & Metcalfe, 2021). Compounding this issue is the widespread disengagement of academic staff. Often excluded from the early stages of QA policy design and seeing it as an additional administrative burden, many lecturers approach QA activities with skepticism or outright resistance. Abebe (2015) found that this lack of ownership is a significant barrier, as faculty are the primary agents of quality in learning and teaching. Without their buy-in, QA initiatives tend to remain superficial and fail to make a meaningful impact at the classroom level.

Data Management and the Misalignment of Metrics

A robust quality assurance (QA) system relies on evidence-based decision-making, which depends on efficient data collection, management, and analysis. A recurring challenge for Ethiopian universities is the weakness of their Management Information Systems (MIS). Data related to student performance, graduate employment, faculty research output, and stakeholder feedback is often fragmented, processed manually, and unreliable (Sintayehu & Menber, 2019). This deficiency severely hampers the ability to conduct meaningful program reviews, track progress, and identify areas for intervention. Furthermore, scholars have identified a critical misalignment between the metrics collected and the actual goals of quality education. Gebru et al..., (2025) note that an overreliance on easily quantifiable inputs and outputs, such as the number of books in the library, the percentage of PhD staff, and graduation rates, fails to capture essential but less tangible outcomes, including the quality of student learning, ethical development, and problem-solving skills. This gap in metrics leads to a scenario where institutions may score highly on audit checklists while providing an education that inadequately prepares graduates for the complexities of the labor market and society.

Stakeholder Synergy Deficits and Accountability Gaps

Weak stakeholder synergy presents a significant barrier to effective quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopian public universities (Freeman, 2010: Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Key stakeholders including university leadership, academic staff, students, the Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance Examination and Placement Agency (ETA), and the Ministry of Education (MoE) experience goal divergence, role ambiguity, and fragmented feedback loops, transforming QA into a compliance-oriented process rather than a collaborative improvement mechanism

(Tareke et al., 2024: Melka, 2025). The MoE and ETA focus primarily on documentation and audits, while academic staff prioritize pedagogical rigor and students emphasize employability outcomes (Mitchell et al., 1997: Yirdaw, 2016). This divergence leads to friction, as the MoE's emphasis on graduation rates often conflicts with faculty concerns about academic standards, and employer needs are poorly communicated to curriculum designers (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012: Senge, 2006).

Accountability gaps exist due to unclear roles between the ETA and university QA directorates, resulting in overlapping responsibilities without a clear owner for improvements (Bogale & Hussien, 2025: Akalu, 2014). Crucial feedback loops are compromised; data such as graduate employability and student satisfaction are rarely used to inform curriculum changes (Melka, 2025). Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) argue that stakeholder interest hinges on power, legitimacy, and urgency. The MoE wields significant formal power, prioritizing its goals over quality enhancement (Kahsay, 2012: Tamrat, 2022), while academic staff have high legitimacy but limited power, leading to "reactive adaptation" to conflicting expectations (Anderson, 2006). Students, despite their urgent concerns about quality outcomes, lack the power to demand accountability (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012: Akalu, 2014). Employer feedback remains limited and non-binding (Abebe, 2015: Diko & Saxena, 2023). This situation creates an "accountability without authority" paradox, where those responsible for QA lack the power to effect change (Mwangi, 2017). For example, department heads may oversee curriculum quality but have limited authority over faculty decisions (Akalu, 2014: Atanaw, et al..,,2025). Collaborative governance mechanisms, like multi-stakeholder forums or shared accountability frameworks, are underdeveloped in Ethiopian universities (Ramdhan & Masuwd, 2025). As a result, systemic friction persists, undermining QA effectiveness and the possibility of resolving goal divergences and accountability gaps**.**

Interaction of Structural, Cultural, and Systemic Barriers

Ethiopian public universities face significant challenges due to the interplay of structural, cultural, and systemic barriers an interaction that scholars refer to as a "low-effectiveness equilibrium" (Tadesse, 2014). This situation traps institutions in a cycle of continuous underperformance. On a structural level, chronic resource shortages are exacerbated by limited institutional autonomy. Centralized governance systems restrict universities' ability to allocate budgets flexibly toward quality assurance (QA) priorities or to develop strategies that

are contextually appropriate (Semela, 2011: Yirdaw, 2016). Culturally, there is inconsistent leadership commitment to quality. Institutional leaders often focus on expansion such as increasing enrollment, proliferating programs, and developing infrastructure rather than on improving quality. Additionally, staff engagement is hindered by excessive teaching loads, insufficient incentives, and the belief that QA is merely an externally imposed surveillance mechanism rather than a form of professional development (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012: Bogale & Hussien, 2025).

Systemically, policy incoherence arises from the application of multiple, partially aligned QA frameworks, including national declarations (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2019), continental standards (African Union, 2007), and international benchmarks like the Bologna Process. These overlapping mandates create contradictory compliance demands that overwhelm the institutions' capacity to implement effective policies (Akalu, 2014). Importantly, these barriers do not function in isolation; they reinforce one another. Resource deficiencies worsen cultural disengagement, which in turn undermines the collaboration needed to address systemic policy incoherence. Empirical evidence shows that this interaction leads to a persistent state of "decoupled compliance" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), where QA mechanisms serve primarily as symbolic measures to satisfy external legitimacy requirements while remaining largely ineffective in improving educational quality, graduate competence, or stakeholder satisfaction (Tareke et al..., 2024: Melka, 2025).

2.15 Theoretical Framework of the Study

This study presents a multi-theoretical framework for systematically analyzing quality assurance (QA) practices in Ethiopian public universities. Given the structural, relational, and environmental complexities of QA systems operating at institutional, national, and global levels a single theoretical perspective is insufficient to capture the full range of causal mechanisms involved. Therefore, this framework synthesizes three complementary theories: Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), and Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). These theories are organized within an Input-Process-Outcome (IPO) heuristic, which serves as a structural organizer rather than the primary explanatory tool. While the IPO framework aids in mapping variables, the explanatory insights come from the three theories, each defined according to its causal or relational logic. Together, these theories elucidate how QA inputs (such as resources, policies, and infrastructure) influence processes (including

teaching, governance, and feedback mechanisms) and outcomes (like graduate competence and stakeholder satisfaction), as well as the conditions that can strengthen or weaken these relationships. From this integrated framework, a set of testable propositions emerges to guide empirical analysis.

2.15.1 Institutional Theory: Explaining Legitimacy-Driven Decoupling

Institutional theory elucidates why public universities in Ethiopia adopt quality assurance (QA) practices primarily to gain external legitimacy rather than to enhance operational efficiency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The theory's strength lies in explaining the causal mechanism of isomorphic pressure and its predictable outcome: a decoupling between formal QA policies and the actual academic practices. Within the context of Ethiopian higher education, three distinct isomorphic mechanisms operate.First, coercive isomorphism stems from legally binding regulations, specifically the Higher Education Proclamations No. 351/2003, 650/2009, and 1152/2019 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2019). These are enforced by the Education and Training Authority (ETA) and are aligned with continental standards, including the African Union's ASG-QA (2007). Second, mimetic isomorphism compels less-resourced or newer universities to emulate QA structures from established institutions or international benchmarks (e.g., the Bologna Process), especially under conditions of environmental uncertainty (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Third, normative isomorphism functions through professional networks, training programs, and international partnerships that standardize QA methodologies across various institutions.

The relational logic suggests that an increase in isomorphic pressure whether coercive, mimetic, or normative leads to the adoption of formal QA policies. However, when the demands for external legitimacy conflict with internal resource limitations or cultural practices, the mechanism of decoupling arises (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Decoupling is defined as the disparity between established formal structures and actual practices. This gap mediates the relationship between isomorphic pressures and the effectiveness of QA. When faced with conflicting demands, such as the need to comply with standardized national QA frameworks while operating under severe resource constraints, universities may adopt QA policies merely ceremonially. They set up formal structures, like QA enhancement directorates, self-assessment reports, and compliance documentation, to please outside auditors. However, the way academics work inside the organization often stays the same.

This mechanism does not signify a failure in implementation; rather, it is a rational response by organizations to conflicting environmental pressures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As a result, the theory leads to the following explanatory proposition for the Ethiopian context:

- Proposition 1 (Legitimacy-Compliance): The higher the intensity of coercive isomorphic pressure from the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Education and Training Authority (ETA), the greater the extent of decoupling between formal QA policies and enacted academic practices within Ethiopian public universities. This dynamic causes QA to work more like a compliance ritual than a way to improve quality.

2.15.2 Resource-Based View: The Logic of Internal Capability and Heterogeneity

While institutional theory explains external pressures on quality assurance (QA) processes, it does not account for the differences in QA effectiveness among universities that operate in similar regulatory environments. Specifically, institutional theory can illustrate why certain QA structures are adopted, but it is the Resource-Based View (RBV) that helps explain the variations in their effectiveness. RBV addresses this gap by focusing on internal, organization-specific resources (Barney, 1991). This theory suggests that organizations achieve effectiveness not just by conforming to external standards but by developing resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable (VRIN). More recently, the framework has evolved to include the notion of organizational support, leading to the VRIO (value, rarity, inimitability, and organization) acronym (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2019). Applied to QA, this theory establishes a causal link between inputs and processes: the quality and arrangement of institutional inputs such as financial resources, infrastructure, faculty expertise, and leadership commitment directly influence the capacity to implement effective QA processes.

In the Ethiopian context, RBV posits that merely having QA inputs does not determine effectiveness; instead, the unequal distribution and strategic implementation of resources across institutions account for differing QA outcomes. This theoretical approach leads to the following propositions: universities with a larger pool of qualified academic staff, dedicated QA infrastructure, and autonomous budget allocations for quality initiatives are likely to exhibit higher levels of operational functionality and stakeholder engagement, compared to

those with limited resources. Conversely, when universities lack VRIO resources, their QA practices often devolve into mere compliance rituals, as their institutional capacity to translate inputs into meaningful processes remains fundamentally hindered. Critical strategic resources for effective QA include: (a) a sufficient number of faculty with formal pedagogical training, (b) stable funding for QA activities, (c) functional digital infrastructure to monitor learning outcomes, and (d) a leadership team that is both committed to quality and capable of implementing change.

The causal mechanism connecting RBV to QA effectiveness is resource-driven capability. A university that possesses VRIN resources can advance beyond merely meeting compliance requirements and instead cultivate genuine internal quality capabilities, such as creating feedback loops from assessments to curriculum revisions. On the other hand, a university with insufficient resources illustrated by large class sizes, underqualified faculty, and unreliable internet access may struggle to implement the same QA policies effectively, regardless of the leadership's commitment. This elucidates the variation between institutions that institutional theory, with its emphasis on field-level conformity, cannot explain. The explanatory framework asserts that inputs must not only be present but also strategically leveraged. This differs from a merely descriptive input-process-output (IPO) model by establishing a directional, causal relationship: resource deficits lead to process failures. Additionally, leadership commitment and staff engagement function as intangible strategic resources that mediate the connection between resource availability and process quality.

The causal logic unfolds as follows: inputs (resources) do not directly determine outcomes; instead, they either enable or restrict process quality. Specifically, the adequacy of resources influences the effectiveness of processes through mediating factors such as staff motivation, teaching load management, and assessment frequency. For instance, sufficient funding (an input) can enhance the likelihood of conducting regular peer reviews (a process mechanism), which in turn improves graduate competence (an outcome). In contrast, resource shortages compel universities to focus on compliance documentation instead of meaningful pedagogical enhancements. This creates a relational structure in which resource endowment moderates the input-process-outcome chain. RBV also sheds light on sustainability: when QA practices rely on non-VRIN resources such as easily replicated templates from other universities, they tend not to create lasting advantages. Only institution-specific resources, such as a stable team of

trained QA staff with deep local knowledge, can facilitate continuous improvement. This rationale leads to the following conditional proposition:

- Proposition 2 (Resource-Capability): The positive impact of formal QA mechanisms (e.g., internal audits, peer reviews) on actual quality outcomes (e.g., graduate competence, stakeholder satisfaction) is mediated by the university's stock of VRIN resources. Specifically, in the absence of adequate VRIN resources, investments in formal QA mechanisms will likely fail to yield measurable improvements in educational quality.

2.15.3 Stakeholder Theory: The Logic of Synergy, Salience, and Divergence

Both institutional theory and the Resource-Based View (RBV) consider Quality Assurance (QA) as something organizations implement for their environments. In contrast, Stakeholder Theory redefines QA as an inherently relational process that involves multiple actors with potentially conflicting interests (Freeman, 1984). Donaldson and Preston (1995) similarly emphasize that effective processes emerge from the quality of interactions among actors who have legitimate interests in QA outcomes. Key stakeholders in this system include university leadership, academic staff, students, the Education and Training Authority (ETA), the Ministry of Education (MoE), and employers. The effectiveness of QA depends significantly on the quality of synergy, defined as aligned expectations, clear communication, and collaborative action among these actors.

In the Ethiopian context, QA failures often stem not only from practices of policies or insufficient resources but also from weak stakeholder synergy. This weakness is characterized by unclear role definitions, broken feedback loops, and imbalanced accountability. The underlying logic is both causal and relational: the degree of stakeholder synergy measured by role clarity, mutual accountability, and effective feedback loops, directly influences whether QA processes produce positive outcomes such as graduate competence, employability, and satisfaction. Weak synergy, evident in inadequate communication between universities and the ETA or unclear staff roles, represents a significant barrier that undermines outcome quality.

The mechanism at play here is stakeholder synergy the extent to which stakeholders perceive their roles as aligned, communicate effectively, and actively engage in collaborative actions.

The causal logic suggests that QA effectiveness relies not only on the actions of individual stakeholders but also on the quality of relational coordination among them. Gaps in responsibility, feedback loops, or mutual accountability create systemic frictions that transform QA from a mechanism for improvement into a mere compliance ritual. Specifically, when universities, the ETA, and the MoE operate in silos with weak feedback mechanisms, accountability becomes diffuse, and no single actor feels responsible for outcomes. Conversely, when stakeholder synergy is strong, QA processes can foster continuous improvement through iterative and multi-directional feedback.

The causal mechanisms at play also involve stakeholder salience and goal divergence. According to Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997), stakeholders exhibit varying degrees of salience based on their power, legitimacy, and urgency. The Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Education Training Authority (ETA) hold significant formal power, making their compliance demands very noticeable. In contrast, academic staff possess high legitimacy due to their professional expertise but have less formal power, allowing for forms of passive resistance. Students, while having a high urgency due to their immediate stakes in outcomes, also possess low power. Goal divergence among stakeholders, such as the MoE's emphasis on quantifiable graduation rates, faculty's focus on academic rigor, and employers' prioritization of specific skills to creates friction. Quality Assurance (QA) mechanisms do not fail because of poor design; rather, they struggle to reconcile these differing interests without intentional, structured avenues for negotiation and feedback.

Stakeholder theory outlines three causal mechanisms that connect stakeholder interactions to outcomes. First, role clarity: when each stakeholder understands their specific QA responsibilities (for example, the ETA as the external auditor, university leadership as the internal implementer, and faculty as process participants), accountability improves. Second, feedback loop integrity: effective QA necessitates timely and actionable feedback from outcome assessments (such as graduate employability data) back into process design and resource allocation. Third, collaborative governance: regular, structured dialogue among stakeholders reduces information asymmetry and fosters shared quality norms. These mechanisms are not just descriptive but represent causal pathways; weak feedback loops diminish the likelihood that outcome data will lead to process improvements. Additionally, stakeholder theory clarifies why compliance-oriented QA practices often continue: when the MoE and ETA view accountability as primarily involving documentation submission rather

than focusing on achieving outcomes, stakeholders are likely to engage in symbolic compliance. This creates a negative feedback cycle where outcome data is collected but not utilized, thereby separating evaluation from improvement. The theory suggests that when university leadership, academic staff, the MoE, and the ETA perceive mutual accountability and participate in ongoing dialogue, QA mechanisms, such as audits, self-assessments, and peer reviews can lead to genuine quality enhancements. Conversely, when these relationships are marked by hierarchical imposition, role ambiguity, or suppressed feedback, the same mechanisms may only yield symbolic compliance. The causal logic can be summarized as follows: stakeholder synergy (the independent relational variable) directly influences process quality, which determines whether inputs translate into desired outcomes. This leads to the proposition that variations in stakeholder collaboration explain more variance in perceived QA effectiveness than formal policy structures do alone. The following propositions are derived from stakeholder theory:

- Proposition 3a: Higher levels of stakeholder synergy (characterized by role clarity, frequent communication, and collaborative action) among university leadership, staff, the ETA, and the MoE will be positively associated with perceived QA effectiveness and graduate outcome satisfaction.
- Proposition 3b: Accountability gaps (resulting from unclear or overlapping responsibilities) will be positively associated with symbolic QA compliance and negatively associated with outcome-based quality improvements.

2.15.4 An Integrated Explanatory Framework and the IPO Organizing Structure

This study synthesizes three theories to establish a clear theoretical framework that illustrates a causal chain: institutional pressures (isomorphism) lead to the legitimacy-driven adoption of Quality Assurance (QA) structures, moderated by Resource-Based View (RBV) resources (inputs). These resources influence the implementation of QA processes, which are mediated by stakeholder synergy, ultimately determining the achievement of QA outcomes (dependent variables). The Input-Process-Output (IPO) model functions only as an organizational tool for the variables involved, rather than as an explanatory mechanism. The analytical strength of this framework lies in its capacity to clarify why QA practices in Ethiopia often become compliance rituals: coercive pressures lead to decoupling (as illustrated by institutional theory), resource deficiencies hinder substantive process implementation (as described by

RBV), and weak stakeholder synergy diminishes outcome quality (according to stakeholder theory). This framework directly informs the empirical investigation of all five research questions by transforming them into testable relational propositions.

Institutional theory elucidates the source and nature of external QA demands (inputs at the policy level) and anticipates decoupling. RBV explains how internal resources as a subset of inputs including financial, human, and technological capital shape the conversion of processes into outcomes. Stakeholder theory clarifies the relational dynamics (a cross-cutting process variable) that influence whether QA mechanisms generate synergy or ritualism. The IPO model is merely a supporting structure for organizing these variables, not the framework of explanation. Inputs (such as funding, policies, infrastructure, and faculty qualifications) are framed through RBV and institutional theory. Processes (including teaching, assessment, governance, and feedback loops) are examined through stakeholder theory and the decoupling mechanism presented in institutional theory. Outcomes (like graduate competence, employability, and satisfaction) represent the dependent variables that require explanation. The causal logic operates as follows: external pressures either lead to institutional decoupling or strategic resource deployment, resulting in stakeholder synergy or conflict, which ultimately influences the effectiveness of QA (or lack thereof). This framework transitions from mere description to concrete explanation by clearly specifying the mechanisms (decoupling, resource-capability mediation, stakeholder goal alignment) and interactions (for instance, resources moderating the link between policy and practice, or stakeholder synergy mediating the relationship between processes and outcomes) that drive QA outcomes.

2.16. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Traditional quality assurance frameworks in higher education have often utilized linear reductionist approaches that assume straightforward cause-and-effect relationships among inputs, processes, and outcomes (Cheng, 2017; Harvey & Williams, 2010). However, these linear models fail to adequately capture the recursive, multidirectional, and contextually embedded nature of quality assurance systems operating within complex organizational environments (Gabi & Chikwa, 2025).; Georgios et al..,2017). To address this limitation, this study conceptualizes quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public universities as a dynamic system characterized by feedback loops, contextual interdependencies, and emergent properties that go beyond simple linear causality (see Figure 1). This systems-oriented

conceptual framework integrates institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), the resource-based view (Barney, 1991), and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 2010 ; Donaldson & Preston, 1995) within an input-process-outcome (IPO) heuristic. It explicitly incorporates recursive feedback mechanisms and contextual moderators that mediate and transform the relationships among constructs.

This systems orientation acknowledges that quality assurance inputs (e.g., policies, resources, and infrastructure) do not simply flow linearly toward outcomes; instead, they are continuously reshaped by process-based feedback, stakeholder interpretations, and institutional adaptations that emerge over time (Meadows, 2008; Senge, 2006). Consequently, the conceptual framework presented here explicitly includes feedback loops where outcome data (e.g., graduate employability, stakeholder satisfaction) recursively inform adjustments in processes and the reallocation of inputs. It also accounts for contextual dynamics, including structural constraints (e.g., resource scarcity), cultural factors (e.g., leadership commitment), and systemic conditions (e.g., policy coherence), that influence the effectiveness of quality assurance (Tolbert & Hall, 2015).

Theoretical Grounding of the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework draws on three complementary paradigms that together explain why quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public universities vary in effectiveness, despite operating under similar regulatory pressures (Dill, 1995; Stensaker, 2020). Unlike purely descriptive input-process-output (IPO) applications, this framework uses these three theories as explanations for why and under what conditions quality assurance inputs lead to effective outcomes. First, institutional theory provides insight into how coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) drive the adoption of formal quality assurance structures. It also explains the decoupling mechanism, wherein ceremonial compliance replaces substantive quality improvement (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This theory predicts that external legitimacy demands, such as regulatory compliance, often result in ceremonial adoption of quality assurance practices rather than meaningful improvement (Naumovska et al.., 2021; Bromley & Powell, 2012). Second, the resource-based view (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2019) accounts for differences in quality assurance effectiveness among institutions by focusing on the distribution and strategic use of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources. These resources include financial capital, faculty expertise, technological infrastructure, and

commitment from leadership. Third, stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997) clarifies how the quality of relationships among university leadership, academic staff, students, the Education and Training Authority (ETA), and the Ministry of Education (MoE) influences whether quality assurance mechanisms yield synergy or merely symbolic compliance. It highlights how relational dynamics such as role clarity, integrity of feedback, and collaborative governance affect whether quality assurance processes result in genuine improvement or symbolic compliance (Keay, 2010; Harrison et al., 2019).

These three theoretical perspectives work together within the proposed framework: institutional theory explains policy-level inputs, the resource-based view addresses the capabilities necessary for processes, and stakeholder theory focuses on the relational dynamics that generate outcomes. By anchoring the framework in these established theories, the study transcends mere descriptive mapping of variables, moving toward analytical and predictive power that can clarify the success or failure of quality assurance efforts in resource-constrained, post-conflict higher education settings (Whetten, 1989; Weick & Weick, 1995).

Defined Constructs: Inputs, Processes, and Outcomes

The conceptual framework operationalizes three primary constructs: inputs, processes, and outcomes. Each of these constructs is defined through specific indicators and measurable dimensions derived from the quality assurance literature (Ewell, 2010; Welzant et al., 2015). Inputs refer to the structural and resource-based elements necessary for initiating quality assurance activities. They are operationalized through four measurable dimensions: Material Resources: Measured by budget allocation for quality assurance activities, the adequacy of infrastructure (classrooms, laboratories, libraries), and the availability of technological infrastructure (learning management systems, assessment platforms). Human Resources: Measured by faculty-student ratios, the proportion of faculty with terminal degrees, and the availability of trained quality assurance personnel. Policy Resources: Measured by the existence and clarity of quality assurance policies, accreditation standards, and internal audit protocols. Leadership Resources: Measured by senior management's commitment to quality, strategic planning for quality assurance, and the autonomy of resource allocation (Brennan & Shah, 2017; Kayyali, 2023).

Processes are the activities, mechanisms, and relational dynamics that transform inputs into outcomes. They are operationalized through four measurable dimensions: Teaching and

Learning Processes: Measured by pedagogical approaches, curriculum delivery methods, assessment frequency and quality, and student support services. Governance Processes: Measured by the functionality of quality assurance committees, transparency in decision-making, clarity of roles among stakeholders, and accountability mechanisms. Quality Assurance Mechanisms: Measured by the frequency of internal audits, the implementation of peer reviews, self-assessment practices, and compliance with external accreditation standards. Feedback Processes: Measured by the communication channels with stakeholders, response times to identified deficiencies, and the integration of assessment data into decision-making (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Georgios et al., 2017). Outcomes represent the results and impacts of quality assurance processes, operationalized through three measurable dimensions: Graduate Competence: Measured by demonstrated knowledge and skills, critical thinking abilities, problem-solving capacity, and communication proficiency. Graduate Employability: Measured by employment rates post-graduation, time to employment, employer satisfaction with graduate capabilities, and career progression metrics. Stakeholder Satisfaction: Measured by academic staff perceptions of the utility of quality assurance, student satisfaction with learning experiences, and approval from regulatory bodies regarding institutional performance (Welzant et al., 2015; Stensaker, 2020).

Relational Specification: Direction, Strength, and Type of Relationships

The conceptual framework outlines directional, mediational, and moderating relationships among various constructs, advancing beyond simple correlations to define causal pathways that can be empirically tested. The primary directional relationships are as follows: (a) inputs positively influence processes; specifically, higher quality and greater availability of material, human, policy, and leadership resources increase the likelihood that quality assurance processes will be implemented meaningfully rather than ceremonially (Barney, 1991; Cheng, 2017); (b) processes positively influence outcomes; effective teaching, governance, quality assurance mechanisms, and feedback processes enhance graduate competence, employability, and stakeholder satisfaction (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Welzant et al., 2015); and (c) inputs indirectly influence outcomes through the mediating variable of processes. This establishes that processes serve as the transmission mechanism through which resource advantages lead to quality improvements (Brennan & Shah, 2017; Ewell, 2010).

The strength of these relationships is hypothesized to vary based on contextual conditions. The input-process relationship is moderated by leadership commitment and staff engagement,

while the process-outcome relationship is moderated by stakeholder synergy and the integrity of feedback loops (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997). The specified relationships include direct effects (inputs → processes, processes → outcomes), indirect or mediated effects (inputs → processes → outcomes), and moderated effects (where stakeholder synergy strengthens the process-outcome relationship and resource scarcity weakens the input-process relationship). Importantly, the framework moves away from linear reductionism by outlining recursive relationships, including feedback loops from outcomes back to inputs (where outcome data informs resource reallocation decisions) and from outcomes back to processes (where graduate employability metrics shape curriculum revisions and pedagogical innovations). This approach captures system complexity and adaptive dynamics (Gabi, J., & Chikwa, 2025; Georgios et al., 2017).

Mediating and Moderating Variables in the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework incorporates both mediating and moderating variables that explain the mechanisms through which inputs translate into outcomes and the boundary conditions that strengthen or weaken these translations. Mediating variables include the following: (a) stakeholder synergy, defined as the degree of aligned expectations, role clarity, communication frequency, and collaborative action among university leadership, academic staff, students, ETA, and MoE, which mediates the relationship between governance processes and outcome satisfaction (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984); (b) decoupling, defined as the disparity between formal quality assurance policies and enacted academic practices, which mediates the relationship between isomorphic pressures and quality assurance effectiveness, explaining why ceremonial adoption fails to produce substantive outcomes (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977); and (c) resource-driven capability, defined as the institutional capacity to strategically deploy VRIN resources for quality enhancement, which mediates the relationship between input availability and process quality (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2019). Moderating variables include the following: (a) leadership commitment, which moderates the input-process relationship by determining whether available resources are actively directed towards quality improvement rather than symbolic compliance (Brennan & Shah, 2017); (b) staff engagement, which moderates the process-outcome relationship by influencing whether quality assurance mechanisms are implemented with professional ownership or passive resistance (Stensaker, 2020); (c) policy coherence, which moderates the isomorphic pressure-decoupling relationship by determining whether external mandates align with institutional capabilities

and cultural contexts (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983); and (d) feedback loop integrity, defined as the timeliness, actionability, and utilization of assessment data, which moderates the outcome-process feedback relationship by determining whether outcome measurements lead to process improvements (Ewell, 2010; Harvey & Williams, 2010).

Analytical and Predictive Power of the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework offers significant analytical power by providing explanations for observed phenomena instead of merely describing relationships among variables. Specifically, this framework clarifies why quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public universities may become disconnected from actual improvement. Coercive isomorphic pressures, as described by institutional theory, create motives for adopting policies to gain legitimacy. However, resource deficiencies, highlighted in the resource-based view, hinder the implementation of processes, while weak stakeholder synergy, discussed in stakeholder theory, compromises outcome quality. This explanatory structure allows the framework to differentiate between scenarios where quality assurance mechanisms lead to meaningful improvements and those where they result in mere symbolic compliance, addressing a critical gap in the quality assurance literature (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Stensaker, 2020).

Furthermore, the framework also has predictive capabilities, generating testable hypotheses about the conditions under which specific relationships will hold. For instance, it predicts that investments in formal quality assurance mechanisms (such as internal audits and peer reviews) will lead to measurable improvements in graduate outcomes only when these efforts are supported by valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources (a mediating variable) and strong stakeholder synergy (a moderating variable). Conversely, if these enabling conditions are not present, the same mechanisms are likely to result in ceremonial compliance without significant quality gains (Barney, 1991; Freeman, 1984). Additionally, the framework predicts that higher levels of coercive isomorphic pressure will correlate with greater decoupling, unless moderated by policy coherence and resource adequacy (Bromley & Powell, 2012; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These predictions can be empirically tested through the mixed-methods design outlined in this study, allowing for the potential refinement or disconfirmation of the framework based on the evidence gathered.

Anchoring in Recognized Theory and Empirical Operationalization

The conceptual framework is based on three well-recognized and extensively validated theories from organizational sociology and strategic management. Institutional theory

explains at the macro level why organizations adopt formal structures that may not align with their operational practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This phenomenon has been well-documented in research on quality assurance in higher education (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Stensaker, 2020). The resource-based view (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2019) provides a meso-level explanation for the differences in inter-organizational performance. It demonstrates that competitive advantage comes from valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources rather than simply conforming to external pressures. Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997) offers a micro-level explanation for relational dynamics. It shows that organizational effectiveness relies on the quality of coordination among stakeholders who have legitimate but potentially differing interests.

The integration of these three theories within an Input-Process-Output (IPO) heuristic is grounded (Katz & Kahn, 1978), which views organizations as interdependent systems that import resources (inputs), transform these resources through internal activities (processes), and export products or services (outcomes) while adapting to feedback from their environment. For empirical operationalization, each construct in the framework is specified with measurable indicators. **Inputs** will be measured using institutional data on budget allocation, faculty qualifications, infrastructure assessments, and policy document analyses, along with survey items that capture stakeholder perceptions of resource adequacy (Brennan & Shah, 2017; Kayyali, 2023). Processes will be assessed through survey items evaluating teaching practices, governance functionality, the frequency of quality assurance mechanism implementation, and the effectiveness of feedback loops. This data will be triangulated with qualitative information from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Georgios et al., 2017). Outcomes will be measured using graduate competence assessments, employability tracking data, and validated satisfaction scales for academic staff, students, and employers, aiming for internal consistency reliability targets of $\alpha \geq 0.80$ for all multi-item scales (Welzant et al., 2015; Stensaker, 2020).

Mediating and moderating variables will be assessed using established instruments: stakeholder synergy will be measured using adapted scales from stakeholder salience research (Mitchell et al., 1997); decoupling will be evaluated using discrepancy scores between policy and practice survey items (Bromley & Powell, 2012); leadership commitment will be measured using validated organizational leadership scales; and feedback loop

integrity will be assessed using adapted measures of information flow (Ewell, 2010). All measurement instruments will undergo pilot testing with a representative subsample to establish content validity, construct validity, and reliability before full administration.

Visual Conceptual Representation of Variables:

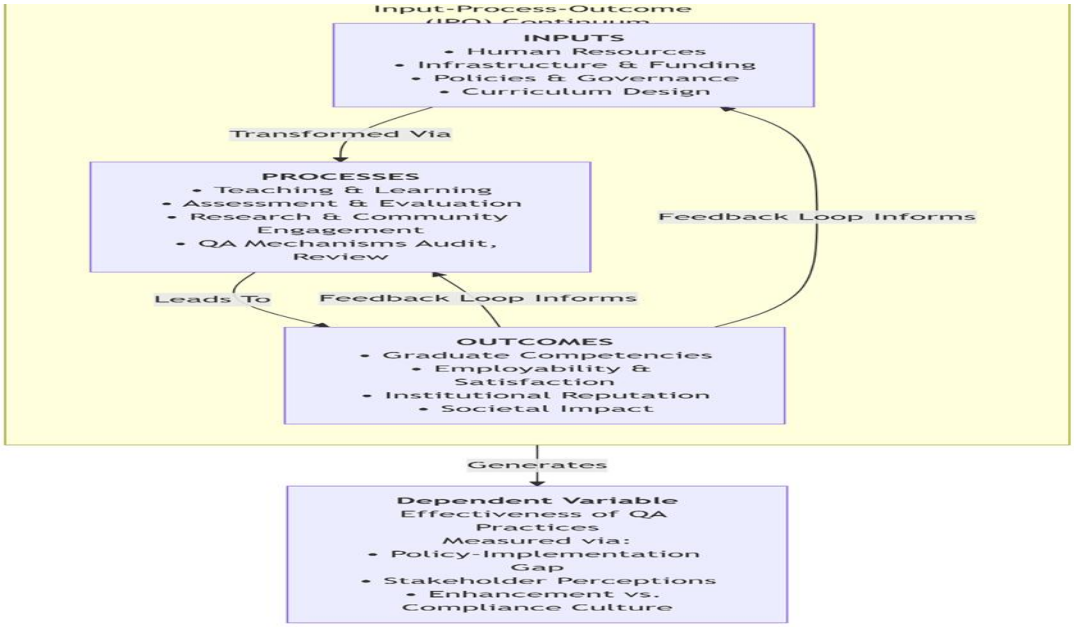


Figure 2.1: conceptual framework of the study: Adapted from Cheng (2016), Barney (1991), and Donaldson & Preston (1995).

2.17 Summary of Review of Related Literature

This literature review examines quality assurance (QA) practices in Ethiopian public universities through a comprehensive theoretical lens. The review begins by defining quality and QA, referencing foundational frameworks that delineate quality across six dimensions: exceptionalism, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money, transformative potential, and continuous enhancement. It then evaluates major QA models, including Total Quality Management, ISO standards, the Bologna Process, European Standards and Guidelines, the Balanced Scorecard, and the Malcolm Baldrige Framework, noting their applicability and the implementation challenges they face in Ethiopia's resource-constrained environment. The review distinguishes critically between quality assurance and quality enhancement. It emphasizes that while QA establishes baseline compliance, genuine improvement requires a cultural shift toward enhancement-focused practices. A historical analysis of Ethiopian higher education reforms traces the evolution from Proclamation No. 351/2003 to No. 1152/2019, highlighting the transition from centralized control to institutional differentiation and

autonomy, along with the establishment of the Education and Training Authority (ETA) as the national QA body.

The literature synthesis identifies persistent gaps between policy and practice, characterized by resource scarcity, compliance-oriented cultures, weak stakeholder engagement, and inadequate outcome measurement. An integrated theoretical framework combining institutional theory (which explains isomorphic pressures and ceremonial compliance), contingency theory (which emphasizes contextual adaptation), and open systems theory (which highlights stakeholder interdependence and feedback loops) is proposed. This framework examines the interplay of input, process, and outcome dimensions. Key findings reveal that Ethiopian public universities face challenges such as faculty shortages, infrastructural deficits, predominantly teacher-centered pedagogies, underdeveloped graduate tracking systems, and misalignment between audit metrics and meaningful educational outcomes. The review concludes that effective QA requires moving beyond mere box-ticking compliance. Instead, it calls for the cultivation of a genuine quality culture, strengthening industry-academia partnerships, enhancing data-driven decision-making, and balancing institutional autonomy with accountability mechanisms aligned with Ethiopia's Ten-Year Development Plan and continental frameworks like Agenda 2063.

CHAPTER THREE

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework that guided the investigation. Methodology is viewed as extending beyond simply choosing techniques; it includes a critical analysis of the philosophical assumptions, principles, and procedures that underpin scientific inquiry (Koro-Ljungberg & Cannella, 2017). The framework involves the interaction of paradigms and theoretical models, as well as the strategic application of quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods to ensure methodological coherence (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Contemporary scholarship suggests that a strong methodology serves as both a philosophical foundation and a practical guide, ensuring rigor, transparency, and a clear alignment between research questions and investigative strategies (Mertens, 2019). In this chapter, the researcher details the research philosophy (pragmatism), approach (mixed methods), and design (concurrent triangulation), followed by specifications about the research context, population, sampling, data collection instruments, analytical procedures, and considerations regarding validity, reliability, and ethical protocols.

3.2. Research Philosophy

The research philosophy, or paradigm, establishes the foundational assumptions about reality (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), and values (axiology) that guide the construction of knowledge. An explicit articulation of this paradigm is essential for methodological coherence and intellectual transparency (Lincoln et al., 2011). Positivism, a paradigm rooted in the natural sciences, asserts that reality is objective, stable, and independent of the researcher. It emphasizes observable and measurable evidence to generate generalizable truths (Smith & Smoll, 2025). This approach prioritizes detached objectivity and typically employs structured quantitative methods to test hypotheses (Smirnov, 2019). In contrast, interpretivism posits that social reality is subjective, multiple, and mentally constructed through human interaction and shared meanings (Burr, 2024). This paradigm prioritizes qualitative methods to explore the depth of lived experiences and contextual understanding (Taylor et al, 2025). Critical theory challenges both positivist and interpretivist traditions by focusing on power dynamics, oppression, and the aim of promoting emancipatory social

change. It often employs participatory and action-oriented research methods to expose and dismantle inequalities (Müller, 2025).

For this study, pragmatism was adopted as the guiding philosophy. Pragmatism rejects the forced dichotomy between positivism and interpretivism, prioritizing the research problem over adherence to a particular paradigm (Mulatu & Negash, 2024). It advocates for a practical and consequentialist approach to inquiry, where the value of knowledge is determined by its utility in solving real-world problems (Dewey & Imagination, 2020). Philosophically, pragmatism represents a third way that transcends the paradigm wars, legitimizing the use of multiple methods to effectively address research questions (Cheng, 2019). This approach aligns perfectly with the contingency-based theoretical framework of the study, which requires both the generalizable trends offered by quantitative data and the nuanced, contextual explanations provided by qualitative data (Zhang, 2025). To mitigate the risk of pragmatism becoming overly utilitarian without a strong theoretical foundation (Mertens, 2023), the research was firmly grounded in established theory, using pragmatism as a flexible framework for methodological integration.

3.3. Research Approach

This study is grounded in the philosophy of pragmatism and employs a mixed-methods research (MMR) approach to investigate quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public universities. Pragmatism serves as the epistemological foundation for this inquiry because it emphasizes practical outcomes and problem-solving effectiveness over abstract debates about qualitative versus quantitative methods. This makes it particularly well-suited for examining complex organizational issues in resource-constrained environments (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Shan, 2022). The pragmatic approach supports the use of mixed methods by asserting that research questions, rather than strict methodological conventions, should guide design decisions. It also posits that various types of data can be integrated to produce actionable insights (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017; Fetters, 2019).

The mixed-methods approach serves three complementary purposes within this study. First, triangulation allows for cross-verification of findings from both quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data, enhancing the validity and robustness of conclusions regarding quality assurance practices (Bazeley, 2019). Second, complementarity enables different facets of the research problem to be explored using different methods. Quantitative data captures the

prevalence and statistical relationships among quality assurance variables across institutions, while qualitative data provides deeper insights by revealing the mechanisms, contextual factors, and stakeholder interpretations that underpin the observed patterns (Onwuegbuzie & Hitchcock, 2020). Third, expansion broadens the scope of the inquiry by investigating both the extent of quality assurance implementation (through surveys distributed to academic staff and department heads) and the depth of stakeholder experiences (through interviews with institutional leaders, Ministry of Education directors, and Education and Training Authority directors, along with focus group discussions with student councils) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

The quantitative component of this study aims to achieve analytical generalization by testing theoretically derived propositions regarding the relationships among isomorphic pressures, resource availability, stakeholder synergy, and the effectiveness of quality assurance. Specifically, it measures the prevalence and correlates of decoupling between formal policies and enacted practices, evaluates the mediating role of VRIN (Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, Non-substitutable) resources in the relationship between quality assurance mechanisms and quality outcomes, and examines the connection between stakeholder synergy and perceived quality assurance effectiveness (Barney, 1991; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Freeman, 1984). On the other hand, the qualitative component provides explanatory insights into the causal mechanisms decoupling, resource-driven capability, and stakeholder synergy that quantitative analysis alone cannot fully capture. This approach addresses the "how" and "why" questions integral to the research objectives (Bazeley, 2019; Fetters, 2019). By integrating the quantitative breadth with qualitative depth, the study aims to explain not just what exists but also why quality assurance practices either succeed or fail within the context of Ethiopian public universities.

3.4. Research Design

This study utilizes a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design, which involves the simultaneous collection of both quantitative and qualitative data during a single phase of the research process. This data is then integrated during the interpretation stage (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). By gathering both types of data at the same time, this design allows for direct comparison of findings, avoiding the temporal confounding issues that can arise in sequential designs, where one method's results depend on and may limit the other (Hitchcock & Onwuegbuzie, 2020). The parallel nature of this design

ensures that both datasets are collected within a comparable timeframe, minimizing the risk that changes in the institutional environment between data collection phases could differentially impact the quantitative and qualitative outcomes (Fetters, 2019).

The priority structure of this design is quantitative-dominant (QUAN + qual), meaning the quantitative component primarily addresses the key research questions, while the qualitative component serves a supporting role, adding depth, context, and illustrative elaboration to the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Shan, 2022). This prioritization is justified by the study's theoretical framework, which outlines testable propositions about relationships among constructs that can be quantitatively operationalized and statistically tested (Barney & Hesterly, 2019; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). Specifically, the quantitative strand examines the hypothesized mediating role of VRIN resources, the moderating effect of stakeholder synergy, and the interaction among structural, cultural, and systemic barriers. Although the qualitative strand is secondary in priority, it is crucial for explaining the underlying mechanisms of these statistical relationships and capturing stakeholder interpretations that standardized survey instruments cannot access (Bazeley, 2017; Fetters, 2019).

The integration strategy for this concurrent design follows a triangulation protocol comprising three analytical steps. First, the quantitative and qualitative data are analyzed separately using methods suited to each paradigm: quantitative data undergoes descriptive statistics, t-test to identify patterns and test propositions, while qualitative data is subjected to thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes, stakeholder perspectives, and explanatory mechanisms (Hitchcock & Onwuegbuzie, 2020; Onwuegbuzie & Hitchcock, 2020). Second, the independently derived findings are compared using joint displays of tables or matrices that juxtapose quantitative results with qualitative themes (including representative quotes, coded categories, and narrative explanations) to identify points of convergence, divergence, and expansion (Fetters, 2019; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Finally, integration occurs through a side-by-side comparison, where qualitative findings elaborate on, contextualize, or explain the quantitative results. Any divergent findings are analyzed to explore sources of discrepancy, such as subgroup differences, measurement limitations, or contextual factors not captured by the quantitative instrument (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

This concurrent research design is specifically tailored to address all five research questions. For Research Question 1 (RQ1), which pertains to the current state and perceptual variation, a

quantitative survey measures the distribution of perceptions among different stakeholder groups. In addition, qualitative interviews provide insights into why these variations exist. For Research Question 2 (RQ2), focused on the implementation of quality assurance (QA) mechanisms, quantitative analysis evaluates the perceived effectiveness of formal mechanisms, while qualitative data reveal the conditions under which these mechanisms lead to meaningful improvements rather than merely symbolic compliance. For Research Question 3 (RQ3), regarding stakeholder synergy, quantitative data offer detailed accounts of role clarity, communication patterns, and collaborative actions. Qualitative data from from interviews and focus groups provide supporting evidence about the prevalence of accountability gaps. For Research Question 4 (RQ4), which addresses systemic barriers, an integrated mixed-methods approach allows for a multi-level analysis of barriers. Quantitative data identify the frequency of various barrier types, while qualitative data explain how these barriers interact to create systemic failures. For Research Question 5 (RQ5), Quantitative findings ensure that the framework addresses documented patterns rather than assumed needs. A qualitative synthesis of interview and focus group data, supported by document analysis, generates context-specific components of the strategic framework.

The analytical depth of this design lies in its ability to achieve explanatory elaboration rather than simple descriptive triangulation (Bazeley, 2017). Unlike descriptive mixed-methods studies that merely confirm or cross-validate findings, this design centers on causal explanations. Quantitative analysis tests whether theoretically predicted relationships hold within the Ethiopian context, while qualitative analysis uncovers mechanisms, such as decoupling, resource-driven capability, and stakeholder synergy that explain why these relationships exist or do not. This explanatory orientation is implemented by integrating the theoretical propositions into the analytical framework. For instance, if quantitative analysis reveals a statistically significant relationship between coercive isomorphic pressure and decoupling, qualitative interviews with institutional leaders and ministry officials will be analyzed to identify the specific mechanisms (e.g., documentation burdens, resource constraints, cultural resistance) that govern this relationship in practice. Similarly, if quantitative analysis shows that VRIN resources mediate the relationship between QA mechanisms and outcomes, qualitative data would be examined to determine whether this mediation occurs through the proposed pathways (e.g., faculty capacity enabling meaningful peer review, digital infrastructure facilitating feedback loops) or through alternative mechanisms not captured by the theoretical framework.

The philosophical foundation of this design is grounded in pragmatism, which has important implications for justifying knowledge claims and translating findings into actionable recommendations (Shan, 2022; Fetters, 2019). Unlike positivist approaches that demand objective and value-neutral knowledge, pragmatism evaluates knowledge claims based on their practical consequences and effectiveness in addressing real-world problems (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). In line with this perspective, the validity of this study's findings will be assessed through conventional criteria (such as internal consistency reliability of scales and triangulation across data sources) as well as their practical usefulness in developing a context-specific strategic framework. This framework aims to reorient the quality assurance (QA) systems of Ethiopian public universities towards continuous improvement. This pragmatic approach is further reflected in the study's acknowledgement of stakeholder perspectives as valid sources of knowledge, its focus on actionable insights rather than abstract theorizing, and its recognition that understanding QA effectiveness is always situated within specific institutional and cultural contexts (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). By integrating quantitative rigor with qualitative depth within a pragmatist framework, this mixed-methods design aims to produce findings that are both empirically reliable and practically relevant to quality assurance policies and practices in Ethiopian public universities.

3.5. Source of Data

A data source is the origin of the data being used. It can be the initial location where data is created or where physical material is first digitized. Even the most refined data can serve as a source if it is utilized or accessed by another operation. For this study, the primary data sources include public universities, the Education and Training Authority (ETA), and the Ministry of Education (MoE). Participants providing data from the MoE will include the Director of Higher Education Competency Assessments, the Curriculum Director, and the Director of Teacher Development. From the ETA, participants will consist of the quality assurance director and the team leader. Additionally, data would be gathered from a sample of public university stakeholders, including student councils, academic staff, department heads, college deans, internal quality enhancement directors, and academic vice presidents. Data collection methods would involve interviews, survey questionnaires, focus group discussions, and document analysis.

3.6. Research setting, Target Population and Sampling Frame

3.6.1. Research setting

A research setting refers to the specific physical, social, or virtual environment in which a study takes place. This includes the location (such as public universities), the participants involved, and the surrounding context, all of which play a significant role in data collection, participant experience, and the interpretation of results. The research setting is a crucial aspect of methodological design, particularly in mixed-methods studies, where contextual factors can greatly affect both data collection and analysis. This study focuses on the Ethiopian public higher education sector, which was chosen because it directly aligns with the research objectives related to quality assurance (QA) and institutional differentiation. Ethiopian universities provide a compelling research site due to their rapid expansion driven by state initiatives and ongoing structural transformations. This environment offers a unique opportunity to explore how QA systems operate within a differentiated yet developing institutional framework (Tareke et al., 2024). This section outlines the reasons for site selection, describes the institutional landscape, specifies the sample used in the study, and examines important contextual challenges.

Research site selection is the systematic process of identifying, evaluating, and choosing the best locations, such as research centers, for conducting a study. In this research, the intentional choice of Ethiopian public universities was driven by important methodological and contextual considerations. As Daniel et al (2024) point out, the research site must provide adequate access to participants and data while also reflecting the broader socio-cultural dynamics of the study. This site provides rich, multi-tiered access to academic staff, administrators, and students across a spectrum of institution types, enabling a comprehensive investigation into the implementation of QA mechanisms. The site's most distinctive characteristic is its recent and explicit policy-driven differentiation. Lee (2018) emphasizes that the geographical and institutional characteristics of the research site influence the transferability of findings to similar contexts. Consequently, this selection facilitates what Yin (2009) terms analytic generalization, where findings may extend to comparable higher education systems in the Ethiopian undergoing similar expansion and reform.

Institutional Diversity and Expansion Context

The research site includes ten public universities in Ethiopia, chosen to represent the diverse categories established by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education's 2021 differentiation framework (MoSHE, 2021). This policy classifies universities into five distinct categories based on their primary mission and function: research universities, applied universities, comprehensive universities, science and technology universities, and education universities. This framework signifies a significant departure from the previously uniform system, aiming to create a stratified and specialized system that better addresses national development needs (MoSHE, 2021). This expansion represents one of the most dramatic patterns of growth in higher education nationally, with the number of public universities increasing to approximately fifty in just two decades. This growth is rooted in the national policy that frames higher education as a critical driver of development, emphasizing the production of a skilled workforce, research, and innovation (Worku, 2025).

Table 3.1*:* Institutional Types Sampled in the Study

Institutional Type	**Primary Focus**	**Degree Levels**	**Number in Sample**
Research Universities	Knowledge generation, postgraduate studies	PhD, Master's, Bachelor's	1
Applied Sciences Universities	Skill-based education, technology transfer	Bachelor's, Master's,	3
Comprehensive Universities	Blended research and applied functions	PhD, Master's, Bachelor's	3
Science & Technology Universities	STEM fields, technical education	Bachelor's, Masters	2
Education Universities	Teacher training, education research	Bachelor's, Masters	1

In Table 3.1, it was quantified that site selections of institutional type, primary focus of the institution, level of training (degree), and number of universities in each sample.

3.6.2 Target Population and Sampling Frame

A fundamental principle of research methodology is the distinction between the population and the sample, which is crucial for the validity and generalizability of a study's findings

(Kumar, 2018). The population refers to the entire group of individuals, items, or elements that share specific characteristics relevant to the research. In contrast, a sample is a strategically selected subset of this population (Zumitzavan, 2026). For this study, the target population includes all 50 public universities officially recognized by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education for the 2023-2024 academic year, as well as key stakeholder groups essential for quality assurance. These stakeholders include institutional leadership, academic staff, student representatives, and relevant government bodies. To ensure comprehensive representation, the sampling frame was organized according to the official classification system of differentation used by the Ethiopian Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE, 2021). The sampling strategy deliberately selected representatives from each institutional category to effectively capture the diverse expressions of educational quality and governance structures. This method aligns with contemporary guidance, which emphasizes that sampling frames should reflect the heterogeneity of the target population to enhance external validity (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Table 3.2*: Sampling Frame by Institutional Category*

Institutional Type	Total Population	Selected Samples	Selection Method
Research Universities	8	Jimma University	Random Sampling
Applied Sciences Universities	21	Wolkite, Debrebrihan, Ambo	Stratified Random Sampling
Comprehensive Universities	21	Werabe, Wachamo, Selale	Stratified Random Sampling
Technology Universities	2	Adama Science and Technology, Addis Ababa Science and Technology	Comprehensive (Census) Sampling
Education Universities	1	Kotebe University of Education	Comprehensive (Census) Sampling

Multistage Sampling Design

This study utilizes a mixed-methods sampling design that strategically combines probability and non-probability techniques to balance statistical representativeness with the need for information-rich data. This approach is increasingly recognized for its capability to address complex research aims that span multiple levels of analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017;

Teddlie & Yu, 2007). For institutional selection, a stratified random approach was employed to capture the diversity of public universities. Research universities, applied sciences universities, and comprehensive universities were chosen through random sampling using a lottery method within their respective strata. Technology and education universities were included comprehensively due to their specialized missions and national strategic importance, acknowledging that their unique characteristics might not be adequately captured through random selection alone. This approach reflects the understanding that representativeness requires not just statistical proportionality but adequate representation of conceptually important subgroups (Collins, 2010). For participant selection, the study employed purposeful sampling for key informants whose positions provide unique insights into quality assurance processes and educational leadership. As Patton (2014) affirmed, purposeful sampling aims to select information-rich cases or informants whose study will provide insight into the subject under investigation. This method is particularly suitable for Ministry of Education directors, Education and Training Authority quality assurance directors and team leaders, student council representatives, college deans, and university academic vice presidents, as their experiential knowledge offers valuable perspectives on quality assurance systems. In addition to purposeful sampling, random sampling techniques were employed to select department heads and academic staff within the chosen institutions. This combination of sampling strategies allows the study to achieve both depth and breadth in data collection. It balances specialized expertise with generalizable perspectives across various institutional roles, minimizing selection bias and ensuring a diversity of perspectives across different disciplines and operational levels. Consequently, this mixed approach enhances the generalizability of findings from these larger subgroups, achieving depth through purposeful sampling and breadth through randomized sampling.

Table 3.3*: Sampling Strategies by Participant Category*

Participant Category	**Sampling Method**	**Justification**
Ministry of Education Directors	Purposive Sampling	Specialized support quality assurance practices
ETA QA Directors	Purposive Sampling	Specialized expertise in external quality assurance practices
University Academic Vice Presidents	Purposive Sampling	Strategic leadership perspective on institutional quality assurance practices

College Deans	Purposive Sampling	To ensure representation across diverse disciplines and colleges in QA practices.
Department Heads	Random Sampling	To gather an operational perspective on quality assurance practice
Academic Staff	Random Sampling	To capture a diversity instructional experiences in QA practices
Student Councils	Purposive Sampling	To represent the organized student voice in quality assurance practice

In general, the sampling methodology used in this study aligns with modern concepts of representativeness, generalizability, and information richness in complex educational environments. By combining various sampling strategies that cater to specific participant groups and research questions, the study effectively captures both depth and breadth in its examination of quality assurance systems across public universities in Ethiopia. This methodological transparency lays a solid foundation for the study's potential transferability to other higher education contexts, especially within Ethiopia.

3.7 Sample and Sample Size

A sample is a carefully chosen subset of individuals from a larger population, designed to simplify data collection while still representing the key characteristics of the entire group. As Brown (1988) mentions, sample size specifically refers to the number of participants selected to represent the population being studied. The core idea behind sampling is that studying an entire population is often impractical, especially when that population is large or spread out geographically. Sampling allows researchers to make statistical inferences about population parameters while optimizing resources, reducing the time needed for data collection, and maintaining research accuracy (Taherdoost, 2016). The sampling process involves defining the target population, selecting an appropriate sampling frame, determining the sample size, choosing a sampling method, and implementing that method in practice.

Determining an appropriate sample size is a critical methodological decision that directly affects the validity and generalizability of research findings. Recent studies emphasize that sample size calculation should balance statistical power with practical limitations, ensuring sufficient precision without wasting resources (Kadam & Bhalerao, 2010; Serdar et al., 2021). In quantitative research, sample size determination typically uses statistical formulas that take into account an acceptable margin of error, confidence level, and population

variance. The Margin of Error (MoE) indicates how much the sample results may deviate from the true population value, while the confidence level shows how often this margin would contain the true value if the study were repeated multiple times.

This study uses a mixed-methods sampling approach that includes both probability and purposive elements to address various research questions and objectives. For the quantitative component, a probabilistic sampling strategy is employed to ensure representativeness and minimize selection bias. In contrast, the qualitative components utilize purposeful sampling to capture cases that provide rich information. Such mixed-methods approaches are particularly suitable for implementation and educational research, where complex phenomena require both breadth and depth of understanding (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2017; Shorten & Smith, 2017). The sampling strategy was designed to provide comprehensive insights into the research problem while maintaining methodological rigor and practical feasibility. The target population for this study consists of academic staff and department heads from ten public universities in Ethiopia: Werabe University (310 senior academic staff in 16 departments), Wachemo University (401 staff in 17 departments), Jimma University (544 staff in 21 departments), Debrebrihan University (412 staff in 18 departments), Selale University (305 staff in 16 departments), Wolkite University (404 staff in 17 departments), Addis Ababa Science and Technology University (205 staff in 16 departments), Adama University (407 staff in 18 departments), Kotebe University (210 staff in 15 departments), and Ambo University (403 staff in 18 departments). In total, there are 3,601 senior academic staff and 172 department heads across these institutions. This diverse representation from multiple universities enhances the external validity of the findings and allows for broader generalization across the Ethiopian higher education sector. To determine the sample size for the quantitative study, Tamaro Yamane's formula was utilized (Yamane, 1967). This formula estimates the sample size (n) based on the population size (N) and a margin of error (e = 0.05) at the 95% confidence level, as follows: [n = {N}{1 + N(e)²}]. Where

- n = required sample size
- N = population size
- e = margin of error (set at 0.05 for 95% confidence level)

Sample size of academic staff:

$n=3601/3601(0.05)^2=360$

Sample size of department heads:

$n=172/172(0.05)^2=120$

The application of this formula guarantees a statistically representative sample while considering practical constraints in data collection. The 5% margin of error aligns with standard practices in social science research, striking a suitable balance between precision and feasibility (Taherdoost, 2017). This method is consistent with recent guidance suggesting that determining sample size should be rooted in explicit statistical reasoning rather than arbitrary figures or convenience (Serdar et al., 2021). The calculated sample size includes 360 academic staff members and 120 department heads, ensuring a proportionate distribution across the ten universities and that each institution is appropriately represented in the final sample.

Table 3.4: *Sample Size Calculation for Quantitative Components*

Participant Group	**Population Size**	**Sample Size**	**Confidence Level**	**Margin of Error**
Academic Staff	3,601	360	95%	5%
Department Heads	172	120	95%	5%

The study not only includes quantitative components but also incorporates qualitative elements, such as key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The selection of participants for these qualitative samples was carried out using purposive sampling, a non-probability technique that targets individuals based on their expertise, experience, and ability to provide valuable insights about the phenomenon being investigated. Purposive sampling is especially suitable for qualitative research where the goal is to achieve a deeper understanding rather than statistical representativeness (Campbell et al., 2020; Etikan et al., 2016). The criteria for selection focused on identifying information-rich cases capable of offering comprehensive perspectives on the research questions.

Table 3.6: Summary of total participants of the study (questionnaire, interview, and focus Group Discussion)

Participants of the Questionnaire				**Key informants of the interview and the focus group discussion**		
	Sample public universities	Total senior academic staff(N)	Total target Department(N)	No	Interviews	Total
1	Werabe	310	16	1	ETA QA directors	3
2	Wachemo	401	17	2	MoE directors	4
3	Selale	305	16	3	Academic presidents	10

4	Debrebrihan	412	18	4	Collage deans(10*3)	30
5	Jima	544	21	5	Internal Quality Enhancement Directors	10
6	wolkitte,	404	17		Total	57
7	Adama	407	18		**Focus group discussion**	
8	ASTU	205	16	1	Student councils (10*4)	40
9	Kotebe	210	15			
10	Ambo	403	18			
	Total	3601	172			
	Sample participants(n)	360				

3.7.1 Sampling Rationale and Linkage to Research Objectives and Conceptual Framework

The integrated sampling strategy effectively implements the study's conceptual framework. by ensuring representation of all specified constructs and their interrelationships. The input construct, which includes material, human, policy, and leadership resources, is gathered through multiple informants. Academic vice presidents and quality assurance directors provide institutional-level resource data, while academic staff report on their perception of resource adequacy at operational levels. The process construct encompasses teaching and learning processes, governance processes, quality assurance mechanisms, and feedback processes. This information is collected from department heads and academic staff (who provide insights on daily practices), college deans (who offer unit-level governance perspectives), and quality assurance enhancement directors (who focus on formal mechanism implementation). The outcome construct, which addresses graduate competence, employability, and satisfaction, is captured through feedback from student council members (who share perceptions of satisfaction and competence), academic staff (who observe graduate competence), and Ministry of Education directors (who provide access to employability data).

Mediating variables, such as stakeholder synergy, decoupling, and resource-driven capability, are explored through qualitative interviews with all stakeholder groups. These interviews can highlight misalignments between formal policies and enacted practices (decoupling), assess the quality of role clarity and communication (stakeholder synergy), and evaluate the

institutional capacity to utilize VRIN (Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, Non-substitutable) resources (resource-driven capability). Moderating variables, including leadership commitment, staff engagement, policy coherence, and feedback loop integrity, are examined through comparative analysis across different institutional types and participant roles. This analysis allows the study to investigate how contextual conditions may strengthen or weaken the hypothesized relationships (Barney, 1991; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Freeman, 1984). Every sampling decision ranging from institutional selection to participant recruitment is theoretically justified and directly supports the study's explanatory goals. The sampling design ensures that the data collected can effectively address the specified research questions while maintaining the rigor, transparency, and methodological coherence.

The sampling strategy in this study was theoretically driven, establishing explicit linkages to both the research objectives and the integrated conceptual framework that synthesizes institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), the resource-based view (Barney, 1991), and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) within an input-process-outcome heuristic. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) emphasized, sampling decisions in mixed-methods research must align with the study's theoretical propositions rather than being determined solely by convenience or tradition. Consistent with this principle, the sampling design directly operationalized the study's five research objectives: diagnosing the current state of quality assurance practices across input-process-outcome dimensions (Objective 1), assessing the efficacy of implemented quality assurance mechanisms (Objective 2), evaluating stakeholder synergy and accountability (Objective 3), identifying systemic implementation barriers (Objective 4), and developing a context-specific strategic framework (Objective 5). The sampling frame therefore encompassed all 50 public universities officially recognized by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education for the 2023–2024 academic year, organized according to the official classification system of institutional differentiation used by the Ethiopian Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE, 2021). This comprehensive framing ensured that the selected cases captured the diversity of institutional types of research universities, applied sciences universities, comprehensive universities, technology universities, and education universities by thereby enabling analytical generalization across Ethiopia's heterogeneous public higher education sector (Palinkas et al., 2015).

3.7.2 Sampling Frame and Representativeness

The target population includes all 50 public universities recognized by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education for the 2023–2024 academic year. The sampling frame is organized according to the institutional differentiation classification system of the Ethiopian Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE, 2021). This framework categorizes public universities into five distinct types: research universities (n = 8), applied sciences universities (n = 17), comprehensive universities (n = 21), technology universities (n = 2), and education universities (n = 1). The sampling frame was intentionally designed to reflect the diversity within Ethiopian public higher education, as quality assurance practices, resource allocations, and stakeholder dynamics vary systematically across these categories. These variations arise from differences in mission, funding, faculty qualifications, and regulatory expectations (Kumar, 2018; MoSHE, 2021).

According to Palinkas et al. (2015), sampling frames must capture the full diversity of the target population to enhance external validity and enable analytical generalization. This principle guided the decision to include all five institutional categories rather than selecting only from the most accessible institutions. From this sampling frame, ten universities were selected using a multistage sampling design that strategically combined both probability and non-probability techniques. This approach aimed to achieve statistical representativeness for quantitative comparisons while providing depth of information for qualitative analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Specifically, research universities (Jimma University), applied sciences universities (Wolkite, Debrebrihan, and Ambo Universities), and comprehensive universities (Werabe, Wachamo, and Selale Universities) were selected through stratified random sampling using a lottery method within each stratum. Technology universities (Adama Science and Technology University and Addis Ababa Science and Technology University) and the single education university (Kotebe University of Education) were included through comprehensive (census) sampling, due to their specialized missions and national strategic importance. This ensured that these unique institutional contexts were not inadvertently excluded by random selection (Collins, 2010).

This stratified approach guarantees that the sample captures the full range of institutional contexts within Ethiopian public higher education, supporting analytical generalization to the broader population of public universities (Polit & Beck, 2010; Yin, 2018). Several potential

biases in this sampling frame should be acknowledged. First, the exclusion of private higher education institutions is a deliberate delimitation rather than an oversight, as the study focuses on public universities that operate under the same regulatory framework for national quality assurance (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2019). Second, the official classification system may not fully reflect variations in institutional capacity or maturity within categories, and newer universities may not be adequately represented in ministry records. To mitigate this bias, the study selected multiple institutions from each category and triangulated the sampling frame data with institutional documentation and key informant verification. Third, coverage bias due to the exclusion of non-sampled universities is addressed through analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization. The theoretical propositions derived from the conceptual framework are tested within the sampled institutions, with findings anticipated to be transferable to theoretically similar institutional contexts rather than to all Ethiopian public universities without exception (Yin, 2018).

3.7.3 Quantitative Sample Size Justification

The sample size for the quantitative component was determined using explicit statistical reasoning rather than arbitrary conventions or convenience sampling. As Serdar et al. (2021) emphasized, appropriate sample size calculation directly affects statistical power, precision of estimates, and the generalizability of findings. For the population of 3,601 senior academic staff across the ten sampled universities, Yamane's (1967) formula was applied: $n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$, where N represents the population size and e represents the margin of error. Similarly, as Serdar et al. (2021) emphasized, appropriate sample size calculation directly affects statistical power, precision of estimates, and the generalizability of findings. For the population of 3,601 senior academic staff across the ten sampled universities, Yamane's (1967) formula was applied: $n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$, where N represents the population size and e represents the margin of error set at 0.05 for a 95% confidence level. This calculation yielded a required sample of 360 academic staff members. For the population of 172 department heads across the same institutions, the same formula produced a required sample of 120 department heads. The choice of a 5% margin of error aligned with standard practices in social science research on higher education quality assurance, balancing precision requirements against the practical constraints of data collection across geographically dispersed institutions (Taherdoost, 2016: Kadam & Bhalerao, 2010). Statistical power analysis assuming a medium effect size (Cohen's d = 0.5) and alpha = 0.05 indicated that the

achieved sample sizes exceeded the minimum required to detect meaningful relationships among input, process, outcome, and mediating variables specified in the conceptual framework (Cohen, 2013; Hair et al., 2019).

3.7.4 Qualitative Sampling: Selection Criteria, Relevance, and Expertise

The qualitative component of this study utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability technique that intentionally selects information-rich cases capable of providing comprehensive insights into quality assurance practices, mechanisms, stakeholder dynamics, and systemic barriers (Patton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is particularly suitable for qualitative research because it focuses on individuals whose roles and experiences give them unique perspectives on the phenomena being examined, rather than striving for statistical representativeness (Etikan et al., 2016). The criteria for participant selection were established in advance based on specific expertise related to their roles, relevance to quality assurance decision-making, and demonstrated experience with quality assurance implementation (Campbell et al., 2020). For key informant interviews, the following selection criteria were applied: (a) formal appointment to a position with direct responsibilities in quality assurance, (b) a minimum of two years of experience in that role to ensure familiarity with institutional quality assurance processes, (c) active involvement in either internal quality assurance implementation (for university leaders) or external quality assurance oversight (for directors of the Ministry of Education and the Education and Training Authority), and (d) willingness to provide informed consent for audio-recorded interviews.

This approach produced 57 key informants, including: 10 academic vice presidents (providing a strategic leadership perspective on institutional quality assurance), 10 internal quality enhancement directors (offering technical expertise in the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms), 30 college deans (representing disciplinary-level insights on quality assurance practices across diverse academic units), four Ministry of Education directors (contributing a policy-level perspective, covering higher education teacher development, competency assessment, curriculum development, and leadership capacity building directors), and three Education and Training Authority directors (providing expertise in external quality assurance including accreditation, auditing, and capacity development directors). For focus group discussions, 40 student council members (selected as four top

leaders from each of the ten universities) were chosen based on their formal representation of the organized student voice in university governance structures, their direct experience with quality assurance processes as learners, and their ability to articulate collective student perspectives on teaching quality, assessment practices, and institutional responsiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The relevance of each participant category to the study is directly linked to the theoretical framework and research questions. Academic vice presidents and internal quality enhancement directors are essential informants for Research Questions 1 and 2 because they have strategic responsibilities for translating national quality assurance policies into institutional practices. They can articulate whether there is a decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) between formal policies and enacted practices (Proposition 1). College deans provide operational perspectives on how quality assurance mechanisms function at the faculty level, including the implementation of peer reviews, self-assessments, and internal audits (Harvey & Williams, 2010). Ministry of Education and Education and Training Authority directors are critical for Research Question 3, as they represent the coercive isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) presumed to drive ceremonial compliance, and can shed light on accountability gaps between regulatory expectations and institutional responses (Proposition 3b). Student council members are uniquely positioned to evaluate the effectiveness and responsiveness of quality assurance measures from the learner's perspective.

Table 3.7.4: Qualitative Sample Composition

Participant Category	**Number**	**Selection Method**
Academic Vice Presidents	10	Purposive sampling
Internal Quality Enhancement Directors	10	Purposive sampling
College Deans	30	Purposive sampling
Ministry of Education Directors	4	Purposive sampling
Education and Training Authority Directors	3	Purposive sampling
Total	57	
Student Council Members (FGD)	40	Purposive sampling
Total	97	

3.7.5 Sample Size Justification: Saturation Principles for Qualitative Component

For the qualitative component, sample size was determined based on the principle of thematic saturation rather than statistical formulas (Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 2015). Saturation refers to the point at which additional data collection yields no new themes, insights, or conceptual categories relevant to the research questions (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Saunders et al., 2018). As Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) demonstrated, thematic saturation in qualitative research with relatively homogeneous participant samples often occurs within the first 12 to 16 interviews. However, given the diversity of stakeholder roles in this study, spanning university leadership, quality assurance enhancement directors, college deans, ministry of education directors, Education and Training Authority directors, and student council members a larger sample was warranted to capture role-specific perspectives (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

The targeted sample of 57 interview participants and 40 focus group participants (97 total qualitative participants) was designed to exceed typical saturation thresholds identified in methodological research. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that saturation in multi-site qualitative studies often occurs within 12 interviews when participants share homogeneous characteristics, but heterogeneous stakeholder groups require larger samples. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) proposed that code saturation (identifying the full range of themes) typically requires 9–17 interviews, while meaning saturation (understanding theme nuance and variation) requires 20–40 interviews. This study's sample of 57 interviews across five distinct stakeholder roles exceeds these benchmarks, providing capacity for within-group and cross-group thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Focus group sample size of 40 participants (4 per university across 10 universities) aligns with guidance suggesting 4 to 6 focus groups per stakeholder category to achieve saturation, with 4 to 6 participants per group (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 2013). The multi-university design (10 institutions) further supports saturation by capturing institutional variation in quality assurance practices, ensuring that themes emerging from resource-rich research universities and resource-constrained comprehensive universities are both represented and comparable (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015).

Saturation would be assessed through an iterative process conducted concurrently with data collection: after every five to seven interviews, the research team will review transcripts to identify whether new codes or themes continue to emerge; data collection will continue until

three consecutive interviews produce no new thematic information (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This explicit saturation protocol ensures that the qualitative findings achieve sufficient depth and completeness to support the development of a context-specific strategic framework (Research Question 5) while maintaining methodological transparency regarding how sample size decisions were made (Fetters, 2019).

3.7.6 Sampling Procedures, Potential Biases, and Mitigation Strategies

The sampling procedures employed a multistage design that effectively combined probability and non-probability techniques to meet the mixed-methods requirements of the study. In the first stage, stratified random sampling was used for institutional selection. Universities were categorized according to the MoSHE (2021) classification framework, which includes research universities, applied sciences universities, and comprehensive universities. Within each category, a lottery method ensured random selection while maintaining representation across different institutional types. Technology universities and the education university were included through census sampling due to their specialized missions and national strategic importance. This approach acknowledged that representativeness requires not only statistical proportionality but also adequate representation of conceptually unique subgroups (Collins, 2010). In the second stage, purposive sampling was utilized to select key informants whose positions provided valuable insights into quality assurance processes that random sampling could not capture. Key informants included Ministry of Education directors, Education and Training Authority directors, academic vice presidents, internal quality enhancement directors, and college deans, chosen based on their specialized expertise and decision-making authority.

In the third stage, random sampling was employed to select department heads and academic staff within the chosen institutions. This ensured the inclusion of operational perspectives on quality assurance practices without any selection bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Several potential biases in this sampling design were identified and addressed through explicit strategies. First, to mitigate selection bias in the purposive sampling of key informants, uniform inclusion criteria were applied across all institutions. Additionally, multiple informants were included within each role category (e.g., 30 college deans instead of just one per institution) to capture variations within roles (Palinkas et al., 2015). Second, to address non-response bias in the quantitative survey, follow-up reminders were sent to non-respondents, and early versus late respondents were compared on key demographic variables,

revealing no significant differences (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). Third, social desirability bias in interview and focus group data where participants may exaggerate the effectiveness of quality assurance to portray their institutions favourably was mitigated through triangulation. This involved gathering data from multiple stakeholder groups (academic staff, department heads, institutional leaders, MoE and ETA directors, and students council) and collecting quantitative survey data concurrently, thus providing cross-verification of qualitative claims (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Finally, coverage bias stemming from the exclusion of non-sampled universities was addressed through analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization. Theoretical propositions derived from the conceptual framework were tested within the sampled institutions, with findings expected to be transferable to theoretically similar institutional contexts rather than to all Ethiopian public universities indiscriminately (Yin, 2018).

3.8 Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

Data collection is the systematic process of gathering and measuring information on specific variables to answer research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes. The integrity of any research project fundamentally relies on the rigor and appropriateness of its data collection methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this mixed-methods study, guided by pragmatism as the foundational research philosophy, a multifaceted approach was used to ensure a comprehensive and triangulated dataset. This dataset is based on an integrated theoretical framework that combines institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), the resource-based view (Barney, 1991), and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) within an input-process-outcome heuristic. The primary instruments employed in this study included a survey questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Each instrument was carefully aligned with the five research objectives, capturing the specified constructs, indicators, mediating variables, and moderating variables. This alignment enabled a thorough exploration of quality assurance practices across Ethiopian public universities, as well as a deeper understanding of stakeholder perspectives concerning mechanisms, synergy, and systemic barriers.

3.8.1 Survey Questionnaire: Construct-to-Item Mapping and Measurement Validity Framework

A self-administered survey questionnaire was created by mapping constructs, variables, indicators, and items based on a conceptual framework. This self-administered survey questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data from academic staff and department

heads at 10 public universities. Subsequent known recommendations for instrument creation in quality assurance research (Harvey & Williams, 2010), the questionnaire operationalised each construct using quantifiable indicators and behavioural items rather than merely perceptual measurements. The construct-to-item mapping followed a systematic framework: each theoretical construct (inputs, processes, outcomes, and effective quality assurance as the dependent variable) was first broken down into measurable dimensions, then into specific indicators, and finally into individual survey items with assigned scale types (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021; Taherdoost, 2021). The independent variable was defined through four measurable dimensions: Material Resources includes budget allocation for quality assurance activities, the adequacy of classrooms and laboratories, and the availability of learning management systems. Human Resources dimension encompasses faculty-student ratios, the proportion of faculty members holding terminal degrees, and the availability of trained personnel for quality assurance. Policy Resources involves the existence and clarity of quality assurance policies, adherence to accreditation standards, and established internal audit protocols. Leadership Resources includes senior management's commitment to quality, strategic planning for quality assurance, and the autonomy in resource allocation (Kayyali, 2023).

The process construct was operationalized through four measurable dimensions: teaching and learning processes (measured by pedagogical approaches, curriculum delivery methods, assessment frequency and quality, and student support services), governance processes (measured by functionality of quality assurance committees, transparency in decision-making, clarity of roles among stakeholders, and accountability mechanisms), quality assurance mechanisms (measured by frequency of internal audits, implementation of peer reviews, self-assessment practices, and compliance with external accreditation standards), and feedback processes (measured by communication channels with stakeholders, response times to identified deficiencies, and integration of assessment data into decision-making) (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Furst-Bowe, 2011).The outcome construct was operationalized through three measurable dimensions: graduate competence (measured by demonstrated knowledge and skills, critical thinking abilities, problem-solving capacity, and communication proficiency), graduate employability (measured by employment rates post-graduation, time to employment, employer satisfaction with graduate capabilities, and career progression metrics), and stakeholder satisfaction (measured by academic staff perceptions of quality assurance utility, student satisfaction with learning experiences, and regulatory body approval of institutional performance) (Welzant et al., 2015; Stensaker, 2020). For graduate

competence, the questionnaire included items adapted from validated graduate skills assessment instruments (Welzant et al., 2015). For stakeholder satisfaction, Likert-scale items captured perceived quality assurance effectiveness, with each item anchored to specific behavioral referents rather than global judgments.

To enhance measurement validity, the questionnaire employed three complementary strategies. First, validated instruments were adapted wherever possible: stakeholder synergy items were derived from established stakeholder salience scales (Mitchell et al., 1997); decoupling was evaluated using discrepancy scores between policy and practice items based on Bromley and Powell (2012); and leadership commitment items were sourced from validated organizational leadership instruments (Brennan & Shah, 2017). Second, behavioral indicators were included alongside perceptual measures to balance subjective responses with objective data. This behavioral anchoring reduces the risk that perceptual data simply reflects generalized satisfaction or dissatisfaction rather than concrete quality assurance practices (Ewell, 2010). Third, the questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) for attitudinal items, featuring clear scale anchors and interspersed reverse-coded items to identify response set bias (Taherdoost, 2021). Frequency items employed a five-point scale (1 = never to 5 = always). Additionally, matrix questions were used to organize related rating-scale items, reducing response burden and improving completion rates (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021;).

The questionnaire was organized into five thematic sections directly aligned with the research questions. Section I (Concepts of Quality Assurance, six items) explored respondents' understanding of quality assurance definitions and purposes, providing baseline data for Research Questions 1 and 2 regarding the current state of quality assurance practices. Section II (Practice of Quality Assurance across Inputs, Processes, and Outcomes, 44 items) operationalized the IPO framework, distributing items according to the construct-indicator mapping. This section generated data for Research Question 1 concerning current quality assurance practices and perceptual variation among stakeholders. Section III (Quality Assurance Mechanisms and Procedures, four items) assessed the implementation and perceived effectiveness of internal audits, peer reviews, self-assessments, and external accreditation processes, addressing Research Question 2 about whether these mechanisms lead to meaningful quality enhancement or merely symbolic compliance. Section IV (Roles and Responsibilities of Stakeholders, 14 items) measured perceived role clarity,

accountability, and communication patterns among university leadership, academic staff, the Ministry of Education, and the Education and Training Authority, providing data for Research Question 3 regarding stakeholder synergy and accountability gaps. Section V (Challenges Impeding Quality Assurance Practices, six items) identified structural, cultural, and systemic barriers to effective quality assurance implementation, directly addressing Research Question 4 (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Stensaker, 2020).

Previously full administration, the questionnaire underwent pilot testing with a representative subsample of 30 academic staff and 10 department heads from a university not included in the main sample (Costello & Osborne, 2005). This pilot established content validity through expert review by three quality assurance researchers who evaluated item relevance and representativeness. During the pilot test, determined items with internal consistency reliability were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, achieving coefficients of $\alpha = 0.89$ for inputs, $\alpha = 0.91$ for processes, $\alpha = 0.87$ for outcomes, and $\alpha = 0.88$ for overall quality assurance effectiveness, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.80 for multi-item scales in educational research (DeVellis, 2017; Hair et al., 2019). Items with low item-total correlations ($r < 0.30$) were revised or eliminated based on pilot feedback (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021).

3.8.2 Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Thematic Structure and Alignment with Research Questions

Semi-structured interviews were the primary qualitative method used to gather rich, detailed insights from key informants selected through purposive sampling based on their specialized expertise in quality assurance decision-making (Patton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach was particularly effective in capturing participants' personal perspectives, understandings, and lived experiences in their own words, providing depth and context that surveys alone cannot achieve (Kallio et al., 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2022). The interview protocol was redesigned to align explicitly with the study's five research questions and the integrated theoretical framework, which includes institutional theory, resource-based view, and stakeholder theory, as well as the conceptual framework regarding mediating and moderating variables. As Kallio et al. (2021) emphasized, an effective interview protocol requires systematic development based on prior knowledge and theoretical grounding rather than ad hoc question generation. Following this principle, the interview protocol was organized into five thematic clusters corresponding to the five research questions. Each

cluster contained both primary questions and structured probes designed to elicit explanatory mechanisms rather than merely descriptive accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The first thematic cluster, which aligns with Research Question 1, focused on assessing the current state of quality assurance practices across input, process, and outcome dimensions. Primary questions addressed how participants perceive the adequacy of material, human, policy, and leadership resources (inputs); how teaching, assessment, governance, and quality assurance mechanisms function in practice (processes); and what evidence exists regarding graduate competence, employability, and satisfaction (outcomes). Structured probes asked participants to provide specific examples of resource constraints or enablers, describe recent quality assurance activities in which they participated, and identify discrepancies between documented policies and enacted practices. This probing directly operationalized the decoupling mechanism from institutional theory (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), enabling the interviews to capture not only what exists but also why gaps between formal structures and actual practices emerge.

The second thematic cluster, aligned with Research Question 2, examined how formal quality assurance mechanisms including institutional audits, accreditation processes, and peer reviews are implemented and perceived. Primary questions explored participants' experiences with specific quality assurance mechanisms, their assessment of whether these mechanisms lead to meaningful improvements or merely serve as compliance documentation, and the conditions that they believe influence which outcome occurs. Probes addressed the frequency and thoroughness of internal audits, whether self-assessment reports actually inform decision-making or remain unused documents, and whether peer reviews lead to pedagogical changes or are merely completed as perfunctory requirements. These probes operationalized the resource-based view's prediction that the effectiveness of formal quality assurance mechanisms depends on the availability of VRIN (valuable, rare, inimitable, non-substitutable) resources (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2019). The interview data is expected to reveal whether resource deficiencies transform potentially meaningful mechanisms into ceremonial rituals.

The third thematic cluster, corresponding to Research Question 3, investigated stakeholder synergy, role clarity, communication patterns, and accountability among university leadership, academic staff, the Ministry of Education, and the Education and Training Authority. Primary questions asked participants to describe their own quality assurance

responsibilities, evaluate the effectiveness with which different stakeholders fulfill their roles, characterize communication and feedback channels among stakeholders, and identify any gaps or overlaps in accountability. Probes explored specific instances of effective collaboration or problematic communication, how feedback from quality assurance assessments flows (or fails to flow) between stakeholders, and who participants believe bears ultimate responsibility for quality outcomes. These probes operationalized stakeholder theory, suggesting that higher levels of stakeholder synergy are associated with perceived quality assurance effectiveness, while accountability gaps are associated with symbolic compliance. Interview data is expected to reveal whether relational dynamics transform quality assurance from a process of collaborative improvement into one marked by fragmented ritual (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997).

The fourth thematic cluster, corresponding to Research Question 4, focused on the structural, cultural, and systemic barriers that hinder the effective implementation and sustainability of quality assurance. Participants were asked to identify the most significant obstacles they face in implementing quality assurance and to categorize these obstacles as stemming from resource constraints (structural), leadership or staff attitudes (cultural), or policy incoherence and external pressures (systemic). Follow-up questions explored how these different types of barriers interact. Intended for example, participants discussed whether resource scarcity exacerbates cultural resistance or whether policy incoherence undermines leadership commitment. This investigation aimed to operationalize the prediction that structural, cultural, and systemic barriers interact to create a low-effectiveness equilibrium, where quality assurance systems remain in a ceremonial and decoupled state (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

The fifth thematic cluster, aligning with Research Question 5, sought participant recommendations for a context-specific strategic framework to realign quality assurance systems toward continuous improvement. Key questions asked participants what components such a framework should include to be effective in Ethiopian public universities, how it should differ from current approaches, and what enabling conditions are necessary for successful implementation. Probes explored how the framework could balance national accountability demands with institutional autonomy, address specific barriers identified earlier, and clarify stakeholder roles and responsibilities within the framework (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Schindler et al., 2015).

3.8.3 Document Analysis Protocol: Objective Measures and Contextual Triangulation

Document analysis was used as a systematic method to review both printed and electronic materials, providing essential contextual evidence and objective indicators to complement the perceptual data gathered through questionnaires and interviews (Bowen, 2009; Özkan, 2023). This unobtrusive approach offered several advantages: stability (documents can be reviewed multiple times), accuracy (documents contain precise citations and policy language), and thorough coverage (documents encompass extensive time periods and various institutional levels) (Morgan, 2013). The document analysis served three specific purposes aligned with the study's objectives: (a) establishing the official policy context against which reported practices could be compared to assess decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977); (b) providing objective behavioral indicators of quality assurance inputs (e.g., budget allocations, faculty qualifications, infrastructure inventories) and processes (e.g., audit completion rates, assessment documentation); and (c) triangulating findings from survey and interview data to enhance validity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Document sources and selection criteria were systematically gathered from three levels: national policy, institutional, and unit levels. At the national policy level, documents included the Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamations No. 351/2003, 650/2009, and 1152/2019 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2019); operational guidelines and quality assurance frameworks from the Education and Training Authority (formerly HERQA); statistical abstracts and sector roadmaps published by the Ministry of Education (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023); and the university differentiation framework (MoSHE, 2021). At the institutional level, for each of the ten sampled universities, documents included strategic plans (2020-2025), quality assurance policy documents, internal audit reports from the previous three academic years, self-assessment reports from the preceding three cycles, accreditation records, and institutional profiles detailing faculty qualifications and student enrollment statistics. At the unit level, documents encompassed college and department-level quality assurance committee minutes, assessment guidelines, curriculum documents, and sample examination papers where available. The selection criteria required that documents be: (a) official, authorized versions (not drafts or unofficial copies), (b) current (dated within the past five years unless historical comparisons were stated), (c) relevant to at least one of the IPO constructs or research questions, and (d) accessible through public records or institutional permission (Bowen, 2009).

Document analysis followed a structured protocol comprising four stages: sourcing, authenticity verification, data extraction, and thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009). Sourcing involved obtaining official documents from ministry websites, university quality assurance directorates, and public archives, with requests for internal documents submitted through institutional gatekeepers. Authenticity verification ensured that policy documents were current and authorized versions rather than drafts or outdated editions. Data extraction was conducted using a standardized template organized by IPO construct, with the extracted data including specific policy requirements, resource commitments, procedural mandates, and reported outcomes. Thematic analysis of the document content was carried out concurrently with the analysis of interviews and surveys, comparing document-derived themes against those generated by participants to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and instances where official rhetoric did not align with reported practices, thereby operationalizing the decoupling construct (Fetters, 2019; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

3.8.4 Focus Group Discussion Protocol: Collective Stakeholder Perspectives and Student Voice

Focus group discussions were utilized to gather data through facilitated group interactions, taking advantage of group dynamics to uncover collective views, shared understandings, and the reasoning behind consensus or disagreement among stakeholders (Morgan, 2013; Krueger & Casey, 2015). As emphasized by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009), focus groups are particularly valuable in mixed-methods research for capturing the social construction of meaning and identifying areas of convergence or divergence among stakeholders that individual interviews might not reveal. For this study, focus group discussions were conducted with student council representatives from each of the ten sampled universities, with four top student leaders participating from each institution, totaling 40 participants across ten focus groups. The focus group discussion protocol was developed following the guidelines of Krueger and Casey (2015). It comprised a semi-structured guide organized around four thematic segments that aligned directly with the research questions relevant to student perspectives. The first segment (15–20 minutes) addressed student experiences with quality assurance inputs and processes. This included questions about teaching quality, assessment practices, access to learning resources (classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and technology), and the responsiveness of university governance to student academic concerns. This segment generated data that triangulated with staff and leader perceptions of input adequacy and process functionality (Research Question 1).

The second segment (15–20 minutes) explored students' awareness of and engagement with formal quality assurance mechanisms. This included whether students participate in course evaluations, self-assessment processes, or quality assurance committees, and whether they perceive these mechanisms as leading to tangible improvements or remaining merely symbolic exercises (Research Question 2). This segment operationalized stakeholder theory's emphasis on the student voice as a legitimacy-holding stakeholder group (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997). The third segment (15–20 minutes) examined student perceptions of stakeholder accountability and communication. Participants were asked whether their concerns reached university leadership or regulatory bodies, whether they received feedback on how their input had been used, and who they believed was most responsible for ensuring educational quality (Research Question 3). This segment captured student perspectives on stakeholder synergy and accountability gaps, providing crucial insights that might counteract leadership and ministry perspectives, which could overstate the effectiveness of existing communication channels. The fourth segment (15–20 minutes) asked students to identify the most significant obstacles to quality improvement from their perspective and to propose context-specific strategies for enhancing quality assurance practices. Participants were asked what changes would most meaningfully enhance their learning experience, how quality assurance mechanisms could become more responsive to student needs, and what role students should play in quality governance (Research Questions 4 and 5).

According to the focus group procedures, each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a private room on the university campus to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. The sessions were moderated by the researcher using a neutral facilitation style that encouraged balanced participation and prevented any single individual from dominating the discussion (Morgan, 2013). All focus group discussions were audio-recorded using two devices, while the assistant moderator maintained a seating chart to link comments to participant characteristics (without using names to protect anonymity) (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Verbatim transcriptions were completed within 72 hours of each session, ensuring that identifying information was removed. Field notes documented group dynamics, including which participants were most and least vocal, instances of agreement or disagreement, and non-verbal responses (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). To enhance trustworthiness, preliminary findings from each focus group discussion were summarized and presented to participants at the session's conclusion for verification and correction (member checking) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, with themes compared across

groups to identify consistent patterns and institution-specific variations (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.8.5 Integration Strategy for Multiple Instruments; Triangulation and Complementarity

The four data collection instruments were deployed concurrently during a single phase fromm following the concurrent triangulation design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Integration occurred at three levels. First, at the design level, the instruments were deliberately linked through shared constructs and research questions, ensuring that each research question could be addressed by multiple data sources (Fetters, 2019). Second, at the methods level, quantitative survey data and qualitative data from interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis were collected in parallel. This approach avoided any sequence effects that could bias one dataset based on findings from another (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). Third, at the interpretation level, joint display matrices were constructed to juxtapose quantitative findings such as mean ratings of input adequacy by institution type with qualitative themes, including stakeholder explanations for resource deficiencies. This process helped identify convergence (where findings agree), divergence (where findings disagree), and expansion (where qualitative findings explain quantitative patterns) (Fetters, 2019; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This integration strategy directly supports the study's explanatory goals, allowing for the testing of theoretical propositions (e.g., decoupling, resource-capability mediation, stakeholder synergy) and uncovering the mechanisms that explain why relationships hold or fail in the Ethiopian context.

The four instruments were designed as an integrated measurement system rather than standalone data collection tools. This design ensures that the strengths of each instrument compensate for the limitations of the others, consistent with the concurrent triangulation design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters, 2019). Specifically, the survey questionnaire provides breadth through standardized measurements from 360 academic staff and 120 department heads, enabling statistical testing of the propositions derived from the theoretical framework. Semi-structured interviews provide depth through detailed exploration of mechanisms, contextual factors, and stakeholder interpretations from 57 key informants, explaining why statistical relationships hold or fail. Document analysis offers objective, non-reactive evidence of formal policies and reported outcomes, allowing for verification of whether perceptual data align with documented reality or reveal instances of decoupling.

Focus group discussions provide collective student perspectives that individual interviews might not capture due to power dynamics, as well as insights that surveys cannot provide because of the interactive, socially constructed nature of group meaning-making (Morgan, 2013; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

The integration strategy proceeds through three analytical steps, all executed concurrently. First, quantitative data from surveys are analyzed using descriptive statistics and t-tests. Second, qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and documents are subjected to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to identify themes, mechanisms, and stakeholder perspectives organized by research question. Finally, findings are compared using joint display matrices that juxtapose quantitative results (e.g., mean scores on decoupling items by institutional type) with qualitative themes (e.g., interview quotes illustrating decoupling mechanisms). This comparison aims to identify convergence (both data sources indicating the same phenomenon), divergence (conflicting findings that require explanation), and expansion (where qualitative findings explain patterns that quantitative analysis only describes). This integration strategy aligns with the pragmatist philosophy underlying the study, generating findings that are both empirically reliable (through triangulation across methods and sources) and practically actionable (through explanatory depth) for the development of a context-specific strategic framework, as specified in Research Question 5 (Shan, 2022; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

3.9 Data Analysis

This concurrent triangulation mixed-methods study utilized a quantitative-dominant (QUAN + qual) analytical framework to systematically examine quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public universities(Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The analysis operationalized an integrated theoretical framework that combined institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), the resource-based view (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2019), and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995) within an input-process-outcome model. Quantitative data were collected from 360 academic staff members and 120 department heads across ten selected public universities. This data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 28). The analysis began with thorough data coding, processing, and cleaning to ensure accuracy (Field, 2024; Hair et al., 2019). Descriptive statistical analysis, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, summarized the fundamental features of the data and characterized the sample

distribution across institutional types. This provided essential evidence for assessing the current state of quality assurance practices as stated in Research Question 1, which is incorporated into the conceptual framework's input, process, and outcome constructs (Schindler et al., 2015).

In addition to descriptive statistics, inferential statistical analysis was conducted to test theorized propositions and explore relationships among variables. Independent samples t-tests were used to compare perceptual differences relating to quality assurance effectiveness among academic staff, department heads, and institutional leaders. This directly addressed Research Question 1's focus on perceptual variation across different stakeholder groups (Pallant, 2020; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). To deepen the analysis of the study's propositions, binary logistic regression analysis was employed to investigate the hypothesized relationships between coercive isomorphic pressures and decoupling (Proposition 1), the mediating role of VRIN resources in the relationship between quality assurance mechanisms and quality outcomes (Proposition 2), and the association between stakeholder synergy and perceived quality assurance effectiveness (Proposition 3a). This followed established protocols for hypothesis testing in quality assurance research (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Stensaker, 2020).

The regression modeling specifically tested the directional relationships proposed in the conceptual framework: inputs positively influencing processes, processes positively influencing outcomes, and the mediating effects of stakeholder synergy and decoupling (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hayes, 2017). Model fit was assessed using Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit tests, with statistical significance set at $\alpha = 0.05$ and confidence intervals reported at 95% for all inferential analyses (Field, 2024; Hair et al., 2019). The qualitative data for this study were collected from 57 semi-structured interviews with key informants, including academic vice presidents, internal quality enhancement directors, college deans, and directors from the Ministry of Education and the Education and Training Authority. Additionally, 10 focus group discussions were held with 40 student council members. The analysis of this data employed reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach proposed (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This process included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The transcripts from the interviews and focus groups

were imported into NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software to facilitate systematic coding, theme development, and retrieval of coded segments (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019).

The thematic analysis was conducted inductively while remaining sensitive to the theoretical constructs of decoupling, resource-driven capability, and stakeholder synergy, as derived from the integrated framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The qualitative findings were organized by research question, highlighting stakeholder perspectives on why quality assurance mechanisms lead to meaningful improvements compared to symbolic compliance (Research Question 2), how accountability gaps and communication patterns affect stakeholder synergy (Research Question 3), and how structural, cultural, and systemic barriers interact to maintain ceremonial quality assurance practices (Research Question 4) (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The integration of quantitative and qualitative data followed a multi-stage mixed-methods integration strategy adapted from Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie's (2003) framework. This process included five analytical stages: data reduction, data display, data correlation, data consolidation, and data integration, as established in contemporary mixed-methods research (Combs & Onwuegbuzie, 2010; Hitchcock & Onwuegbuzie, 2022).

Data reduction involved distilling the quantitative data into descriptive statistics and inferential test results while condensing the qualitative data into thematic codes and categories. During the data display stage, the reduced data were transformed into interpretable formats. This included tables showing mean scores and standard deviations for quantitative findings, along with thematic matrices and concept maps for qualitative findings (Fetters, 2019; Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Data correlation quantitatively examined relationships among variables using inferential statistical tests. Data consolidation combined both forms of data to create new variables or higher-order constructs that could not be derived from either dataset alone. For instance, integrated measures of stakeholder synergy were developed using both survey ratings and interview narratives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). In the final data integration stage, the quantitative and qualitative results were merged into a coherent analytical whole through joint display matrices. These matrices juxtaposed statistical findings, such as mean ratings of input adequacy by institutional type, with qualitative themes, such as stakeholder explanations for resource deficiencies. This approach facilitated the identification of convergence (where findings agree), divergence (where findings conflict), and expansion (where qualitative

findings explain quantitative patterns) (Fetters, 2017; Guetterman, Fetters, & Creswell, 2015).

The integrated analytical strategy was carefully aligned with the study's conceptual framework, allowing for an examination of whether inputs positively influence processes, whether processes positively affect outcomes, and whether stakeholder synergy mediates the relationship between processes and outcomes. For Research Question 1, which investigates the current state of quality assurance practices, quantitative descriptive statistics provided prevalence estimates of input adequacy, process functionality, and outcome achievement across different types of institutions. Additionally, qualitative thematic analysis explored the reasons behind perceptual variations among academic staff, department heads, and institutional leaders. For Research Question 2, which focuses on the implementation and perception of formal quality assurance mechanisms, quantitative t-test comparisons evaluated differences in perceived effectiveness between various types of mechanisms. Qualitative data were utilized to reveal the conditions under which these mechanisms lead to meaningful enhancement versus mere symbolic compliance, directly testing Proposition 2 concerning VRIN resource mediation (Barney & Hesterly, 2019; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). For Research Question 3, regarding stakeholder synergy and accountability, quantitative regression analysis was conducted to test the associations between role clarity, communication patterns, and perceived quality assurance effectiveness. Qualitative narratives from interviews and focus groups provided deeper insights into accountability gaps and the failures of feedback loops, thereby operationalizing Propositions 3a and 3b (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). For Research Question 4, which examines systemic implementation barriers, an integrated multi-level analysis explored how structural barriers (such as resource scarcity), cultural barriers (including leadership commitment and staff engagement), and systemic barriers (like policy incoherence and external pressures) interact to create a low-effectiveness equilibrium. Quantitative frequency data identified the prevalence of these barriers, while qualitative data explained the mechanisms of their interaction, thus testing Proposition 4 (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Stensaker, 2020).

Lastly, for Research Question 5, focused on a context-specific strategic framework, a qualitative synthesis of data from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis was conducted to generate framework components. Quantitative findings ensured that these components addressed empirically documented patterns rather than assumed needs (Creswell

& Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters, 2019). This integrated analytical approach ensured that the findings were not merely descriptive but also explanatory. The quantitative analysis tested whether the theoretically predicted relationships were valid in the context of Ethiopian public universities, while qualitative analysis uncovered the mechanisms, such as decoupling, resource-driven capability, and stakeholder synergy, that explain why these relationships exist or fail. The analytical procedures linked each research question to specific analytical techniques, operationalized all conceptual framework constructs through measurable indicators, and maintained rigorous standards of transparency and reproducibility throughout the analytical process (Levittetal.., 2021; Maxwell, 2021).

3.10 Validity and Reliability

3.10.1 Validity

In this concurrent triangulation mixed-methods study, validity is viewed as a fundamental design principle that is integrated throughout the research process, rather than being treated as a procedural step applied only after data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Maxwell, 2021; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). This design-oriented approach acknowledges that validity defined as the extent to which evidence and theory support the adequacy, meaningfulness, and appropriateness of inferences drawn from data must be proactively constructed. This requires a deliberate alignment of philosophical assumptions, theoretical frameworks, methodological choices, and empirical observations (Messick, 1989; Onwuegbuzie & Hitchcock, 2022).

In line with the pragmatist philosophy guiding this inquiry, validity is operationalized as multidimensional and context-dependent. It necessitates focused attention on the coherence among research questions, the integrated theoretical framework which synthesizes institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), the resource-based view (Barney, 1991), and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and the concurrent triangulation design that allows for cross-verification across both quantitative and qualitative data sources (Fetters, 2019; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The validity framework implemented in this study consists of three interconnected strategies: (a) construct validity, which is achieved through the systematic operationalization of theoretical constructs into measurable indicators and the explicit documentation of the mapping process from constructs to indicators; (b) internal validity, established through the

concurrent triangulation design that permits cross-verification across methods and proactively mitigates threats such as description bias, researcher bias, and reactivity (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); and (c) external validity, which is addressed through analytical generalization that connects empirical findings to theoretical propositions instead of relying on statistical generalization to populations. This is supported by stratified sampling that captures institutional diversity across Ethiopia's differentiated public university system (Yin, 2018).

Additionally, the procedural treatment of validity includes pilot testing all instruments with representative subsamples, specifying triangulation protocols prior to data collection, and conducting reflexive auditing of researcher assumptions throughout the data collection and analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1988; Lincoln et al.., 2018). As a result of incorporating validity considerations into every methodological decision from sampling and instrument development to analytical integration rather than treating validity as a separate verification stage or a post-hoc checklist, this study ensures that conclusions regarding quality assurance practices, stakeholder dynamics, and systemic barriers in Ethiopian public universities are based on a credible, defensible, and transferable evidentiary foundation (Levitt et al.., 2021; Maxwell, 2021; Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006).

Construct Validity: Operationalization of Theoretical Constructs

Construct validity the degree to which measurement instruments accurately capture the theoretical constructs they purport to measure (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021) was systematically strengthened in this study through an explicit construct-to-indicator mapping process grounded in an integrated theoretical framework synthesizing institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), the resource-based view (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2019), and stakeholder theory (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984). Succeeding established protocols for instrument development in quality assurance research (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Schindler et al., 2015), each theoretical construct was decomposed into measurable dimensions, specific behavioral indicators, and individual survey or interview items before instrument administration. The input construct defined as structural and resource-based elements necessary for initiating quality assurance activities was operationalized through four dimensions: material resources (budget allocation, adequacy of classrooms and laboratories, availability of learning management systems); human resources (faculty-student ratios, proportion of terminal-degree

faculty, availability of trained quality assurance personnel); policy resources (clarity of quality assurance policies, accreditation standards, internal audit protocols), and leadership resources (senior management commitment, strategic planning, autonomy of resource allocation) (Kayyali, 2023). The process construct encompassing the activities, mechanisms, and relational dynamics transforming inputs into outcomes was operationalized through teaching and learning processes (pedagogical approaches, curriculum delivery, and assessment quality); governance processes (functionality of quality assurance committees, decision-making transparency, and role clarity); quality assurance mechanisms (frequency of internal audits, peer review implementation, and self-assessment practices); and feedback processes (communication channels, response times to deficiencies, and integration of assessment data into decision-making) (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Furst-Bowe, 2011). The outcome construct defined as the results and impacts of quality assurance processes was operationalized through graduate competence (demonstrated knowledge, critical thinking, and problem-solving capacity), graduate employability (post-graduation employment rates, time to employment, and employer satisfaction), and stakeholder satisfaction (academic staff perceptions of quality assurance utility, student satisfaction with learning experiences, and regulatory approval) (Schindler et al., 2015; Stensaker, 2020). To further strengthen construct validity, mediating constructs stakeholder synergy, decoupling, and resource-driven capability were operationalized using adapted instruments from stakeholder salience research (Mitchell et al., 1997), discrepancy scores between policy and practice items (Bromley & Powell, 2012), and validated organizational leadership scales (Furst-Bowe, 2011), while moderating constructs leadership commitment, staff engagement, policy coherence, and feedback loop integrity employed adapted measures enabling investigation of boundary conditions under which hypothesized relationships strengthen or weaken (Barney & Hesterly, 2019; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Each multi-item scale underwent expert review by three quality assurance researchers who assessed item relevance and representativeness, achieving content validity index scores exceeding 0.85 for all construct domains (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021; Polit & Beck, 2008), and subsequent pilot testing with a representative subsample confirmed factor loadings above 0.60 with no significant cross-loadings, meeting established thresholds for construct validity in educational research (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2023).

3.10.2 Reliability: Internal Consistency and Measurement Accuracy

Reliability, defined as the consistency and stability of measurements across repeated administrations or items within a scale, was systematically addressed with an emphasis on internal consistency and measurement accuracy. It is important to note that reliable measurement is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for validity (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021; Hair et al., 2019). Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all multi-item scales after conducting a pilot test with a representative subsample of 30 academic staff members and 10 department heads from a public university in Ethiopia, who were not included in the main sample (Costello & Osborne, 2005; Cronbach, 1951). The pilot test achieved Cronbach's alpha coefficients of $\alpha = 0.89$ for the input construct scale, $\alpha = 0.91$ for the process construct scale, $\alpha = 0.87$ for the outcome construct scale, and $\alpha = 0.88$ for the overall quality assurance effectiveness scale. All coefficients exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.80 for multi-item scales in educational and higher education research (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Schindler et al., 2015).

Item-total correlations were examined, and items with correlations below $r = 0.30$ were revised or eliminated based on pilot feedback to improve internal consistency without compromising construct coverage (Field, 2024; Hair et al., 2019). However, the reliability assessment balanced with conceptual alignment: instead of maximizing alpha coefficients through redundant or overly narrow items, the instrument development process prioritized content validity and construct coverage. This ensured that each dimension of the theoretical framework was adequately represented, even if it meant modestly reducing internal consistency coefficients. High internal consistency can sometimes indicate item redundancy rather than measurement quality, particularly when dealing with multidimensional constructs like quality assurance practices (Sijtsma, 2009; Streiner, 2003).In addition to internal consistency, attention to measurement accuracy included assessing test-retest stability over a two-week interval with a subsample of 20 participants, yielding correlation coefficients exceeding $r = 0.85$. Cohen's kappa coefficients for thematic categories ranged from 0.81 to 0.88. Transcription accuracy was verified with all interview and focus group transcripts being checked against audio recordings by a second researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1988).

Intended for the qualitative component, reliability was conceptualized as the dependability of findings, which was ensured through audit trails, reflexive journaling, and systematic documentation of analytical decisions. Standardized interview protocols were maintained across all key informant interviews, including consistency in question wording and probes. Verbatim transcriptions were completed within 48 hours of each interview to preserve accuracy (Fetters, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). This balanced approach to reliability ensured that measurement error was minimized across both quantitative and qualitative components without sacrificing conceptual alignment. Each reliability verification was directly linked to specific construct indicators rather than being applied generically to instruments as undifferentiated whole entities (Maxwell, 2021; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

Balancing Reliability With Conceptual Alignment

While internal consistency reliability ensures that measurement items align with a common construct, placing too much emphasis on statistical coherence can paradoxically undermine validity by eliminating meaningful variations relevant to the construct (Edwards & Bagozzi, 2000; Rossiter, 2010). Therefore, this study aims to balance reliability concerns with the need for conceptual alignment through five complementary strategies grounded in established measurement theory. First, content validity was established before reliability testing through an expert review involving three quality assurance researchers and two higher education policy experts. They evaluated whether each item adequately represented its target construct and identified any important dimensions that might have been omitted (Haynes et al., 1995; Polit & Beck, 2008). Second, the measurement design preserved the conceptual framework's specification of multidimensional constructs, such as inputs, which include material, human, policy, and leadership resources. Instead of forcing a unidimensional solution that would obscure important distinctions between resource types, separate subscales were calculated for each dimension (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2019). This approach prioritizes conceptual fidelity over statistical simplicity, recognizing that the resource-based view's prediction about VRIN (valuable, rare, inimitable, non-substitutable) resources necessitates differentiating among qualitatively different resource categories that may not perfectly co-vary across institutions (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999).

Third, the study employs a nomological network approach to validity assessment (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955), evaluating the meaning of each construct not only through internal consistency but also through its predicted relationships with other constructs in the theoretical

framework. For instance, stakeholder synergy should correlate positively with perceived quality assurance effectiveness while having a negative correlation with decoupling (Marsh et al., 2019; Strauss & Smith, 2009). Fourth, conceptually distinct but empirically related constructs were separated into distinct sections of the questionnaire with clear instructions. This reduces the risk that respondents will apply consistent response sets across theoretically unrelated domains (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This balanced approach is particularly important for the mediational relationships outlined in the conceptual framework, where stakeholder synergy mediates the relationship between governance processes and outcome satisfaction, and decoupling mediates the connection between isomorphic pressures and quality assurance effectiveness (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hayes, 2018).

Reliable measurement of each mediating variable is necessary but not sufficient; these measures must also be conceptually aligned with theoretical definitions to ensure that detected mediation reflects genuine causal mechanisms rather than measurement artifacts (Byrne, 1984; Anderson-Cook, 2005). Finally, reliability coefficients are interpreted alongside interrater agreement indices for qualitative data. This approach recognizes that in mixed-methods research, consistency across different measurement approaches quantitative scales and qualitative thematic coding can provide stronger evidence of construct stability than relying on any single reliability estimate (Hitchcock & Onwuegbuzie, 2022; Yin, 2018). This integrated strategy acknowledges that while reliability is necessary, it is insufficient for validity. A measure can be consistently inaccurate, and demonstrating conceptual alignment requires showing that measurement procedures accurately capture the construct as theoretically defined rather than simply producing internally consistent scores (Messick, 1995; Anderson-Cook, 2005).

3.10.3 Qualitative Rigor: Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

Qualitative rigor which focuses on Ethiopian public universities, was operationalized through the framework of trustworthiness established(Lincoln and Guba, 1988). This framework includes four key components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These elements serve as qualitative counterparts to the concepts of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity in quantitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Morse, 2015). To enhance credibility defined as the confidence that findings accurately represent participants' experiences four complementary strategies were employed (Creswell & Poth,

2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1988). First, triangulation was used across various data sources, including survey questionnaires from 480 academic staff and department heads, semi-structured interviews with 57 key informants from five stakeholder roles, focus group discussions with 40 student council members across 10 universities, and document analysis of national policies, audit reports, and institutional records. This approach enabled cross-verification of findings and helped to reduce the risk of bias associated with relying on any single source (Denzin, 2017; Flick, 2022; Patton, 2015). Second, member checking involved returning interview transcripts and preliminary thematic summaries to participants for verification, correction, and elaboration. This process ensured that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's preconceptions (Birt et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Third, prolonged engagement was achieved through the researcher's prior professional experience in Ethiopian higher education and sustained fieldwork over four months. This experience helped build trust and develop the contextual awareness necessary for accurate interpretation (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Padgett, 2016). Fourth, peer debriefing involved regular discussions with doctoral supervisors and independent qualitative researchers. They reviewed coding decisions, thematic interpretations, and draft findings, challenging assumptions and identifying alternative explanations (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1988).

Transferability defined as the extent to which findings apply to other contexts was enhanced through a thick description of the research setting, participant characteristics, institutional contexts, and the Ethiopian public higher education system (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Detailed contextual information included the institutional differentiation framework (MoSHE, 2021), the regulatory environment under Higher Education Proclamations No. 351/2003, 650/2009, and 1152/2019 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2019), as well as the resource constraints typical of public universities in low-income, post-conflict settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Liang, 2019). The sampling strategy, which encompassed all five institutional categories (research, applied sciences, comprehensive, technology, and education universities), further supports transferability by enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to their own contexts (Palinkas et al., 2015; Polit & Beck, 2010).

Dependability, defined as the stability and consistency of findings over time and across researchers, was established through a comprehensive audit trail that documented all research

decisions, from raw data to final interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1988; Nowell et al., 2017). The audit trail included several components: anonymized transcripts, completed surveys, and records of document collection as raw data; coded transcripts, codebooks with definitions and examples, theme development documentation, and memos as data analysis products; draft findings and theoretical propositions as data reconstruction products; and final interpretations along with components of the strategic framework as synthesis products (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Throughout data collection and analysis, reflexive journaling was maintained to document methodological decisions, emerging interpretations, researcher assumptions, and potential biases, particularly regarding the researcher's position as a doctoral candidate with professional experience in Ethiopian higher education (Berger, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Confirmability, which refers to the extent to which findings are based on participant data rather than researcher bias, was addressed through reflexive practices, including the maintenance of a reflexive journal that documented prior assumptions, evolving interpretations, and potential sources of bias throughout data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1988; Liang, 2019). Triangulation across multiple stakeholder groups helped reduce the risk that the findings reflected only a single group's perspective or the researcher's affinity for specific viewpoints (Flick, 2022; Patton, 2015). Additionally, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative findings provided an external check on confirmability. This integration allowed qualitative claims to be examined against quantitative patterns, helping to identify potential instances where the researcher's interpretation diverged from empirical patterns in the broader dataset (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters, 2019). By explicitly addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as foundational design principles rather than as post hoc justifications, this study establishes qualitative rigor appropriate for the complexities of the Ethiopian public university context and the explanatory goals of the theoretical framework (Maxwell, 2013; Morse, 2015).

3.11 Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to a rigorous ethical framework grounded in the principle that ethical considerations must be integrated prospectively into every stage of research design rather than treated as a procedural afterthought or bureaucratic requirement (Banks et al., 2020; Mertens, 2019). Consistent with contemporary research ethics scholarship advocating for

non-formalistic treatment of ethical protocols, this study conceptualizes ethics as an ongoing, reflective process woven throughout data collection, analysis, and dissemination rather than a one-time institutional approval hurdle (Lincoln & Guba, 1988; Mertens, 2023). This approach requires sustained attention to the socio-cultural context of Ethiopian public universities, including their unique institutional norms, hierarchical structures, and governing regulations, to ensure cultural competence and respectful engagement with all participants (Biruk, 2018; Halse & Honey, 2005).

Context-specific ethical issues emerged from the Ethiopian higher education environment, which differs significantly from Western research contexts where standard ethical protocols were developed (Mertens, 2019; Bitter et al., 2020). First, the post-conflict and resource-constrained nature of Ethiopian public universities creates power asymmetries that researchers must navigate carefully, as participants may perceive research participation as carrying professional risks given centralized governance structures within the Ministry of Education and Education and Training Authority (Banks et al., 2020; Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2019). Next, the study's focus on quality assurance practices intersects with institutional accountability mechanisms, meaning that academic staff and department heads may harbor legitimate concerns about how their candid assessments of resource inadequacies, decoupling between policies and practices, or stakeholder accountability gaps could be accessed by supervisory bodies (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Schrag, 2011). Third, the hierarchical differentiation among stakeholder groups including university leadership, academic staff, Ministry of Education directors, and student council representatives generates context-specific ethical tensions regarding whose voice carries weight and whether lower-status participants (particularly students and junior academic staff) can speak freely without fear of reprisal (Banks et al., 2020; Bitter et al., 2020).

Practical ethical challenges during data collection were anticipated and addressed through explicit protocols tailored to the Ethiopian public university context. The primary challenge concerns voluntary participation in hierarchical institutional environments where academic staff and department heads may feel implicit pressure to participate when requests come through university leadership channels (Halse & Honey, 2005; Mertens, 2023). To mitigate this, recruitment materials explicitly stated that participation is entirely voluntary, that non-participation carries no professional consequences, and that participants may withdraw at any time without penalty (Hammersley, 2023; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,

2018). Additional practical challenge involves social desirability bias in interview and focus group settings, where participants may provide institutionally acceptable rather than candid accounts of quality assurance failures such as decoupling, ceremonial compliance, or weak stakeholder synergy (Bromley & Powell, 2012; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The study addressed this through multiple strategies: (a) triangulating interview data with anonymous survey data that reduces social desirability pressure (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters, 2019), (b) assuring participants that no identifying information would be linked to specific responses, and (c) using neutral, non-judgmental phrasing in interview questions (e.g., "What challenges have you observed?" rather than "What problems exist?") (Kallio et al., 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). A third practical challenge involves informed consent in multilingual settings where English serves as the medium of instruction but not all participants are equally fluent (Biruk, 2018). The study addressed this by providing consent information in both English and Amharic, with the researcher offering verbal explanations and clarifications in either language to ensure full comprehension before consent was obtained (Mertens, 2019; Bitter et al., 2020).

Confidentiality and data protection mechanisms were implemented at multiple levels to safeguard participant identities and raw data throughout the research lifecycle. At the data collection level, all survey questionnaires, interview transcripts, and focus group transcripts were anonymized at the point of data entry through assignment of unique numerical codes rather than recording names, institutional affiliations, or specific titles that could enable identification (Saunders et al., 2020; Stang, 2020). Audio recordings of interviews and focus group discussions were password-protected and stored on encrypted devices accessible only to the principal researcher and research supervisor (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Written consent forms, which contained participant signatures, were stored separately from anonymized data files in a locked filing cabinet to prevent linkage between identifying information and research responses (Hammersley, 2023). At the data storage level, digital files were maintained on a secure, password-protected university server with two-factor authentication, while physical documents (including signed consent forms and printed transcripts) were kept in a locked office accessible only to the research team (Stang, 2020). At the data retention level, all research data will be retained for four years following completion of the study in accordance with Addis Ababa University's data retention policy, after which digital files will be irreversibly deleted using secure erasure software and physical documents will be cross-shredded (Banks et al., 2020; Mertens, 2023).

Power dynamics and participant sensitivity issues were addressed through explicit attention to the relational asymmetries inherent in studying quality assurance practices across hierarchical stakeholder groups (Banks et al., 2020; Halse & Honey, 2005). The study includes participants occupying different positions of authority, including Ministry of Education directors (high power), academic vice-presidents (high power), college deans (medium power), department heads (medium power), academic staff (variable power), and student council members (low power). This heterogeneity generates sensitivity regarding whether lower-power participants can speak candidly about quality assurance failures without fearing that their responses might be accessed by higher-power stakeholders (Biruk, 2018; Bitter et al., 2020). To mitigate this, the study employed four strategies. First, data collection was conducted by the principal researcher rather than institutional gatekeepers, ensuring that interview and focus group responses were not filtered through university leadership or ministry officials (Mertens, 2019). Another, student focus group discussions were conducted without the presence of university staff, academic leadership, or external observers, creating a safe environment for candid expression of student perspectives on teaching quality, assessment practices, and institutional responsiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 2013). Third, reporting of findings uses aggregated thematic presentation rather than attributing specific quotes or claims to identifiable individuals or institutions, with illustrative quotes identified only by participant category (e.g., "Academic staff member, Research University") rather than by name, title, or specific institution (Saunders et al., 2020; Stang, 2020). Fourth, participants were explicitly informed that their responses would not be shared with their supervisors, institutional leadership, the Education and Training Authority, or the Ministry of Education, and that publication of findings would not include any information enabling identification of specific individuals (Hammersley, 2023).

Institutional authorization and formal permissions were obtained prior to any data collection activities. Ethics approval was secured from Addis Ababa University's, followed by formal written permission from the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, the Education and Training Authority, and the leadership of each of the ten sampled public universities. All authorizing bodies received detailed information about the study's purpose, methods, data protection protocols, and intended dissemination of findings, and no institution withheld or conditionalized approval (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Mertens, 2019). As a result of integrating these ethical considerations as foundational design principles rather than procedural formalities, this study ensures that research on quality assurance practices in Ethiopian public

universities is conducted with respect for participant autonomy, cultural competence, and sustained attention to the relational dynamics that characterize hierarchical institutional environments (Banks et al., 2020; Mertens, 2023).

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

4.1. Introduction

This study aimed to examine the quality assurance (QA) practices in Ethiopian public universities. It used a mix of data collection methods, including survey questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with selected individuals, focus group discussions, and document reviews, to provide a thorough analysis of the institutions. This chapter starts by describing participant socio-demographic information and the background of these institutions, and then analyzes the perceptions of department heads and teachers based on their questionnaire answers. These responses offered valuable information about institutional QA practices. They highlighted key aspects of QA systems, such as the development of QA manuals and guidelines, core activities in internal QA systems, and challenges faced during implementation. The insights from the questionnaires were supported by thorough semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, which offered a more detailed understanding of the obstacles to effective QA practices. Additionally, document analysis was vital in providing context for these responses, resulting in a comprehensive view of QA practices in public universities. The discussion parts finally describe an overview of the findings, combining results from questionnaires, interviews, and document reviews.

4.1 Background Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4.1: *Background Characteristics of Respondents*

Variables	Categories	Teachers	Department heads	College Dean	Internal quality enhancement directors	Academic vice presidents	Leaders of student councils
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Age	**15-20**						
	20-25						**13 (32)**
	25-30	**21(6)**					**27 (68)**
	30-35	**35(10)**	**15(13)**				
	35-40	**110(30)**	**27(23)**	**12(40)**	**2(20)**		
	41-45	**78(22)**	**36(31)**	**12(40)**	**6(60)**		
	46-50	**63(18)**	**26(22)**	**6(20)**	**2(20)**	**10 (100)**	
	Above 51	**48(14)**	**14(11)**				
Sex	**Male**	**287 (81)**	**107 (91)**	**30 (100)**	**9 (90)**	**10 (100)**	**34 (85)**
	Female	**68 (19)**	**11 (9)**	**-**	**1 (10)**	**-**	**6 (15)**
Academic Rank	Graduate Assistant Lecturer	**125(35)**		**12(40)**	**4(40)**		
	MD Speciality Assistant professor	**132(37)**	**55(47)**	**6(20)**	**6(60)**	**8(80)**	
	Associate professor	**48(14)**	**35(30)**	**12(40)**		**2(20)**	
	Professor	**26(7)**	**28(23)**				
	Others	**24(7)**					
Field of study	**Education**	**83(23)**	**8(7)**	**4(13)**			
	Natural science	**86(24)**	**43(36)**	**10(33)**			
	Social Science	**90(26)**	**44(37)**	**10(33)**			
	Health	**22(6)**	**6(5)**	**2(8)**			
	Business and Economics	**74(21)**	**17(15)**	**4(13)**			
Education level	Students						**40 (100)**
	MA/M.Sc.	**211 (59)**			**4 (40)**		
	PhD	**72 (20)**	**71 (60)**	**16 (53)**	**6 (60)**	**10 (100)**	
	Associate Professor	**32 (9)**	**25 (21)**	**8 (27)**			
	Professor	**31 (9)**	**22 (19)**	**6 (20)**			
	Others	**9 (3)**					
Total Years of Experiences	**1-5**	**38(11)**					
	6-10	**55(15)**	**8(7)**				
	11-15	**100(28)**	**25((21)**				
	16-20	**92(26)**	**56(47)**	**16(54)**	**5(50)**		
	21-25	**25(7)**	**29(25)**	**7(23)**	**5(50)**	**7(70)**	
	26-30	**20(6)**		**7(23)**		**3(30)**	
	Above 31	**25(7)**					

Data in Table 4.1 revealed the sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants. The age distribution of the study's participating teachers varied among different groups. The smallest proportion of participants (6%) was in the 25-30 age range, with a slightly higher percentage (10%) in the 30-35 age group. Most participants were between 35 and 50 years old, with the 35-40 age group being the largest at 30%, followed by the 41-45 age group at 22% and the 46-50 age group at 18%. Together, these three middle-aged groups comprised 70% of the teachers in the study, highlighting their prominence. Participants aged 51 and above accounted for 14%, indicating a smaller yet still notable presence. Among department heads, 31% were in the 41-45 age range, making it the largest group, followed by 23% in the 35-40 age range and another 23% in the 46-50 age range. Only 11% of department heads were over 51 years old. There were no participants reported in the 15-20, 20-25, or 25-30 age groups, suggesting that department heads are generally at least 30 years old. The majority of participants were male teachers, representing 81% of the total. Female teachers comprised a smaller segment at 19%. Among department heads, males were significantly more represented, accounting for 91% of the participants, while female department heads only made up 9%.

In terms of academic rank, most teacher participants were assistant professors, representing 37% of the group, closely followed by lecturers at 35%. Associate professors accounted for 14%, while professors and other ranks each represented 7%. For department heads, the largest group was also assistant professors at 47%, followed by associate professors at 30% and professors at 23%. The teachers came from various fields of study with the following distribution: social sciences (26%), natural sciences (24%), education (23%), business and economics (21%), and health (6%). Among department heads, the distribution was social sciences (37%), natural sciences (36%), business and economics (15%), education (7%), and health (5%). Regarding education levels, the majority of teacher participants (59%) hold a master's degree (MA/M.Sc.), while 20% have a PhD. A smaller proportion, 9%, were classified as associate professors, and another 9% are at the professor level. A very small percentage (3%) falls under the "Others" category. Among department heads, the largest proportion (60%) holds a PhD, while 21% are associate professors and 19% are professors. The distribution of teachers' years of experience is as follows: 28% have between 11 and 15 years, 26% have between 16 and 20 years, and 15% have between 6 and 10 years. Only 11% have 1 to 5 years of experience, while 7% have either 21 to 25 years or more than 31 years of experience. The smallest group consists of 6% of participants, who have between 26 and 30

years of experience. Among department heads, nearly half (47%) have between 16 and 20 years of experience. A significant portion, 25%, have between 21 and 25 years of experience, while 21% have between 11 and 15 years. Only 7% of department heads reported having between 6 and 10 years of experience. Notably, there are no department heads in the categories of 1 to 5 years, 26 to 30 years, or over 31 years of experience.

The demographic analysis presented above informs the study's five research objectives by showing how background variables influence the relationships among Quality Assurance (QA) inputs, processes, and outcomes. For Objective 1, which aims to diagnose the current state of QA practices, the analysis reveals that most stakeholders are mid-career professionals (ages 35-50 with 11-20 years of experience). These individuals possess enough institutional knowledge to evaluate QA integration across input, process, and outcome dimensions. However, the gender imbalance where 81-100% of leadership roles are occupied by men—suggests that diagnostic assessments may consistently overlook female perspectives regarding resource adequacy and process functionality (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023; Palinkas et al., 2015). For Objective 2, which focuses on assessing the efficacy of QA mechanisms, it is noted that a significant proportion of PhD-qualified personnel occupies department head (60%) and academic vice president (100%) positions. This indicates that evaluations of QA mechanisms are primarily conducted by highly educated individuals. However, the underrepresentation of master's-level teachers who make up 59% of the teaching staff in QA governance could limit the inclusion of operational perspectives in these assessments (Barney & Hesterly, 2019; Harvey & Williams, 2010).

For Objective 3, evaluating stakeholder synergy and accountability, demographic stratification across hierarchical levels shows that academic vice presidents are primarily aged 46-50 (100%), department heads are mostly aged 41-45 (31%), and teachers are mostly aged 35-40 (30%). These dynamics suggest that stakeholder interactions may be affected by generational and experiential divides, potentially hindering role clarity, frequency of communication, and collaboration (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984). Furthermore, the complete absence of women in college dean and academic vice president positions (0%) creates an accountability gap, where the legitimate interests of female stakeholders in QA outcomes may be systematically excluded from decision-making processes (Mitchell et al., 1997). For Objective 4, which aims to identify systemic implementation barriers, the demographic patterns indicate the presence of structural barriers

(like the underrepresentation of master's-level faculty in QA leadership and gender disparities in all leadership categories), cultural barriers (such as potential generational tensions between experienced and early-career staff), and systemic barriers (including inconsistent rank requirements across QA leadership positions). These issues interact to perpetuate a low-effectiveness equilibrium, where QA systems remain ceremonially decoupled from substantive improvements (Bromley & Powell, 2012; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For Objective 5, which focuses on developing a context-specific strategic framework, the demographic findings indicate that an effective framework must (a) address gender imbalances through targeted leadership development and QA committee composition.

4.2 Context of sample public universities

4.2.1 Research University

Table 4.2.1: ***Context of Research University***

Sample universities	**Focus**	Generation Of the Universities	Establishment year	**Motto**	**Vision**	**Mission**	**No of Academic staff**	**No of Students**
Jima	Research	1st	1952	We are in the Community!	Aspires to be one of the Leading Community Based Research Universities in Africa and Renowned in the World by 2030.	Jimma University is committed to engaging in the core functions of Innovative Teaching, Research, and Community Services through its Cherished and Innovative Community-Based Education (CBE).		**18013**

Table 4.2.1 designates the context of a research university. Jimma University (JU) was established in 1952 and is located in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia, approximately 352 kilometres southwest of Addis Ababa. Since 2021, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE) has recognized JU as a prominent public research university. The institution was formed in December 1999 through the merger of Jimma College of Agriculture and Jimma Institute of Health Sciences. JU employs nearly 4,000 academic staff members and operates twelve specialized research centers, a modern hospital, a community school, and a community radio station (FM 102.0), among other revenue-generating activities. Currently, the university enrolls about 18,013 undergraduate students across 56 programs and has four campuses, with plans to open a fifth campus in Agaro. JU aims to be recognized as one of Africa's leading community-based research institutions by 2030. Its mission focuses on innovative teaching, research, and community service, all grounded in the

Community-Based Education (CBE) paradigm. The university's tagline, "We are in the community!", reflects its commitment to serving local populations and addressing community needs through educational programs (Table 4.2.1)

4.2.2 Science and Technology universities

Table 4.2.2: ***Context of Science and Technology universities***

Sample universities	**Focus**	Generation Of the Universities	Establishment year	**Motto**	**Vision**	**Mission**	**No of Academic staff**	**No of Students**
Adama	**Technology**	**2nd**	**1993**	Dream, Discover, Achieve	To become a renowned center of excellence for science, technology, and innovation, both nationally and internationally.	To provide quality education, conduct impactful research, and contribute towards the socio-economic development of Ethiopia through innovation and technology transfer.		**6821**
ASTU	**Technology**	**3rd**	**2011**	A University for Industry, Working with Industry	To become a leading research university in Africa, advancing national needs and responding to global development challenges.	To pursue transformative education, cutting-edge research and innovation, and impactful services and engagement in advancing socio-economic, cultural, and technological needs and interests.		**7202**

Table 4.2.2 displays the context of science and technology universities. Adama Science and Technology University (ASTU) was established in 1993 as Nazareth Technical College (NTC) and later renamed Nazareth College of Technical Teacher Education (NCTTE). The university introduced business education in 2003. Despite its relatively short history, ASTU has a dynamic past, opening additional academic programs in 2006 under the name Adama University. In 2008, the Ministry of Education recognized it as a Center of Excellence in Technology for applied engineering and technology. In 2011, the Council of Ministers renamed it Adama Science and Technology University with the aim of becoming a center of excellence in science and technology. ASTU has expanded its reach to Asella, where two of its seven schools are located. The mission of ASTU is to produce ethical and competent graduates in applied science and technology through high-quality education, research driven by community needs, and active service to the community. The university aims to generate innovative knowledge that supports the socio-economic development of the nation. ASTU envisions becoming the first choice for higher education in Ethiopia and the premier center of excellence in applied science and technology in Africa by 2030. Its motto is "Dream, Discover, and Achieve." As of the 2017/2018 academic year, there are 6,821 undergraduate students enrolled at ASTU.

Addis Ababa Science and Technology University (AASTU) is a higher education institution located in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Its main campus is situated in the Akaky Kaliti subcity, specifically in the Kilinto area, around Tulu Dimtu. AASTU was established in 2011 under Directive No. 216/2011 from the Council of Ministers. The establishment of well-institutionalised and robust science and technology universities, along with institutes of technology, is essential for fostering an economically developed and industrialized state in Ethiopia. The university's motto underscores its commitment to collaboration with industry.

AASTU envisions becoming a leading research university in Africa, addressing national needs while tackling global development challenges. Currently, the university has enrolled over 8,000 undergraduate students across both regular and continuing education programs, as well as nearly 700 postgraduate students. These students are part of various schools focused on applied sciences, technology, engineering, and information and communication technology (ICT). AASTU is continuously evolving, with its short-term plans centered on establishing academic infrastructure and facilities, recruiting staff, and developing a skilled workforce. To date, the university has successfully recruited 472 academic staff members and 391 administrative staff. For the academic year 2017/2018, the total enrollment of undergraduate students at AASTU is 7,202.

4.2.3 Education University

Table 4.2.3: ***Context of Education University***

Sample universities	**Focus**	Generation Of the Universities	Establishment year	**Motto**	**Vision**	**Mission**	**No of Academic staff**	**No of students**
Kotebe	Education	2nd	1976	Strive for quality	To be a flagship university of education renowned for producing competent and effective professionals to transform the education systems of Ethiopia and beyond.	To cultivate competent and effective education professionals, the organization aspires to be a center of excellence and innovation in teaching and leadership. It plans to collaborate with both international and local partners who share a common vision for transforming education. The organization prioritizes the identification and dissemination of innovative teaching practices and aims to generate policy options for systemic transformation. Ensuring high-quality learning environments is vital for student success. The organization employs research-based methods informed by global best practices, tailored to the specific context and needs of Ethiopia. Additionally, it focuses on designing and implementing advanced curricula, instructional methodologies, assessments, and professional qualification systems.	**450**	**2532**

Table 4.2.3 demonstrates the context of applied universities. Kotebe University of Education (KUE), previously Kotebe Metropolitan University (KMU), has a rich history dating back to 1959, originating as a college of education within Hailesellasie I University (HSIU). Initially named Kotebe College of Teacher Education, it focused on teacher training until achieving university status in 2016 under Proclamation No. 1263/2021. After a decade of operation, the institution relocated to Addis Ababa Technical and Vocational College and was subsequently rebranded as the Addis Ababa College of Teacher Education. In 1976, the college moved to Kotebe, adopting the notable name Kotebe College of Teachers Education (KCTE). KUE's mission emphasizes the production of competent education professionals through a commitment to excellence and innovation in teaching and leadership. The university strives to collaborate with both international and local partners to enhance education by developing innovative teaching practices, diversifying policy options, and implementing cutting-edge curricula, instructional methods, assessments, and professional qualification systems. KUE's vision is to establish itself as a flagship institution for education, recognized for cultivating effective professionals aimed at transforming Ethiopia's education systems and beyond. As of the academic year 2017/2025, KUE has an undergraduate enrollment of 2,532 students.

4.2.4 Applied Universities

Table 4.2.4: ***Context of Applied Universities***

Sample universities	**Focus**	Generation Of the Universities	Establishment year	**Motto**	**Vision**	**Mission**	**No of Academic staff**	**No of students**
Ambo	Applied	2nd	2011	A better future through knowledge and wisdom.	Ambo University envisions becoming a renowned university of choice in eastern Africa by 2030.	Ambo University is dedicated to serving the Ethiopian Society and the world in the discovery, development, and application of knowledge in a wide range of disciplines. The university is committed to maintaining and ensuring the provision of quality, cost effective, timely, and need-based education at undergraduate and graduate levels; engaged in research and knowledge transfer; conducting short-term training and consultancy; and offering community services professionally and innovatively to address the needs of stakeholders.	**450**	**10452**
Debrebrihan	Applied	2nd	2007 G.C	Practical Knowledge for Better Success!	Aspires to be one of the nationally leading universities in practice- oriented teaching and research by 2030	To prepare knowledgeable, skilled, and attitudinally mature graduates for the job market and entrepreneurship by providing practice-oriented education. To enhance and promote applied research focusing on innovation and technology transfer to create sustainable and knowledge-based industries and societies. To establish strategic partners to strengthen practice-oriented education, research, and community engagement.	**524**	**8914**
Wolkite	**Applied**	**3rd**	**2012 G.C**	We strive for Wisdom	To be among one of the top applied science universities in Ethiopia by 2027 E.C.	The university, as indicated in the proclamation No. 650/ 2009, has the following missions. To produce graduates who are knowledgeable, attitudinally mature, and practically innovative, To supply relevant and demanded technology and knowledge that address national and community-level development problems To help make operations of the government and non- government organizations efficient, effective, and competitive, and To provide training and consulting services to the community and the government.		**10924**

Table 4.2.4 validates the context of applied universities. The Ministry of Education in Ethiopia recognizes Ambo University (AU), established on May 11, 2011, by government proclamation (Council of Ministers 212/2011), as a coeducational higher education institution. Its roots trace back to 1947, marking it as one of the country's oldest educational establishments. The initial phase of the university commenced in a building erected by French engineers, offering basic education in Amharic, mathematics, and French, supported by a mix of Ethiopian and French educators. In its present form, Ambo University has significantly expanded its academic offerings, providing a total of 75 graduate programs, 71 undergraduate programs, 10 PhD programs, and four speciality programmes distributed across nine distinct colleges. The university operates four campuses: the Main Campus, Hacalu Hundessa Campus, Mamo Mezemer Campus, and Waliso Campus.

Ambo University's mission is to serve both Ethiopia and the broader global community by fostering knowledge discovery, development, and application across various disciplines. It seeks to deliver quality, cost-effective, and timely educational programs tailored to community needs, conduct impactful research, provide short-term training, and engage in innovative community services. The institution aspires to establish itself as a leading choice for higher education in Eastern Africa by the year 2030. Its guiding motto is "A Better Future Through Knowledge and Wisdom." For the academic year 2017/2025, the total enrollment of undergraduate students stands at 10,452.

Debre Berhan University (DBU), located in Debre Berhan town, Ethiopia, is actively expanding its campus, particularly the Professor Asrat Woldeyes Health Science Campus, which has been inaugurated and commenced teaching and learning activities. DBU was established in 2007 and classified as a second-generation university. It is situated 130 kilometres from Addis Ababa, within the Amhara National Regional State and the North Shewa Administrative Zone. The university offers a comprehensive educational structure with 54 undergraduate programs across nine colleges on a single campus and provides 64 postgraduate programs, including five PhD offerings. DBU's mission centers on equipping graduates with the necessary skills for the job market and entrepreneurship, emphasizing a practice-oriented educational framework. Additionally, the institution prioritizes applied research with a focus on innovation and technology transfer, alongside forming strategic partnerships to bolster education, research, and community engagement. By 2030, DBU aspires to be a leading institution in Ethiopia known for practice-oriented teaching and

research that imparts practical knowledge essential for success. The total enrollment of undergraduate students for the academic year 2017/2025 stands at 8,914, reflecting its growth and commitment to educational excellence.

Wolkite University was established by the Council of Ministers of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia through Proclamation No. 1097/2011, with its foundation laid in 2010 to meet the community's demand for higher education. It is classified as a third-generation public institution and specifically as a university of applied sciences. The university commenced its teaching activities on November 24, 2012, with an initial enrollment of 551 students distributed across three colleges: the College of Engineering and Technology (353 students), the College of Natural and Computational Sciences (84 students), and the College of Computing and Informatics (114 students). After completing its initial construction phase, many faculty members transitioned from Wolkite Polytechnic College to the newly constructed main campus located in Gubrye, which is situated 14 km from Wolkite town and 174 km from Addis Ababa. The mission of Wolkite University, as outlined in Proclamation No. 650/2009, is to develop knowledgeable and innovative graduates, provide relevant technology and expertise for national and community development, support effective operations in both governmental and non-governmental sectors, and offer training and consulting services. The university aspires to be recognized among the leading applied science universities in Ethiopia by 2027 E.C. Its guiding motto is "We strive for wisdom". As of the academic year (2017/2018)/2025, total enrolment for undergraduate students reached 10,924.

4.2.5 Comprehensive universities

Table 4.2.5: *Context of comprehensive universities*

Sample Universities	Focus	Generation Of the Universities	Establishment year	Motto	Vision	Mission	**No of Academic staff**	**No of Students**
Selalile	Comprehensive	4th	2016	Co-creating quality		to produce competent and innovative graduates in diversified fields of study; conduct problem-solving research, transfer technologies, and provide demand-driven community services		**8317**
Wachamo	Comprehensive	3rd	2004EC/2012 GC	Let your light shine in society!	Aspires to become one of the ten first-class universities and home of the brilliant in Ethiopia	To deliver proficient graduates equipped with knowledge, skill, and attitude by providing relevant and quality education; produce new knowledge and technology by conducting problem-solving research; transform community livelihoods by strengthening community-industry partnership, technology transfer, and advisory training health service, enhance sustainable institutional capacity and integrated leadership.		**10556**
Werabe	Comprehensive	4th	2018GC	Knowledge For Excellence	Werabe University aspires to be one of the most preferred best of five comprehensive universities in Ethiopia by 2022 E.C.	Werabe University has a mission of producing versed, skilled, and disciplined graduates, who can immensely contribute to the improvement and development of the lives of our society, and conducting demand-driven research and rendering multi- faceted community services.	**4000**	**4267**

Table 4.2.5 stated the context of comprehensive universities. Selale University is a newly established public university located in Fiche town, Ethiopia. It serves as the administrative center of the Semien Shewa Zone in the Oromiya Region and operates as a distinct woreda. The university was founded in July 2016, following Proclamation Article No. 359/2008. Selale University is situated 114 kilometres from the capital city, Addis Ababa, within the North Shewa Zone of the Oromia Regional State. The university comprises three campuses: the General Tadesse Birru (main) Campus, the Abebech Gobena (Health Science) Campus,

and the Ganda Farda Campus. The mission of Selale University is to produce competent and innovative graduates across various fields, conduct problem-solving research, transfer technology, and provide community services that meet local needs. The university's motto is "Co-Creating Quality". For the academic year 2017/2025, the total enrollment of undergraduate students is 8,317.

Wachemo University (WCU) is a public higher education institution established in 2009. It is located in Hosanna town, which is 230 km southwest of Addis Ababa. The university's mission is to provide quality education, generate new knowledge and technology through problem-solving research, and improve community livelihoods by fostering partnerships, facilitating technology transfer, and offering advisory training. WCU also aims to enhance sustainable institutional capacity and integrated leadership to contribute to achieving sector goals. The university envisions becoming one of the top ten universities in Ethiopia and a center of excellence by 2017 E.C. Its motto is, "Let Your Light Shine in Society!" For the academic year 2017/2025, the total enrollment of undergraduate students is 10,556.

Werabe University (WRU) is one of Ethiopia's fourth-generation universities, established in 2018. It is located in Werabe town, a rapidly growing area that is 172 km southwest of Addis Ababa and 155 km from Hawassa. The Prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegn laid the foundation stone for the university on November 29, 2007 E.C. The mission of Werabe University is to produce skilled and disciplined graduates who can significantly contribute to societal improvement and development through demand-driven research and diverse community services. The university aims to become one of the five most preferred comprehensive universities in Ethiopia by 2022 E.C. Its motto is "Knowledge for Excellence." For the academic year 2017/2025, the total enrollment of undergraduate students is 4,267.

4.3 The Concept of Quality

Table 4.3: *Teachers and department heads perceptions about the concept of quality*

No	To what extent do you believe the following concepts of quality significantly define or describe the current quality assurance practices at your university?	Teachers								Department heads							
		N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Not important at all	minimally important	Moderately important	Important	Very important	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Not important at all	minimally important	Moderately important	Important	Very important
1	Quality as fitness for purposes	355	4.06	0.84	9(2.5)	12(3.4)	25(7)	210(59.2)	99(27.9)	118	3.98	1.07	5(5.1)	6(5.1)	20(16.9)	42(35.6)	45(38.1)
2	Quality as value for money	355	3.36	1.03	15(4.2)	64(18)	92(25.9)	145(40.8)	39(11)	118	2.92	1.4	14(11.9)	52(44.1)	9(7.6)	16(13.6)	27(22.9)
3	Quality as excellence	355	3.36	1.07	34(9.6)	40(11.3)	44(12.4)	237(66.8)	-	118	2.17	0.957	34(28.8)	40(33.9)	33(28)	11(9.3)	-
4	Quality as perfection	355	3.15	1.12	51(14.4)	44(12.4)	58(16.3)	202(56.9)	-	118	1.87	0.97	51(43.2)	44(37.3)	10(8.5)	13(11)	-
5	Quality as a transformation of the learners	355	4.0	0.94	12(3.4)	25(7)	11(3.1)	211(59.4)	96(27)	118	3.9	1.15	6(5.1)	12(10.2)	12(10.2)	46(39)	42(35.6)

Table 4.3 presents teachers' perceptions regarding how various concepts of quality characterize current quality assurance practices at their university. The analysis employs mean scores, standard deviations, and percentage distributions based on a Likert scale that ranges from Not important at all to Very important. The concept of quality, defined as fitness for purpose, received the highest rating, with a mean score of 4.06 and a standard deviation of 0.84. A significant majority of teachers (87.1%) considered this concept either Important (59.2%) or very important (27.9%), while only 5.9% viewed it as minimally or not important. The low standard deviation indicates a strong consensus among participants regarding this concept. Similarly, the concept of quality as transformation of learners was highly valued, achieving a mean score of 4.00 with a standard deviation of 0.94. About 86.4% of teachers rated this concept as Important (59.4%) or Critical (27%), although the slightly higher standard deviation suggests some variation in perceptions compared to fitness for purpose.

The concepts of quality as excellence and value for money also received attention, each receiving a mean score of 3.36, with standard deviations of 1.07 and 1.03, respectively. While both concepts have the same mean scores, their interpretations differ. For excellence, 66.8% considered it important, but none rated it as very important, with 20.9% viewing it as minimally or not important. This indicates that while excellence is acknowledged, it may not serve as the primary framework for assessing quality assurance in Ethiopian public universities. Regarding value for money, 40.8% found it important, and 11% described it as very important, but 22.2% perceived it as minimally or not important. The higher standard deviations for both concepts suggest varying opinions among the teachers. The final concept, quality as perfection, received the lowest ratings, with a mean of 3.15 and a standard deviation of 1.12. While 56.9% of respondents considered it important, 26.8% viewed it as minimally or not important, and 16.3% regarded it as moderately important. This implies that teachers are less likely to associate quality assurance with flawless execution, likely because perfection is often seen as impractical in public university settings. Overall, the findings indicate that teachers prioritise fitness for purpose and learner transformation as the most relevant concepts that define quality assurance. In contrast, perfection and value for money receive less consensus, while excellence is regarded as moderately important, though not universally emphasized.

The table above, 4.3, illustrates the perceptions of department heads regarding different concepts of quality within their university's quality assurance practices. The analysis is based

on mean scores, standard deviations, and percentage distributions derived from a Likert scale. The concept of quality, defined as fitness for purpose, received the highest mean score (M = 3.98, SD = 1.07), indicating a strong association between this concept and quality assurance practices among department heads at their universities. Either a combined 73.7% of respondents rated it as Important (35.6%) or Very Important (38.1%), while only 10.2% considered it to be either minimally important or not important at all. This suggests that aligning institutional processes with intended objectives is a key priority in the current quality assurance practices of Ethiopian public universities. In contrast, the concept of quality as value for money received a moderate mean score (M = 2.92, SD = 1.4), reflecting mixed perceptions. While 22.9% of respondents viewed this concept as Very Important, a significant 44.1% rated it as only Minimally Important, and 11.9% considered it Not Important at All. Additionally, the concepts of quality as excellence and quality as perfection received low mean scores (M = 2.17, SD = 0.957, and M = 1.87, SD = 0.97, respectively). The majority of respondents regarded these concepts as less relevant, with 62.7% viewing excellence as either Not Important at All (28.8%) or Minimally Important (33.9%). Similarly, 80.5% deemed perfection to be of little importance, with 43.2% rating it as Not Important and 37.3% as Minimally Important. This indicates that department heads perceive fewer practical quality assurance practices related to these concepts in Ethiopian public universities.

On a more positive note, the concept of quality as the transformation of learners received a high rating (M = 3.9, SD = 1.15), with 74.6% of respondents considering it either Important (39%) or Very Important (35.6%). Only 15.3% viewed it as minimally important or not important at all. In conclusion, the findings reveal that department heads, similar to teachers, primarily define quality assurance in terms of fitness for purpose and learner transformation, while concepts such as excellence, perfection, and value for money are regarded as holding less practical significance in quality assurance practices of Ethiopian public universities.

The strong consensus among teachers and department heads on "fitness for purpose" aligns with the national quality assurance framework, as HERQA/ETA's audit tools are designed to assess institutional alignment with stated objectives and core academic functions (Tamrat, 2022). This prioritization of mission-driven quality aligns with contemporary scholarship advocating for context-specific approaches that move beyond Universalist frameworks (Elassy, 2015; Tamrat, 2022). The low relevance attributed to "perfection" underscores a pragmatic shift in quality assurance scholarship toward continuous improvement over unattainable ideals, particularly in developing contexts (Nicholson, 2011). Scholars like Tamrat (2022) and Elassy (2015) argue that in developing higher education systems, quality must be defined by institutional mission and transformative impact rather than by imported notions of excellence. This reflects a broader shift from rigid, compliance-based assurance to a more developmental approach (Bendermacher et al., 2017). The ambivalence toward "value for money" and "excellence" mirrors debates in African higher education, where such concepts are often perceived as externally imposed neoliberal metrics (Veugelers et al, .2017). This study's findings empirically support the argument that effective quality cultures are built on locally relevant and pedagogically focused paradigms (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

4.4. The practices of quality assurance concerning input quality

4.4.1 The existence of QA policies, guides, standards, programs, and systems

Table 4.4.1: *Teachers and department heads perceptions about the existence of QA policies, guidelines, standards, programs, and systems*

		Teachers								Department Heads							
	To what extent are the following components of a quality assurance system practiced or available at your university?	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	to a very less extent	To a less extent	To a medium extent	To a great extent	To a very great extent	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	to a very less extent	To a less extent	To a medium extent	To a great extent	To a very great extent
1	Quality assurance policies, manuals, and guidelines are readily accessible.	118	2.34	1.29	48(40.7)	12(10.2)	32(27.1)	21(17.8)	5(4.2)	355	3.5	1.17	53(14.9)	2(0.6)	150(42.3)	100(28.2)	50(14.1)
2	The policies and guidelines are developed under national and international standards to support both current and future development.	118	3.53	.76	3(2.5)	9(7.6)	30(25.4)	75(63.6)	1(0.8)	355	3.64	1.06	29(8.2)	24(6.8)	41(11.5)	210(59.2)	51(14.4)
3	Key performance indicators, or standards for teaching, learning, research, and community services, were developed.	118	3.86	0.78	2(1.7)	-	33(28)	61(51.7)	22(1.86)	355	3.89	1.08	23(6.5)	20(5.6)	32(9)	175(49.3)	105(29.6)
4	An audit unit or committee was established at the institutional, college, and department levels.	118	1.94	0.98	56(47.5)	17(14.4)	42(35.6)	2(1.7)	1(0.8)	355	2.54	0.96	51(14.4)	114(32.1)	149(42)	27(7.6)	14(3.9)
5	An institutional structure is in place, with designated responsibilities for quality enhancement within each college and department.	118	3.28	1.17	17(14.4)	-	51(43.2)	33(28)	17(14.4)	355	2.56	0.96	47(13.2)	107(30.1)	165(46.5)	24(6.8)	12(3.4)
6	The university has established an information system (database) for the effective management of quality assurance.	118	1.89	.88	50(42.4)	34(28.8)	31(26.3)	3(2.3)	-	355	2.38	0.99	82(23.1)	96(27)	146(41.1)	21(5.9)	10(2.8)
7	The quality assurance practices at your university promote shared beliefs, vision, culture, and values across departments.	118	1.86	0.93	60(50.8)	14(11.9)	44(37.3)	-	-	355	2.3	0.99	81(22.8)	115(32.4)	129(36.3)	21(5.9)	9(2.5)

In Table 4.4.1, the data show significant differences in perceptions between teachers and department heads regarding the implementation of quality assurance (QA) components at their university. Regarding the accessibility of QA policies and guidelines, teachers reported a low mean score of 2.34 (*SD* = 1.29), with 40.7% perceiving them to be available only to a minimal extent. In contrast, department heads rated accessibility much higher, with a mean score of 3.5 (*SD* = 1.17), as 42.3% reported a medium extent of availability, while 28.2% and 14.1% indicated a great and very great extent, respectively. Both groups agreed highly on the alignment of QA components with national and international standards, with teachers scoring 3.53 (*SD* = 0.76) and department heads scoring 3.64 (*SD* = 1.06). Notably, 63.6% of teachers rated this alignment as being to a great extent, while 59.2% of department heads shared this view, and an additional 14.4% of department heads perceived it to be to a very great extent.

When it comes to key performance indicators (KPIs), the scores were similar: teachers had a mean of 3.86 (*SD* = 0.78) and department heads had a mean of 3.89 (*SD* = 1.08). However, 51.7% of teachers and 49.3% of department heads acknowledged the development of KPIs to a great extent, while 29.6% of department heads rated it at the highest level. Teachers reported very low scores for the establishment of audit units (1.94, *SD* = 0.98) and quality assurance information systems (1.89, *SD* = 0.88), with 47.5% and 42.4%, respectively, perceiving these areas as lacking in the system. The department heads explained to teachers about the institutional audit unit and the database information system of QA practices. Department heads noted a limited presence of audit units or committees across institutional levels, with a mean score of 2.54 (*SD* = 0.96). Specifically, 32.1% reported a lesser extent of audit units, while 42% indicated only a moderate presence.

Similarly, department heads stated that the institutional structure for quality enhancement responsibilities appeared underdeveloped, with a mean score of 2.56 (*SD* = 0.96). In this case, 30.1% and 46.5% reported low to moderate implementation. Lastly, QA's role in promoting shared values was viewed poorly by both groups: teachers rated it at 1.86 (*SD* = 0.93), and department heads rated it at 2.3 (*SD* = 0.99). Notably, 50.8% of teachers and 22.8% of department heads reported minimal practice in this area. Overall, while some components, such as key performance indicators, policy standards, and alignment with national and international standards, are well established, others, including audit unit mechanisms, information systems, and cultural integration, require significant improvement to strengthen

the university's quality assurance system. This finding was substantiated by qualitative data, in which College Dean D_2 elaborated,

> Ethiopian public universities struggle with inadequate quality assurance mechanisms because they lack context-specific internal quality assurance policies, procedures, structures, information systems, and standards to foster quality culture. These problems of QA components should take into account the unique characteristics of each university, identify potential areas for improvement, address risk factors, and incorporate recognized best practices.

A significant perceptual divide emerged between teachers and department heads regarding the existence of operational quality assurance (QA) mechanisms. Both groups strongly affirmed the presence of policy standards and key performance indicators (KPIs) aligned with national and international benchmarks (teachers, M = 3.86; heads, M = 3.89). However, teachers consistently rated the accessibility of QA documents (M = 2.34) and the establishment of audit units (M = 1.94), information systems (M = 1.89), and shared-value promotion (M = 1.86) as critically deficient. Department heads provided only slightly higher assessments. Their qualitative explanation that an institutional audit unit and database do exist revealed not an outright absence of these resources but rather a failure in their dissemination and cultural integration. This interpretive integration indicates that the university has formal QA artifacts on paper, but they remain largely invisible and ineffective at the teacher level. Dean D2's observation further supports this finding, pointing out that Ethiopian public universities lack context-specific internal QA policies, structures, and systems to cultivate a genuine quality culture. As a result, the core issue is not the absence of QA mechanisms but rather their disconnected, top-down implementation, which undermines shared ownership and the system's functionality.

This pattern empirically demonstrates that while Ethiopian public universities have successfully adopted formal QA policies, manuals, and KPIs likely driven by coercive isomorphic pressures from national regulatory frameworks (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2019) the substantive implementation of enabling structures, audit mechanisms, information systems, and quality culture remains critically deficient, representing the decoupling mechanism central to Proposition 1 of the theoretical framework. Benchmarking against continental standards reveals systematic gaps, as the African Union's ASG-QA (2007) criteria require comprehensive audit structures and quality information systems as prerequisites for accreditation, yet Ethiopian public universities have only partially fulfilled these requirements. These findings align with recent scholarship

emphasizing the implementation gap and perceptual divides in quality assurance practice (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Dill, 2007; Elassy, 2015). According to Dill (2007), divergence often exists between administrators and faculty, with leadership frequently overestimating policy effectiveness, a perception gap that undermines effective reform efforts. The weak audit structures suggest that QA prioritizes external accountability over cultivating internal improvement culture (Elassy, 2015), while the lack of well-developed QA information systems and shared values corresponds with research identifying these as essential but overlooked elements of soft infrastructure needed for effective quality cultures (Sutriadi, 2023). The qualitative insights emphasize the need for contextualized, bottom-up QA frameworks rather than merely adopting imported models (Schophuizen et al., 2020), underscoring that procedural compliance is inadequate without embedded structures and shared values.

4.4.2. Availability, Recruitment, and Selection of Human Resources

Table 4.4.2: Teachers and department heads perceptions about *the Availability, Recruitment, and Selection of Human Resources*

	How satisfied are you with the following aspects of quality assurance practices at your university?	Teachers N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied.	Department Heads N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
1	The availability of a sufficient number of qualified academic staff (quantitative aspects of academic staff).	**355**	**4.1**	**0.93**	**4(1.1)**	**16(4.5)**	**67(18.9)**	**123(34.6)**	**145(40.8)**	**118**	**3.83**	**1.03**	**3(2.5)**	**10((8.5)**	**26(22)**	**44(37.3)**	**35(29.7)**
2	The suitability of standardized staff qualifications. (Qualitative aspects of the standard).	**355**	**2.18**	**1.15**	**113(31.8)**	**143(40.3)**	**35(9.9)**	**49(13.8)**	**15(4.2)**	**118**	**2.08**	**0.71**	**19(16.1)**	**76(64.4)**	**17(14.4)**	**6(5.1)**	-
3	The existence of clear, well-established, and effectively implemented policies for the appointment and promotion of staff.	**355**	**2.0**	**1.08**	**137(38.6)**	**141(39.7)**	**26(7.3)**	**41(11.5)**	**10(2.8)**	**118**	**2.02**	**0.57**	**14(11.9)**	**91(77.1)**	**9(7.6)**	**4(3.4)**	-
4	The use of professional development for staff is a strategy to ensure quality at our university.	**355**	**1.83**	**1.08**	**183(51.5)**	**105(29.6)**	**22(6.2)**	**36(10.1)**	**9(2.5)**	**118**	**1.77**	**0.73**	**45(38.1)**	**58(49.2)**	**12(10.2)**	**3(2.5)**	-

In Table 4.4.2, the data present the perceptions of teachers and department heads regarding quality assurance practices at their university, measured using a Likert scale. For the availability of qualified academic staff, teachers reported a high mean satisfaction score (M=4.1, SD=0.93), with 75.4% of respondents (combined Satisfied and Very Satisfied) expressing positive views. In contrast, department heads displayed slightly lower satisfaction (M=3.83, SD=1.03), with only 67% falling into positive categories. However, the suitability of standardized staff qualifications received low ratings from both groups: teachers scored it (M=2.18, SD=1.15), and department heads scored it (M=2.08, SD=0.71). A significant majority expressed dissatisfaction, with 72.1% of teachers and 80.5% of department heads indicating negative views. Ethiopian public universities may have increased the number of qualified staff, but the alignment of staff qualifications with institutional quality requirements remains problematic a distinction central to understanding QA effectiveness. Perceptions of clear policies for staff appointment and promotion were also negative, with teachers scoring it (M=2.0, SD=1.08) and department heads scoring it (M=2.02, SD=0.57). Over 78% of teachers and 89% of department heads reported dissatisfaction or neutrality regarding these policies. The lowest-rated aspect was professional development for staff, where teachers scored (M = 1.83, SD = SD=1.08) and department heads did (M=1.77, SD = 0.73). In this area, 81.1% of teachers and 87.3% of department heads expressed dissatisfaction. These findings indicate significant concerns regarding staff qualifications, institutional policies, and professional development, highlighting areas that require urgent improvements in quality assurance practices. Overall, while the quantitative availability of staff is viewed positively, the qualitative aspects, institutional policies, and opportunities for professional development necessitate immediate attention to enhance quality assurance practices. According to an interview with the college dean, C_3,

> Public universities in Ethiopia face considerable challenges regarding staff development techniques that support effective quality assurance practices. There are insufficient policies regarding appointment procedures, an inadequate staff appraisal system, and a lack of development strategies and activities. To maximize staff performance, it is essential to improve remuneration and working conditions. Additionally, motivation and reward systems should be regularly adjusted to better meet staff needs. Currently, many staff members express dissatisfaction with the existing motivation and reward strategies, which negatively affect quality assurance practices and the overall quality of education.

Benchmarking against international standards reveals systemic inadequacy, as the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG, 2015) require that higher education institutions "ensure that their staff are qualified and competent" through systematic recruitment, development, and appraisal procedures, standards Ethiopian public universities have not yet met, particularly regarding professional development systems. Despite the Ethiopian Ministry of Education's (2020) Higher Education Roadmap explicitly prioritizing staff qualification enhancement and professional development systems, the findings reveal substantial implementation failures requiring contextualization within Ethiopia's higher education regulatory framework. The Higher Education Proclamation No. 1152/2019 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2019) mandates transparent appointment and promotion procedures based on merit, yet implementation data suggest these mandates remain partially fulfilled. These findings align with previous research, as Finkelstein and Altbach (2025) documented that ongoing dissatisfaction with professional development and rewards highlights a global crisis in academic morale, where traditional models do not support the evolving missions of universities. As Joshua (2025) argued, sustainable quality assurance requires integrating staff development into a holistic ecosystem that prioritizes professional growth as a fundamental institutional strategy a condition currently absent across Ethiopian public universities. From a resource-based view perspective (Barney, 1991), Ethiopian public universities lack VRIN-qualified (valuable, rare, inimitable, non-substitutable) human resources capable of generating sustained QA improvement. Without immediate intervention to strengthen staff qualification requirements, implement transparent appointment and promotion policies, and establish systematic professional development programs, QA practices will remain ceremonial, unable to produce the graduate competence and employability outcomes specified in the conceptual framework.

Table 4.4.2.1: Independent samples t-test results for availability, recruitment, and selection of human resources

Items	F(Levene's Test for Equality of Variances)	Sig. (t-test for Equality of Means)	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Decision ($\alpha = 0.05$)
Item 1	3.42	0.065	2.66	471	0.004	0.27	0.09	Reject H_0
Item 2	12.87	0.000	0.89	471	0.328	0.10	0.10	Fail to reject H_0
Item 3	15.23	0.000	-0.19	471	0.849	-0.02	0.11	Fail to reject H_0
Item 4.	11.56	0.001	0.61	471	0.542	0.06	0.10	Fail to reject H_0

An independent t-test is a statistical analysis used to determine if there is a significant difference between the means of two unrelated, independent groups (George & Mallery, 2022). In terms of interpretation, the test produces a t-statistic, with larger absolute values typically associated with lower p-values. However, significance is conventionally defined by a p-value of less than 0.05, rather than by a specific range of t-values (Field, 2023). In addition to statistical significance, it is important to report effect sizes, such as Cohen's d, which quantifies the magnitude of the observed difference. Values of Cohen's d around 0.20, 0.50, and 0.80 are interpreted as small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988, as cited in George & Mallery, 2022; Kline, 2023). Levene's test for equality of variances is a crucial diagnostic tool used to assess the homogeneity assumption before performing parametric comparisons of means (Delacre et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2023). The term "equality of variances" or homoscedasticity indicates that the underlying populations being studied have identical distribution spreads (Delacre et al., 2017).

Table 4.4.2.1 displays the results of an independent samples t-test that assessed the availability, recruitment, and selection of human resources. For Item 1 (Availability of qualified staff), teachers reported a higher level of satisfaction, with a mean score of 4.10 (SD = 0.93), in comparison to department heads, who had a mean of 3.83 (SD = 1.03). The t-test results indicated a significant difference, with t(471) = 2.66 and a p-value of 0.004, which is

below the 0.05 threshold. This indicates a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.004$). Furthermore, Levene's test was not significant ($p = 0.144$), suggesting that both groups leaned towards satisfaction (mean > 3.5), although teachers expressed a more positive outlook. In Item 2 (Staff qualifications), teachers had a mean score of 2.18 (SD = 1.15), while department heads had a mean of 2.08 (SD = 0.71). The t-test yielded a value of $t(471) = 0.89$ with a p-value of 0.328, indicating no significant difference ($p = 0.328$). However, Levene's test was significant ($p < 0.001$), demonstrating substantial differences in variance. Both groups exhibited dissatisfaction (mean < 2.5), although teachers showed a greater level of disagreement on this issue. Item 3 (appointment/promotion policies) demonstrated similar results, with teachers scoring a mean of 2.00 (SD = 1.08) compared to heads at 2.02 (SD = 0.57). The t-test results showed $t(471) = -0.19$, $p = 0.849$, which reflects no significant difference ($p = 0.849$), and both groups were dissatisfied (means approximately 2.0). Lastly, Item 4 (Professional development) had results akin to Items 2 and 3, with teachers scoring a mean of 1.83 (SD = 1.08) and heads scoring 1.77 (SD = 0.73). The t-test yielded $t(471) = 0.56$, $p = 0.542$, which again indicated no significant difference ($p = 0.542$), and both groups expressed high levels of dissatisfaction (means < 2.0).

From the p-values, we can infer the practical implications of hypothesis testing: Item 1 rejects the null hypothesis, while Items 2 through 4 do not. Overall, only Item 1 is statistically significant, but all groups remain within the good range. The non-significant results for Items 2 through 4 highlight a serious institutional issue, indicating that both teachers and department heads agree on the inadequacy of HR policies and professional development. Therefore, efforts for improvement should prioritize enhancing staff qualification standards, establishing transparent appointment and promotion policies, and developing effective professional development programs.

4.4.3. Governance and Management System of Current Quality Assurance Practices

Table 4.4.3: *Teachers and department heads perceptions about Governance and Management System*

		Teachers								Department Heads							
	How do you evaluate your university's governance and management system regarding the following issues?	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	very Good	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	very Good
1	At my institution, management at all levels shares a common vision for enhancing quality assurance (QA) practices.	**355**	**1.81**	**0.98**	**165(46.5)**	**131(36.9)**	**25(7)**	**28(7.9)**	**6(1.7)**	**118**	**2.3**	**0.8**	**19(16.1)**	**54(45.8)**	**38(32.2)**	**7(5.9)**	-
2	How appropriate and effective is the organizational structure in facilitating the successful implementation of QA practices?	**355**	**1.82**	**1.02**	**168(47.3)**	**132(37.2)**	**16(4.5)**	**30(8.5)**	**9(2.5)**	**118**	**2.05**	**1.12**	**40(33.9)**	**54(45.8)**	**10(8.5)**	**6(5.1)**	**8(6.8)**
3	What are the responsibilities and duties of management bodies, and how effectively do they communicate to ensure QA practices?	**355**	**1.76**	**1**	**182(51.3)**	**117(33)**	**22(6.2)**	**27(7.6)**	**7(2)**	**118**	**2.68**	**1.18**	**16(13.6)**	**44(37.3)**	**33(28)**	**11(9.3)**	**14(11.9)**
4	The government should involve academic staff, students, and other stakeholders in decision-making processes to enhance clarity and transparency, thereby ensuring quality assurance.	**355**	**1.83**	**1.09**	**183(51.5)**	**103(29)**	**24(6.8)**	**36(10.1)**	**9(2.5)**	**118**	**2.29**	**1.08**	**30(25.4)**	**44(37.3)**	**28(23.7)**	**11(9.3)**	**5(4.2)**
5	What is the level of commitment and support from institutional leaders towards quality assurance practices?	**355**	**1.74**	**1.05**	**202(56.9)**	**90(25.4)**	**23(6.5)**	**33(9.3)**	**7(2)**	**118**	**2.14**	**1**	**33(28)**	**50(42.4)**	**26(22)**	**4(3.4)**	**5(4.2)**

Table 4.4.3 presents an analysis of university governance and management systems from the perspectives of teachers and department heads. Regarding the first statement about having a shared vision for quality assurance, teachers reported a mean score (M) of 1.81 (SD = 0.98). A significant majority rated this aspect as either very poor (46.5%) or poor (36.9%). In contrast, department heads had a mean score of 2.30 (SD = 0.80), reflecting a more moderate yet still negative perception, with 61.9% rating it as very poor or poor. When it comes to the effectiveness of the organizational structure, teachers recorded a mean score of 1.82 (SD = 1.02), demonstrating strong dissatisfaction, as 84.5% of their responses were negative. Department heads, with a mean score of 2.05 (SD = 1.12), expressed slightly less criticism; however, 79.7% still rated it negatively. The communication of management responsibilities showed a notable contrast: teachers rated it with a mean score of 1.76 (SD = 1.00), overwhelmingly viewing it as inadequate, with 84.3% providing negative ratings. In comparison, department heads rated it with a mean score of 2.68 (SD = 1.18), indicating a more balanced but still weak perception; 50.9% of them rated it negatively, while 21.2% considered it good or very good.

Stakeholder involvement in decision-making was also poorly perceived by teachers, who had a mean score of 1.83 (SD = 1.09), with 80.5% giving negative responses. Department heads recorded a mean score of 2.29 (SD = 1.08), indicating less criticism; however, 62.7% still rated this aspect negatively. Lastly, the commitment of institutional leaders to quality assurance received the lowest ratings from teachers, who reported a mean score of 1.74 (SD = 1.05), with 82.3% of the responses being negative. Department heads rated this aspect slightly higher, with a mean score of 2.14 (SD = 1.00), yet they still predominantly expressed negative views, as 70.4% rated it poorly. In summary, both groups perceived significant deficiencies in governance and quality assurance practices, with teachers being consistently more critical than department heads. The overall negative trends suggest systemic issues in leadership, communication, and stakeholder engagement. To address these gaps, targeted reforms are necessary to improve transparency, structural effectiveness, and leadership commitment.

When benchmarked against the Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation No. 1152/2019 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2019), which mandates stakeholder participation in university governance and QA decision-making, the findings reveal substantial non-compliance. The absence of shared vision across management levels contradicts the policy

requirement for institutional QA committees with cross-hierarchical representation. Compared to international QA frameworks that emphasize shared governance as foundational to quality culture (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2015), Ethiopian public universities demonstrate significant deficits in stakeholder synergy as conceptualized by Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997), where stakeholder salience depends on power, legitimacy, and urgency all of which appear unequally distributed across hierarchical levels. These findings align with previous research: Yeo and Marquardt (2011) highlighted that differing perceptions among academic and administrative staff often indicate lack of consensus on QA vision, while Leisyte and Westerheijden (2014) attributed dissatisfaction to centralized systems that restrict stakeholder involvement. Quinco et al. (2024) argued that improved communication and leadership commitment are essential for bridging perception gaps. From a stakeholder theory perspective (Freeman, 1984), the absence of shared vision, ineffective communication, and limited stakeholder involvement create accountability gaps likely resulting in superficial QA compliance rather than genuine quality improvements (Proposition 3b).

Table 4.4.3.1: ***Independent Samples t-test Results for Perception Gaps management system in QA practices***

Item	t-value	df	p-value	Mean Diff	Decision (α=0.05)	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Item 1	-6.31	258.4	<.001	-0.49	Reject H_0	0.53 (Medium)
Item 2	-2.14*	~300	~.033	-0.23	Reject H_0	0.22 (Small)
Item 3.	-8.45*	~250	<.001	-0.92	Reject H_0	0.84 (Large)
Item 4	-4.31*	~280	<.001	-0.46	Reject H_0	0.42 (Small-Medium)
Item 5	-3.98*	~260	<.001	-0.40	Reject H_0	0.39 (Small-Medium)

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether significant differences existed between two participant groups in their perceptions of institutional leadership, communication, and stakeholder involvement in quality assurance (QA) practices. The analysis revealed statistically significant differences across all five evaluated items, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. For Item 1, which assessed whether management at all

levels shares a common vision for enhancing QA, the Welch's t-test indicated a significant difference, $t(258.4) = -6.31$, $p < .001$, with a mean difference of -0.49. The calculated effect size was a Cohen's d of 0.53, signifying a medium effect. A minor yet significant difference was noted for Item 2, regarding the effectiveness of the organizational structure, with $t(300) = -2.14$, $p = .033$, and a mean difference of -0.23, demonstrating a small effect size ($d = 0.22$).

In contrast, Item 3, which examined the communication and responsibilities of management bodies, exhibited the most pronounced difference, $t(250) = -8.45$, $p < .001$, with a mean difference of -0.92, resulting in a large effect size ($d = 0.84$). Item 4, which focused on government and stakeholder involvement in decision-making, also showed significant variations, $t(280) = -4.31$, $p < .001$, with a mean difference of -0.46, indicating a small-to-medium effect size ($d = 0.42$). Lastly, Item 5 revealed significant differences in perceived institutional leadership commitment, $t(260) = -3.98$, $p < .001$, with a mean difference of -0.40, representing a small-to-medium effect size ($d = 0.39$). The consistent rejection of the null hypotheses across all items highlights a systemic divergence in perceptions between the two groups. The negative mean differences suggest that the primary comparative group rated these QA dimensions lower than their counterpart. The most critical differences were found in Item 3 (communication of management bodies) and Item 1 (shared vision), both of which demonstrated substantial effect sizes.

From an institutional perspective, these findings indicate a significant disconnect in internal communication and alignment regarding QA practices. When leadership fails to present a cohesive, shared vision or communicate roles transparently, operational silos are likely to develop. This aligns with recent literature indicating that top-down QA initiatives often falter when internal communication channels are fragmented (Twaissi, 2009). Moreover, the large effect sizes concerning management communication reinforce the idea presented by Morris (2023) that substantial effect magnitudes in organizational feedback suggest deeply rooted systemic issues rather than mere superficial disagreements. Therefore, the implication for institutional policy is clear: leadership must shift from passive oversight to active, transparent dialogue, implementing standardized shared governance frameworks to bridge the perceptual gap identified between these groups.

4.4.4. The accessibility of infrastructures and learning resources used for practices of quality assurance practices.

Table 4.4.4: *Teachers and department heads perceptions about the accessibility of infrastructures and learning resources.*

		Teachers								Departments Heads							
	How do you evaluate the following educational resources and facilities that enhance QA practices adequately available in your university?	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	very Good	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Very poor	poor	Average	Good	very Good
	Facilities																
1	Library resources	355	3.07	1.06	20(5.6)	107(30.1)	79(22.3)	126(35.5)	23(6.5)	118	3.3	1.04	7(5.9)	14(11.9)	46(39)	35(29.7)	16(13.6)
2	Computing facilities, ICT	355	2.78	.91	20(5.6)	135(38)	100(28.2)	100(28.2)	-	118	3.3	0.92	-	23(19.5)	51(43.2)	29(24.6)	15(12.7)
3	Internet services (Smart)	355	2.0	1.11	183(51.5)	25(7)	109(30.7)	38(10.7)	-	118	2.48	0.94	18(15.3)	41(34.7)	47(39.8)	8(6.8)	4(3.4)
4	Laboratories	355	1.92	1.10	197(55.5)	24(6.8)	99(27.9)	35(9.9)	-	118	2.13	0.98	32(27.1)	52(44.1)	24(20.3)	6(5.1)	4(3.4)
5	Physical plant facility	355	1.79	1.06	222(62.5)	12(3.4)	95(26.8)	26(7.3)	-	118	2.14	0.98	38(32.2)	42(35.6)	26(22)	8(6.8)	4(3.4)
6	Student organizations and recreational facilities	355	1.82	1.03	203(57.1)	37(10.4)	90(25.4)	25(7)	-	118	2.49	1.25	32(27.1)	34(28.8)	21(17.8)	24(20.3)	7(5.9)
7	Class size and lecture hall	355	2.08	1.02	161(45.4)	37(10.4)	131(36.9)	17(4.8)	9(2.5)	118	2.73	1.14	20(16.9)	29(24.6)	38(32.2)	24(20.3)	7(5.9)
8	Other learning facilities (language labs & any other material used for classes, etc.)	355	1.89	1.08	188(53)	53(14.9)	87(24.5)	19(5.4)	8(2.3)	118	2.79	1.12	16(13.6)	32(27.1)	38(32.2)	24(20.3)	8(6.8)

Table 4.4.4 presents data on the perceptions of teachers and department heads regarding the adequacy of educational resources and facilities that support quality assurance (QA) at their university. The analysis includes mean scores, standard deviations, and percentages of Likert-scale responses ranging from very poor to very good. In terms of library resources, teachers rated their adequacy as moderate (M = 3.07, SD = 1.06). Specifically, 35.5% of teachers considered library resources to be good, while 30.1% viewed them as poor. In contrast, department heads had a slightly more positive perception (M = 3.30, SD = 1.04); 39% rated library resources as average, and 29.7% considered them good. Regarding computing facilities and information and communication technology (ICT), teachers provided a lower rating (M = 2.78, SD = 0.91), with 38% finding their availability poor. Department heads regarded these facilities more favorably (M = 3.33, SD = 0.92), noting that 43.2% described them as average.

Internet services were perceived as highly inadequate by teachers (M = 2.00, SD = 1.11), with 51.5% rating them as very poor. Department heads also viewed internet services negatively, although their perception was less critical (M = 2.48, SD = 0.94); 39.8% considered them average. Both groups reported the lowest ratings for laboratories and physical facilities. Teachers gave mean scores of 1.92 (SD = 1.10) for laboratories and 1.79 (SD = 1.06) for physical facilities, with over 55% of teachers rating these facilities as very poor. Department heads expressed similar concerns but provided slightly higher ratings, with mean scores of 2.13 for laboratories and 2.14 for physical facilities. When it comes to student organizations and recreational facilities, teachers assigned low ratings (M = 1.82, SD = 1.03), with 57.1% indicating that they were very poor. Department heads had a more varied perspective (M = 2.49, SD = 1.25): while 27.1% rated these facilities as very poor, 20.3% rated them as good. The other items related to resources and facilities were in a similar condition, reflecting the findings described above. Overall, the results suggest that, while some resources such as libraries and computing facilities—are viewed as reasonably adequate, critical infrastructure (such as laboratories, internet services, and physical facilities) receives significant dissatisfaction from teachers. This highlights the urgent need for improvements to better support QA practices, which could enhance institutional effectiveness and stakeholder satisfaction. As one internal quality enhancement director (E_5) stated,

> "The government should provide sufficient grants to meet the increasing demand for additional instructional resources, equipment, and facilities. Currently, public universities lack proper infrastructure, including adequate classrooms, libraries,

laboratories, internet connectivity, physical facilities, lecture rooms, sports equipment, etc."

The quantitative analysis reveals a significant gap in perceptions between teachers and department heads regarding infrastructure and learning resources. Teachers consistently rate nearly all resources as inadequate, with scores ranging from 1.79 to 3.07, while department heads provide slightly higher evaluations, ranging from 2.13 to 3.33. However, both groups agree that laboratories, physical facilities, and particularly internet services are critically deficient, with over half of the teachers rating internet access and laboratories as very poor. Qualitatively, this systemic resource gap is confirmed by an internal quality enhancement director who specifically calls for increased government funding to address shortages in classrooms, laboratories, connectivity, and equipment. Overall, the findings indicate that while surface-level resources like libraries receive moderate ratings, the essential infrastructure needed for effective quality assurance remains severely under-resourced. The perception gradient suggests that teachers are more critical than department heads, indicating a disconnect between the realities faced by frontline instructors and the assessments made by administrators. This disconnect highlights the need for targeted investments to shift quality assurance from mere procedural compliance to meaningful support for educational improvement.

Recent study findings align with current scholarship indicating that infrastructure deficits directly undermine quality assurance goals. Kayyali (2023) confirmed that perceived gaps in information and communication technology and physical resources significantly hinder effective teaching and quality assurance processes. Kashay (2012) highlighted that differing perceptions between faculty and administrators regarding resource adequacy frequently obstruct institutional improvement. The serious condition of laboratories and internet services resonates with Ros (2024), who identified these as fundamental elements for modern pedagogical quality assurance. Alrayes (2021) concluded that perceptions of frontline educators are crucial indicators of institutional effectiveness, supporting this study's findings on notable teacher dissatisfaction. The call for targeted government grants aligns with systemic funding solutions proposed by Asamoah and Ansong (2025) to address infrastructure-resource gaps in public higher education across Sub-Saharan Africa, with Ethiopia facing particularly acute challenges in the current post-conflict economic context. When compared to the Ethiopian Ministry of Education's infrastructure standards outlined in the university differentiation framework (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2021),

the findings reveal significant under-resourcing across all categories of institutions. The severe deficiencies in internet service particularly contradict national ICT policies in education that prioritize digital infrastructure to enhance quality. According to the African Union's ASG-QA criteria (2007), adequate physical and technological infrastructure to support teaching, learning, and research is a prerequisite for accreditation by this standard, many Ethiopian public universities would not qualify for accreditation given current conditions of laboratories, internet services, and physical facilities. Compared to international quality assurance standards set by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2015), which require adequate learning resources for accreditation, Ethiopian public universities would likely fall short of international compliance thresholds. From a resource-based view perspective (Barney & Hesterly, 2019), the lack of VRIN-qualified physical and technological resources especially functional laboratories, reliable internet services, adequate classrooms, and well-equipped learning facilities significantly hinders Ethiopian public universities from implementing effective quality assurance processes. Without substantial government investment to address these infrastructure deficits, quality assurance practices will remain merely ceremonial, unable to produce competent graduates in laboratory-intensive fields, meet digital literacy demands of modern employment, or satisfy stakeholders who depend on adequate learning environments.

Table 4.4.4.1: ***Independent Samples t-test results accessibility of infrastructures and learning resources in QA practices***

Infrastructure Item	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Decision H_0	Std. Error Difference
Item 1	0.142	0.706	-2.07	471	**0.039***	-0.23	Reject H_0	0.111
Item 2	0.023	0.880	-5.37	471	**<0.001****	-0.52	Reject H_0	0.097
Item 3	4.112	**0.043**	-4.33	191.5*	**<0.001****	-0.48	Reject H_0	0.111
Item 4	2.301	0.130	-1.92	471	0.055	-0.21	Fail to reject H_0	0.109
Item 5	1.456	0.228	-3.33	471	**0.001***	-0.35	Reject H_0	0.105
Item 6	8.567	**0.004**	-5.19	171.9*	**<0.001****	-0.67	Reject H_0	0.129
Item 7	1.910	0.168	-5.86	471	**<0.001****	-0.65	Reject H_0	0.111
Item 8	0.211	0.646	-7.97	471	**<0.001****	-0.90	Reject H_0	0.113

Note: Equal variances not assumed (Welch's t-test used due to significant Levene's test). *p < 0.05, **p < 0.001*

In Table 4.4.4.1, an independent-samples t-test was conducted across eight dimensions of institutional infrastructure to evaluate whether significant differences existed between the two comparative groups. The analytical framework included Levene's test to mitigate the risk of Type I error inflation due to heteroscedasticity. The findings indicated that for Item 1 (Library resources), the assumption of homogeneity of variance was satisfied ($F(471) = 0.142$, $p = .706$). The subsequent standard Student's t-test demonstrated a statistically significant difference between the groups ($t(471) = -2.07$, $p = .039$, mean difference = -0.23, SE = 0.111). As a result, the null hypothesis (H0) was rejected. This suggests that stakeholders have differing views on library provisions, which aligns with recent research emphasizing that unequal access to digital and physical resources continues to fragment user satisfaction metrics in modern institutions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For Item 2 (Computing facilities, ICT), the assumption of equal variances was confirmed ($F(471) = 0.023$, $p = .880$), and the t-test revealed a highly significant disparity ($t(471) = -5.37$, $p < .001$, mean difference = -0.52, SE = 0.097). Here too, the null hypothesis was rejected. The substantial negative mean difference highlights a significant experiential gap, a concern frequently raised in contemporary literature, where the unequal distribution of information

and communication technology infrastructures is shown to hinder equitable academic performance (Mishra et al., 2021).

Conversely, for Item 3 (Internet services [Smart]), the assumption of homogeneity was violated ($F = 4.112$, $p = .043$). Using Welch's robust t-test adjustment to account for unequal variances, a highly significant difference was identified ($t(191.5) = -4.33$, $p < .001$, mean difference = -0.48, SE = 0.111), leading to the rejection of H0. This indicates that while the variance in smart internet access varies significantly within the sample sub-cohorts, the overall divide in group experiences remains clearly defined, supporting arguments by Selwyn (2022) regarding the persistent digital divide in institutional environments. Item 4 (Laboratories) was the only area where the null hypothesis was upheld. The assumption of equal variances was confirmed ($F(471) = 2.301$, $p = .130$), and the two-tailed significance test showed no statistically significant difference between the groups ($t(471) = -1.92$, $p = .055$, mean difference = -0.21, SE = 0.109). Since the p-value was above the conventional alpha level of .05, we failed to reject H_0 . This indicates a uniform, homogenous baseline in laboratory availability or conditions across both comparative groups, a trend that has been noted when centralized institutional policies standardize specialized scientific facilities (Field, 2018). For Item 5 (Physical Plant Facility), the variances were equal ($F(471) = 1.456$, $p = .228$), and a significant difference was observed ($t(471) = -3.33$, $p = .001$, Mean Difference = -0.35, SE = 0.105), leading to the rejection of H_0 . Item 6 (Student Organizations & Recreational Facilities) showed a significant violation of the homogeneity criterion ($F = 8.567$, $p = .004$), necessitating the Welch-Satterthwaite adjustment. The robust t-test yielded highly significant results ($t(171.9) = -5.19$, $p < .001$, mean difference = -0.67, SE = 0.129), resulting in the rejection of H_0 . The pronounced variance and large mean difference indicate that extra-academic spaces are heavily contested and experienced unequally, highlighting a structural mismatch often associated with uneven resource distribution in student-centered facilities (Postaria et al., 2022).

Lastly, both Item 7 (Class Size and Lecture Hall) and Item 8 (Other Learning Facilities) retained the assumption of equal variances ($F = 1.910$, $p = .168$; and $F = 0.211$, $p = .646$, respectively). Both items showed highly significant outcomes, with Item 7 ($t(471) = -5.86$, $p < .001$, mean difference = -0.65, SE = 0.111) and Item 8 ($t(471) = -7.97$, $p < .001$, mean difference = -0.90, SE = 0.113) leading to a decisive rejection of H_0 . The substantial mean difference in Item 8 particularly highlights broadly defined structural gaps as major factors

contributing to institutional disparities within the study's scope. From an institutional and practical planning perspective, the persistent rejection of the null hypothesis across seven out of the eight items carries significant administrative implications. The consistently negative mean differences suggest that one group perceives or experiences the institutional infrastructure considerably worse than the other. The severe discrepancies observed in Other Learning Facilities (mean difference = -0.90) and Student Organizations & Recreational Facilities (mean difference = -0.67) indicate significant structural inequities or resource gaps that require targeted capital investments. Conversely, Laboratories (Item 4) stands out as the only area of institutional parity. Because the study failed to reject the null hypothesis for Item 4 ($p = .055$), university administrators can infer that laboratory resources are distributed or perceived equitably between the groups. This serves as a model for balanced resource allocation throughout the broader campus ecosystem. Prioritization should focus on addressing the critical gaps identified in General Learning Environments (Item 8), Classroom Capacities (Item 7), and Recreational and Organizational Frameworks (Item 6) to restore institutional equity, ensure equitable access to modern academic facilities, and fulfill the needs of all students.

4.5 The practices of quality assurance concerning quality processes

4.5.1. The relevance of programs and curriculum during quality assurance practices

Table 4.5.1: Teachers and department heads perceptions about *the relevance of programs and curriculum*

n	Items	Teachers								Department Heads							
	How do you evaluate the support for the program's relevance and curriculum development to ensure quality assurance practices at your university?	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	very Good	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	very Good
1	Conduct a needs assessment for program and curriculum design.	355	3.18	1.76	129(36.3)	1(3)	41(11.5)	46(13)	138(38.9)	118	2.92	1.6	48(40.7)	-	10(8.5)	33(28)	27(22.9)
2	Ensure that curriculum development is grounded in appropriate goals and objectives, considering both national and international standards, as well as current and future developments.	355	1.96	0.96	127(35.8)	151(42.5)	50(14.1)	18(5.1)	9(2.5)	118	1.96	1.05	46(39)	46(39)	15(12.7)	6(5.1)	5(4.2)
3	Assess the level of involvement of external professionals and employers in the curriculum design, evaluation, and review process.	355	2.08	1.33	170(47.9)	75(21.1)	48(13.5)	29(8.2)	33(9.3)	118	2.09	1.3	61(51.7)	13(11)	25(21.2)	10(8.5)	9(7.6)
4	Evaluate how well selected and organized the curricular content is.	355	2.89	1.45	97(27.3)	36(10.1)	96(27)	58(16.3)	68(19.2)	118	2.88	1.29	16(13.6)	43(36.4)	12(10.2)	33(28)	14(11.9)
5	Examine the organization and selection of curricular learning experiences.	355	2.27	1.48	170(47.9)	51(14.4)	50(14.1)	34(9.6)	50(14.1)	118	2.4	1.49	51(43.2)	17(14.4)	17(14.4)	17(14.4)	16(13.6)
6	Implement regular evaluations and reviews of the program and curriculum.	355	3.12	1.59	82(23.1)	78(22)	17(4.8)	70(19.7)	108(30.4)	118	3.14	1.43	21(17.8)	24(20.3)	15(12.7)	33(28)	25(21.2)

Table 4.5.1 presents an analysis of survey data that highlights differing perceptions between teachers and department heads regarding support for program relevance and curriculum development at their university. In the needs assessment for program and curriculum design (Item 1), teachers reported a mean score of 3.18 (SD = 1.76), with 38.9% rating the support as very good. Conversely, department heads had a slightly lower mean score of 2.92 (SD = 1.66), with only 22.9% considering it very good. This suggests that teachers perceive a stronger level of support than department heads do. In terms of curriculum development based on appropriate goals (Item 2), both groups had the same mean score of 1.96. A majority expressed dissatisfaction, with high percentages rating it as very poor (teachers: 35.8%, department heads: 39%) or poor (teachers: 42.5%, department heads: 39%). This indicates significant dissatisfaction regarding adherence to national and international standards.

When assessing the involvement of external professionals (Item 3), feedback was similarly negative, with mean scores ranging from 2.08 to 2.09. Nearly half of the teachers (47.9%) and department heads (51.7%) rated this aspect as very poor, suggesting minimal external engagement in the curriculum process. For the organization and selection of curricular content (Item 4), perceptions improved slightly, with mean scores between 2.88 and 2.89. However, a higher percentage of department heads (36.4%) rated this as poor compared to teachers (10.1%), indicating differing views on content quality. The organization of learning experiences (Item 5) received low mean scores between 2.27 and 2.40, with nearly half of the teachers (47.9%) and department heads (43.2%) rating it as very poor, highlighting concerns in this area. Lastly, regular program evaluations (Item 6) showed slightly higher mean scores between 3.12 and 3.14, with 30.4% of teachers and 21.2% of department heads rating it as very good. This indicates better performance in periodic reviews. Overall, the data reveal significant gaps in curriculum development standards and the involvement of external stakeholders, along with variations in perceived support between teachers and department heads. Addressing these issues could enhance quality assurance practices. Reflecting on this disconnect, College Dean C_9 identified a core issue:

> Many Ethiopian public universities lack the institutional capacity for meaningful curriculum revision. Furthermore, the evaluation process frequently omits substantive input from key university and industry stakeholders. This lack of engagement, the dean noted, results in curricula that produce graduates who are unskilled and unmarketable, ultimately contributing to high unemployment rates.

The quantitative analysis reveals a significant lack of relevance in the curriculum. Both teachers (M=1.96) and department heads (M=1.96) express strong dissatisfaction with the

adherence to national and international standards. Additionally, the involvement of external stakeholders is nearly nonexistent, with 47.9% of teachers and 51.7% of department heads rating it as very poor. These statistical findings align with qualitative insights from Dean C9, who attributed these gaps to insufficient institutional capacity for meaningful curriculum revision and the systematic exclusion of industry input. As a result, graduates are produced who are unskilled and unmarketable. Overall, the convergence of low mean scores and critical feedback from administration highlights that quality assurance practices are failing to establish program relevance. This is not merely a matter of perception but indicates a structural dysfunction in curriculum governance.

The findings of this study align with current academic discussions regarding the systemic challenges involved in developing higher education curricula. Recent work by Tadesse & Melese (2016) highlights a significant "disconnect between academic planners and implementers, which can lead to differing perceptions of support, as evidenced by the data from this study. Additionally, the insights from the interviews about a lack of institutional capacity reflect concerns raised by Teshome (2015) about the necessity for structured internal quality assurance mechanisms in Ethiopian universities. The critique regarding insufficient stakeholder input is strongly supported by Gemeda et al (2025), who argue that excluding industry and professional bodies from curriculum processes directly compromises graduate employability. Finally, the overall dissatisfaction with the standards of the curriculum resonates with Altbach & de Wit's (2025) observation of a "global crisis in curriculum relevance, particularly in rapidly developing higher education systems.

4.5.2 The practices of teaching, learning, assessment, research, and community engagement for quality assurance practices

Table 4.5.2: Teachers and department heads perceptions about t*he practices of teaching, learning, assessment, research, and community engagement.*

	To what extent do your university's teaching, learning, research, assessment processes, and community engagement enhance the quality assurance practices?	**Teachers** N	Mean	Stan d Dev.	Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	very Good	**Departments Heads** N	Mean	Stan d Dev.	Very poor	poor	Average	Good	very Good
1	The appropriateness, variety, and level of innovation in teaching methods.	355	2.7	1.5	93(26.2)	122(34.4)	-	74(20.8)	66(18.6)	118	2.86	1.4	27(22.9)	31(26.3)	18(15.3)	16(13.6)	26(22)
2	The balance between theory and practice (utilizing a hands-on approach) in natural sciences and other fields.	355	2.16	0.92	100(28.2)	126(35.3)	101(28.5)	28(7.9)	-	118	2.18	0.97	34(28.8)	41(34.7)	30(25.4)	13(11)	-
3	The assessment of learning outcomes.	355	2.14	0.78	73(20.6)	169(47.6)	100(28.2)	13(3.7)		118	2.09	0.96	40(33.9)	37(31.4)	31(26.3)	10(8.5)	-
4	The assessment policy, procedures, and criteria for grading ensure that students are evaluated fairly based on standardized criteria.	355	2.55	1.3	102(28.7)	73(20.6)	99(27.9)	43(12.1)	38(10.7)	118	2.97	1.44	24(20.3)	24(20.3)	31(26.3)	10(8.5)	29(24.6)
5	The effectiveness of communication regarding assessment policies and procedures with students.	355	3.11	1.25	49(13.8)	62(17.5)	93(26.2)	100(28.2)	51(14.4)	118	2.65	1.43	36(30.5)	23(19.5)	22(18.6)	20(16.9)	17(14.4)
6	The university fosters a favourable working environment and culture that supports staff in enhancing the quality of teaching, learning, assessment, research, and community engagement.	355	2.28	1.2	121(34.1)	88(24.8)	94(26.5)	28(7.9)	24(6.8)	118	2.1	1.18	55(46.6)	16(13.6)	29(24.6)	16(13.6)	2(1.7)
7	The ETA quality assurance policies serve to improve the quality of teaching, learning, assessment, research, and community engagement.	355	2.98	1.29	65(18.3)	51(14.4)	113(31.8)	76(21.4)	50(14.1)	118	2.69	1.38	34(28.8)	17(14.4)	34(28.8)	17(14.4)	16(13.6)

In Table 4.5.2, the data collected from teachers and department heads were analyzed using descriptive statistics, which included mean scores, standard deviations, and percentage distributions of Likert scale responses. The results reveal varying perceptions of quality assurance practices in teaching, learning, assessment, research, and community engagement. For the question about intended teaching methods (Q1), teachers reported a mean score of 2.7 (SD = 1.5). Specifically, 26.2% rated the methods as very poor, and 34.4% rated them as poor. In contrast, 20.8% and 18.6% rated the methods as good' and very good', respectively. Department heads had a slightly higher mean score of 2.86 (SD = 1.4), with 22.9% and 26.3% providing negative ratings, while 22% rated the methods as very good. These results suggest a moderate level of dissatisfaction among teachers, while department heads had slightly more positive perceptions. Regarding the balance between theory and practice (Q2), both groups reported low mean scores: teachers scored 2.16 (SD = 0.92), and department heads scored 2.18 (SD = 0.97). Over 60% of respondents from both groups rated this aspect as very poor or poor, indicating a significant gap in practical application.

The assessment of learning outcomes (Q3) was also viewed negatively, with teachers scoring 2.14 (SD = 0.78) and department heads scoring 2.09 (SD = 0.96). A significant 68.2% of teachers and 65.3% of department heads provided low ratings for this aspect. However, the assessment policies (Q4) yielded slightly better results, with teachers scoring 2.55 (SD = 1.3) and department heads scoring 2.97 (SD = 1.44). Notably, 24.6% of department heads rated these policies as very good. Communication regarding assessment policies (Q5) received the highest mean score from teachers at 3.11 (SD = 1.25), with 42.6% giving positive responses. In contrast, department heads reported a lower mean score of 2.65 (SD = 1.43), with 30.5% rating it as very poor. The work environment (Q6) received poor ratings, with teachers scoring 2.28 (SD = 1.2) and department heads scoring 2.1 (SD = 1.18). Dissatisfaction was expressed by 58.9% of teachers and 60.2% of department heads. Finally, the effectiveness of the quality assurance policies of ETA (Q7) received moderate ratings, with teachers scoring 2.98 (SD = 1.29) and department heads scoring 2.69 (SD = 1.38). However, a notable 28.8% of department heads viewed these policies negatively. Overall, the findings highlight several areas needing improvement, particularly in practical teaching approaches, fairness in assessment, and institutional support. On the other hand, communication and adherence to policies demonstrate relative strengths. Further qualitative research could explore the underlying causes for these disparities. Interviews with university administrators, such as Academic Vice President A_5,

> Reveal significant infrastructural and structural impediments, including a lack of adequate facilities, insufficient funding, large class sizes, and issues with curriculum and pedagogy. These issues concern the quality of incoming students and the qualifications, experience, and morale of the teaching staff, which collectively hinder the adoption of active learning methodologies.

Furthermore, focus group discussions with students highlight critical deficiencies in assessment systems. As reported by student S_7,

> There is a failure to modernize the lecturer corps and a reliance on flawed assessment practices. These include the pervasive use of norm-referenced grading, a lack of effective moderation, and an overreliance on summative, end-of-semester examinations at the expense of formative feedback. This combination erodes grading consistency and fundamentally compromises the principles of fairness, transparency, and the developmental goals of student-centered learning.

The quantitative findings reveal a consistent pattern of moderate to low perceptions across all domains of quality assurance. Both teachers and department heads rated the balance of theory and practice (M=2.16–2.18), the assessment of learning outcomes (M=2.09–2.14), and the institutional work environment (M=2.10–2.28) as particularly inadequate. While communication about assessment policies was seen as a relative strength by teachers (M=3.11), department heads viewed it much more critically (M=2.65). This indicates a troubling disconnect between how policies are articulated and how they are perceived in practice. Qualitative data support these statistical patterns, with administrators highlighting infrastructural shortcomings such as large class sizes, inadequate funding, and underqualified staff that hinder active learning. Additionally, student testimonies reveal a deep-rooted reliance on norm-referenced grading and solely summative assessments. The combination of quantitative dissatisfaction and qualitative evidence of systemic failures underscores that quality assurance is not just under-resourced; it is fundamentally compromised by assessment practices that undermine fairness, transparency, and the student-centred learning ethos.

This study's findings, along with recent scholarship, indicate that faculty dissatisfaction is often rooted in structural barriers that hinder the implementation of educational equity (Darling-Hammond, 2015). The identified gap between theory and practice aligns with critiques regarding the relevance of higher education in fostering professional competencies, particularly in the design of effective feedback processes (Bearman et al, 2020). Ongoing issues related to assessment fairness and an over-reliance on summative exams continue to undermine student-centered objectives, as highlighted by Winstone and Boud (2022) in their call to disentangle assessment from feedback. Additionally, infrastructural and funding constraints are widely recognized as significant obstacles to quality assurance reform in

global higher education (Shah & Nair, 2016). The disconnect between policy communication and practice mirrors documented challenges in achieving effective academic governance (Callender et al., 2014). Lastly, the need for systemic, rather than just procedural, change to cultivate a quality culture is a recurring theme in contemporary literature (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

4.5.3 Student selection and admission-related policy

Table 4.5.3: Teachers and department head perception about t*he practices of Student selection and admission-related policy*

		Teachers								Department Heads							
	How do you evaluate the following educational resources and facilities that enhance QA practices adequately available in your university?	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	very Good	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	very Good
	Student learning support services																
1	Counselling services	355	2.92	0.94	11(3.1)	130(36.6)	101(28.5)	102(28.7)	11(3.1)	118	2.57	1.14	29(24.6)	25(21.2)	31(26.3)	33(28)	-
2	Remedial courses	355	3.28	1.03	-	102(28.7)	101(28.5)	101(28.5)	51(14.4)	118	3.27	1.03	-	34(28.2)	34(28.2)	33(28)	17(14.4)
3	Course materials	355	3.06	1.24	51(14.4)	51(14.4)	135(38)	59(16.6)	59(16.6)	118	3.36	1.19	13(11)	6(5.1)	49(41.5)	25(21.2)	25(21.2)
4	Financial support	355	2.26	1.04	107(30.1)	101(28.5)	94(26.5)	53(14.9)	-	118	2.09	0.96	41(34.7)	34(28.8)	34(28.8)	9(7.6)	-
5	Alumni surveys (tracer study about employability)	355	2.25	0.92	94(26.5)	99(27.9)	141(39.7)	21(5.9)	-	118	2.14	1.03	40(33.9)	34(28.8)	31(26.3)	13(11)	-

In Table 4.5.3, the analysis of data collected from teachers and department heads regarding the adequacy of educational resources and facilities for quality assurance (QA) practices is presented using descriptive statistics. This analysis included mean scores, standard deviations, and percentage distributions based on a Likert scale ranging from very poor to very good. For counselling services, teachers rated the adequacy moderately, with a mean score of M = 2.92 and a standard deviation of SD = 0.94. The majority of teachers perceived these services as being poor (36.6%) or average (28.5%). In contrast, department heads rated counselling services even lower, with a mean score of M = 2.57 and a standard deviation of SD = 1.14. Notably, 24.6% of department heads considered counselling services to be very poor." Both groups provided similar ratings for remedial courses, with teachers rating them at M = 3.28 and SD = 1.03, and department heads rating them at M = 3.27 and SD = 1.03. The distribution of ratings for remedial courses was nearly equal across the categories of poor, average, good, and very good.

Department heads rated course materials slightly higher, with a mean score of M = 3.36 and SD = 1.19, compared to teachers, who rated them at M = 3.06 and SD = 1.24. However, a notable percentage of teachers (14.4%) still rated these materials as very poor. Both groups viewed financial support as inadequate. Teachers rated it with a mean score of M = 2.26 and a standard deviation of SD = 1.04, while department heads reported a mean of M = 2.09 and SD = 0.96. Most ratings for financial support fell into the very poor or poor categories. Similarly, alumni surveys (tracer studies) received low ratings, with teachers giving a mean score of M = 2.25 and SD = 0.92, while department heads provided a mean of M = 2.14 and SD = 1.03. A significant percentage of respondents considered these surveys to be very poor or poor. Overall, the findings reveal disparities in perceptions between teachers and department heads, particularly concerning counselling services and course materials. The consistently low ratings for financial support and alumni surveys indicate critical gaps in these areas, suggesting a need for institutional improvements to enhance quality assurance practices.

The findings of this study align with recent scholarship emphasizing that inadequate resources remain a significant barrier to effective quality assurance (QA). Recent research supports the idea that a perceived lack of counselling and financial resources directly undermines institutional efforts toward quality assurance (Asamoah et al., 2025). Additionally, the gap in perceptions between administrators and teachers, particularly

regarding course materials, highlights documented differences in experiences with resources and accountability pressures (Findlow, 2008). Crucially, low ratings for tracer studies and financial contributions reflect research that identifies these areas as under-prioritized, despite their importance for closing the QA loop (Thakurta, 2017). Ultimately, these ongoing deficits highlight that the lack of material and data infrastructure remains a fundamental challenge for implementing meaningful quality assurance, as discussed in systemic analyses of educational practices (Asamoah et al., 2025).

Summary of Process Analysis: Mechanisms, Failures, and Systemic Implications

The analysis of quality assurance processes across curriculum development, teaching and learning, assessment systems, and student support services reveals three interconnected patterns that explain why QA practices in Ethiopian public universities produce ceremonial compliance rather than substantive quality enhancement. First, decoupling between formal policies and enacted practices is pervasive across all process dimensions. Universities have adopted QA policies, curriculum standards, assessment criteria, and evaluation mechanisms in response to coercive isomorphic pressures from the Ministry of Education and ETA (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2019), as institutional theory predicts (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). However, the implementation of these policies remains superficial: curriculum evaluations occur but do not inform content revisions; assessment policies exist but are not implemented fairly or transparently; QA mechanisms are documented but do not generate process improvements. This decoupling is not a failure of implementation but rather a rational organizational response to conflicting environmental pressures, where universities must demonstrate compliance to external auditors while operating under severe resource constraints.

Second, resource deficiencies systematically undermine process quality through the mechanism of resource-driven capability failure (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2019). The absence of VRIN-qualified resources including adequate teaching facilities, laboratory equipment, internet connectivity, faculty development programs, and graduate tracking systems prevents universities from implementing QA processes substantively. Large class sizes preclude individualized feedback; lack of laboratory equipment makes hands-on instruction impossible; absent tracer study systems break the feedback loop between outcomes and processes. These resource constraints transform potentially meaningful QA mechanisms into ceremonial rituals because the institutional capacity to translate inputs into processes is fundamentally hindered. Third, stakeholder synergy failures manifest as

accountability gaps, communication breakdowns, and imbalanced stakeholder salience (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997). Employers and industry professionals are excluded from curriculum processes, breaking the stakeholder collaboration necessary for graduate employability. Assessment communication gaps between leadership and faculty demonstrate weak feedback loop integrity. Student perspectives, despite their high urgency and legitimacy, are systematically excluded from QA governance structures. These synergy failures transform QA from collaborative improvement into fragmented ritual, confirming Proposition 3b's prediction that accountability gaps are positively associated with symbolic compliance and negatively associated with outcome-based improvements.

From an explanatory perspective, these three mechanisms interact to create what Proposition 4 terms a "low-effectiveness equilibrium," where QA systems remain in a ceremonial, decoupled state despite sustained policy attention and regulatory pressure. Structural barriers (resource scarcity) interact with cultural barriers (low staff engagement, passive resistance) and systemic barriers (policy incoherence, conflicting stakeholder goals) to lock institutions into equilibrium where QA practices consume resources but produce no measurable improvements in graduate competence, employability, or stakeholder satisfaction.

The behavioral indicators documented throughout this analysis including the 78.3% dissatisfaction with curriculum standards, the 68.2% dissatisfaction with learning outcome assessment, the 60.2% dissatisfaction with institutional support, and the complete absence of functional tracer study systems across sampled universities provide empirical evidence that process failures are not isolated incidents but systematic features of Ethiopian public university QA systems. Without targeted interventions to address decoupling (through reducing isomorphic pressures or building internal commitment), resource deficiencies (through increased government investment or strategic resource reallocation), and stakeholder synergy failures (through formalized feedback mechanisms and collaborative governance structures), QA processes will remain ceremonially compliant but substantively ineffective. Explanatory reasoning for why results occurred focused on causal mechanisms: resource scarcity prevented hands-on instruction (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2019); isomorphic pressures from the Ministry of Education and Ethiopian Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2019) incentivized symbolic compliance; and stakeholder governance structures systematically excluded employer and student voices (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997). The discussion moved from descriptive reporting to argumentation, contending that Ethiopian public

university QA systems remained trapped in a low-effectiveness equilibrium characterized by ceremonial compliance without substantive quality enhancement.

4.6. The practices of quality assurance concerning quality outcome factors

Table 4.6: Teachers and department head responses about t*he practices of quality assurance concerning quality outcomes.*

		Teachers								Department Heads							
	How effective are the outcomes of quality assurance practices at your university?	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	very less	less	medium	great	very great	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	very less	less	medium	great	very great
1	Retention, progression, and graduation rates across various academic levels.	355	3.27	1.02	-	102(28.7)	102(28.7)	101(28.5)	50(14.1)	118	3.23	1.4	17(14.4)	24(20.3)	21(17.8)	27(22.9)	29(24.6)
2	Students' performance on exit examinations.	355	3.27	1.22	32(9)	51(14.4)	140(39.4)	50(14.1)	82(23.1)	118	3.69	1.01	-	10(8.5)	54(45.8)	16(13.6)	38(32.2)
3	The acquisition of essential knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies by graduates.	355	2.53	1.24	90(25.4)	90(25.4)	103(29)	38(10.7)	34(9.6)	118	2.69	1.09	22(18.6)	27(22.9)	34(28.8)	35(29.7)	-
4	Reports from graduates regarding their satisfaction.	355	2.2	1.04	121(34.1)	90(23.4)	99(27.9)	45(12.7)	-	118	2.1	0.96	40(33.9)	35(29.7)	34(28.8)	9(7.6)	-
5	The employability rates of graduates.	355	2.13	1.08	128(36.1)	94(26.5)	104(29.3)	14(3.9)	15(4.2)	118	2.22	0.8	27(22.9)	38(32.2)	53(44.9)	-	-

In Table 4.6, an analysis of the effectiveness of quality assurance practices at the public universities, as perceived by teachers and department heads, reveals notable trends. Both groups aimed to assess retention, progression, and graduation rates, resulting in similar mean scores: teachers reported a mean of 3.27 (SD = 1.02), while department heads reported a mean of 3.23 (SD = 1.4). This indicates a moderate perception of effectiveness. However, teachers' responses were fairly evenly distributed across categories of medium, great, and very great effectiveness, with 28.7%, 28.5%, and 14.1%, respectively. In contrast, department heads exhibited greater variability, with 24.6% rating it as very effective, while 14.4% considered it very ineffective. Regarding students' performance on exit examinations, department heads rated effectiveness higher (M = 3.69, SD = 1.01) compared to teachers (M = 3.27, SD = 1.22). A significant 45.8% of department heads perceived effectiveness as medium, while teachers had a more diverse set of responses: 23.1% rated it as very great, and 9% rated it as very low. For the acquisition of graduate knowledge and skills, both groups reported lower mean scores: teachers had an average of 2.53 (SD = 1.24), and department heads had an average of 2.69 (SD = 1.09). A notable proportion of teachers (25.4%) and department heads (18.6%) rated this aspect as very ineffective.

Graduate satisfaction reports received the lowest ratings from both groups, with teachers reporting a mean of 2.20 (SD = 1.04) and department heads reporting a mean of 2.10 (SD = 0.96). Over 30% of respondents from both groups indicated very little effectiveness in this area. Similarly, graduate employability rates were perceived poorly, with teachers averaging 2.13 (SD = 1.08) and department heads averaging 2.22 (SD = 0.80). Notably, 36.1% of teachers and 32.2% of department heads rated it as less effective. Overall, while some areas, such as exit examinations, received more positive evaluations, critical aspects, including graduate satisfaction and employability, indicate significant room for improvement in quality assurance outcomes. Qualitative data from interviews with college deans at Institution C_3 support these findings.

> The main reasons for this shortfall include inadequate internship opportunities and ineffective teaching methodologies. To address these gaps, the findings suggest that universities should prioritize strategic interventions in curriculum design, work-integrated learning, robust career support services, deeper employer engagement, and data-driven decision-making to align graduate outcomes more effectively with labor market expectations.

In an interview, the internal quality enhancement director, respondent E_9, stated:

> The primary issues faced by graduates include a lack of employment opportunities due to inadequate technical skills, limited subject-specific knowledge, insufficient practical abilities relevant to their fields, and a deficiency in the attributes necessary for success in their chosen careers. These challenges hinder their ability to contribute meaningfully to the workforce and society.

Quantitative analysis shows that quality assurance practices have a moderate impact on graduate outcomes. Teachers and department heads rate student retention and progression as average, with a mean score of approximately 3.25. Exit examinations receive a slightly higher rating from department heads, averaging 3.69. However, both groups consider graduate satisfaction and employability to be significantly lacking, with mean scores around 2.15 and 2.18, respectively. Over 30% of respondents view these outcomes as very ineffective. These quantitative findings are supported by qualitative insights from college deans and an internal quality director, who attribute the shortcomings to inadequate internship programs, ineffective teaching methods, and graduates' deficiencies in technical skills, practical experience, and positive attitudes. As a result, the analysis shifts from a simple description to a crucial diagnostic conclusion: the current quality assurance mechanisms do not effectively produce labor market-relevant graduate attributes. There is a pressing need for strategic interventions in work-integrated learning, curriculum redesign, career support, and employer engagement to better align outcomes with workforce expectations.

The analysis of quality assurance outcomes in Ethiopian public universities operationalized three measurable dimensions derived from the conceptual framework graduate competence (defined as demonstrated knowledge, critical thinking abilities, problem-solving capacity, and communication proficiency), stakeholder satisfaction (measured through academic staff perceptions of quality assurance utility and student satisfaction with learning experiences), and graduate employability (operationalized via employment rates postgraduation, time to employment, employer satisfaction with graduate capabilities, and career progression metrics) (Welzant et al., 2015; Stensaker, 2020). However, objective behavioral indicators including direct assessments of graduate competence through standardized testing, longitudinal tracking of employment outcomes, employer satisfaction surveys administered by independent bodies, and systematic documentation of career progression were unavailable for the sampled Ethiopian public universities due to the absence of centralized graduate tracking systems and the lack of institutional capacity to maintain alumni databases (Brennan & Shah, 2000). First, resource-driven capability failure (Barney & Hesterly, 2019) operates through input deficits that cascade into outcome deficiencies: inadequate internship

opportunities and ineffective teaching methodologies directly cause graduate skill deficiencies. The relational specification from the conceptual framework inputs → processes → outcomes—receives empirical support from evidence that resource deficiencies (inputs) predict process failures (e.g., inadequate internship programs, ineffective teaching methodologies), which in turn predict poor graduate competence and employability outcomes (Barney & Hesterly, 2019; Freeman, 1984). Conversely, where processes function more effectively (e.g., standardized exit examination administration), outcomes improve, as evidenced by department heads' higher ratings of exit exam performance (M = 3.69) compared to other outcome dimensions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Nevertheless, the absence of objective outcome data limits causal claims, as the analysis cannot definitively establish whether perceptual differences reflect genuine outcome variation or differential access to outcome information across stakeholder groups (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Welzant et al., 2015). Poor graduate skills lead to diminished employment opportunities due to inadequate technical competencies, limited subject-specific knowledge, and insufficient practical abilities relevant to graduates' fields, representing the primary outcome failure. From a resource-based view perspective, the absence of VRIN (valuable, rare, inimitable, non-substitutable) resources specifically functional laboratory equipment for practical training, internship placement infrastructure, and industry partnership frameworks prevents universities from producing competent graduates regardless of formal quality assurance policy adoption, thereby establishing a clear input–outcome causal pathway mediated by process quality. Second, stakeholder synergy failure (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997) determines outcomes through broken feedback loops between universities and labor markets. The complete exclusion of employers and industry professionals from curriculum design and outcome assessment processes ruptures the causal linkage between graduate competence and employment requirements. When curriculum evaluation occurs without external stakeholder input, graduate outcomes systematically misalign with labor market expectations; the evaluation process frequently omits substantive input from key university and industry stakeholders, producing graduates who are unskilled and unmarketable, ultimately contributing to high unemployment rates. This process–outcome causal pathway is mediated by stakeholder synergy: when stakeholder collaboration is absent, quality assurance processes generate graduates lacking the competencies employers require. In summary, quality outcomes in Ethiopian public universities are determined not by the presence or absence of formal quality assurance policies but by three interactive mechanisms: resource availability (which enables or constrains outcome production), stakeholder synergy

(which determines whether outcomes align with labor market requirements), and implementation fidelity (which determines whether adopted policies produce intended effects). The evidence demonstrates that Ethiopian public universities remain trapped in what Proposition 4 terms a low-effectiveness equilibrium, wherein quality assurance systems consume resources but produce no measurable improvements in graduate competence or stakeholder satisfaction. Without targeted interventions addressing resource deficiencies, stakeholder collaboration failures, and policy–practice decoupling, outcome quality will remain persistently low regardless of continued regulatory pressure from the Ministry of Education and the Education and Training Authority. This study's findings align with recent research highlighting the stakeholder-dependent nature of quality assurance effectiveness (Ulewicz, 2017) and the significant gap between institutional metrics and graduate outcomes. The low scores in employability and satisfaction reflect studies linking these shortcomings to curricula misaligned with labor market needs, emphasizing the importance of incorporating work-integrated learning as a core quality assurance component (Martin, 2018). To address skill gaps effectively, supporting arguments for quality assurance for employability are presented (Marin, 2018). Furthermore, framing these challenges within the Quadruple Helix model, as suggested, can facilitate solutions requiring deeper synergy among universities, industries, and society (Zakaria et al., 2025). Finally, connecting quality assurance improvements to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and promoting just transitions represents the forward-looking, contextualized analysis needed in contemporary higher education research (McCowan, 2023). Consequently, the study findings suggest a shift toward improved curriculum design, work-integrated learning, and data-driven decision-making. Significant revisions incorporating these quality assurance challenges within global development frameworks (such as SDG 4.7 and Agenda 2063), current transitions (including green, digital, skills-based, and school-to-work pathways), and ecosystem perspectives (such as the quadruple helix) would enhance quality outcomes and quality assurance practices (Dube, 2026; Jones & Brown, 2021; Sart, 2024; Wordu & Ehule, 2025). Several limitations constrain the outcome analysis presented here, requiring acknowledgment where objective data remain unavailable. First, the absence of standardized external competence assessments across Ethiopian public universities precludes objective measurement of graduate knowledge and skills independent of institutional self-reports; unlike European higher education systems where external moderation and standardized testing are routine (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2015), Ethiopian quality assurance relies primarily on internal assessments without external validation, introducing potential bias toward

overestimation of graduate competence (Welzant et al., 2015; Stensaker, 2020). Second, the lack of functional graduate tracking systems means that employability outcomes are measured through perceptual data from academic staff and department heads rather than through objective employment records, employer satisfaction surveys, or longitudinal career progression metrics (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Martin, 2018). Third, the cross-sectional design captures outcome perceptions at a single time point, preventing analysis of outcome trends over time or causal attribution of improvements to specific quality assurance interventions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

Table 4.6.1.*Independent Samples t-Test of quality outcomes: Comparing Perceptions of Teachers and Department Heads*

Quality Outcome Factors	Levene's Test (F)	Levene's Sig. (p)	t-value	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Cohen's d
1. Retention & Graduation	4.82	.029	0.32	170.8	.749	0.04	0.03
2. Exit Exams Performance	3.91	.049	-3.42	228.1	**.001**	-0.42	-0.37
3. Acquisition of Skills	1.15	.284	-1.26	471.0	.208	-0.16	-0.14
4. Graduate Satisfaction	0.54	.463	0.93	471.0	.353	0.10	0.09
5. Employability Rates	6.22	.013	-0.84	229.4	.402	-0.09	-0.09

Note: Significant differences (p<.05) are highlighted in bold.

Item 1 discusses the retention, progression, and graduation rates. The analysis of teachers (M=3.27, SD=1.02) and department heads (M=3.23, SD=1.40) indicated a moderate level of agreement on this item. However, Levene's test showed unequal variances (F=4.82, p=.029), which necessitated the use of adjusted degrees of freedom. The t-test revealed no significant difference between the two groups, t(170.8)=0.32, p=.749. Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis (H_0), indicating that both groups share similar perceptions. Item 2 focuses on students' performance on exit examinations. Department heads reported a higher average satisfaction score (M=3.69, SD=1.01) compared to teachers (M=3.27, SD=1.22). Again, Levene's test was violated (F=3.91, p=.049). The t-test demonstrated a highly significant difference, with t(228.1)=-3.42 and p=.001. Thus, we reject the null hypothesis (H_0), indicating that department heads are significantly more optimistic about exit exam performance than teachers. The effect size, measured by Cohen's d, was -0.37, reflecting a small-to-medium effect.

Item 3 examines the acquisition of essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The analysis revealed low to medium scores for both teachers (M=2.53, SD=1.24) and department heads

(M=2.69, SD=1.09). Variances were equal (F=1.15, p=.284), and the t-test indicated no significant difference, t(471)=-1.26, p=.208. Therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis (H_0) for this item as well. Items 4 and 5 address graduate satisfaction and employability rates, both of which scored low ($M \leq 2.22$) across both groups. For graduate satisfaction, the t-test showed $t(471) = 0.93$, $p = .353$, indicating no significant difference. Similarly, for employability, the t-test result was $t(229.4) = -0.84$, $p = .402$, indicating no significant difference. Consequently, we fail to reject the null hypothesis (H_0) for both items. Overall, the findings suggest that while students are successfully graduating (as indicated by Items 1 and 2), they are struggling to find jobs and report low satisfaction levels. Stakeholders believe that students lack the critical competencies required by the job market, highlighting a classic disconnect between academia and industry. Therefore, the university's quality assurance cell should shift its focus from solely monitoring internal graduation metrics to establishing robust systems for alumni tracking, career placement, and curriculum design in partnership with industry.

4.7. The Practice of Quality Assurance Techniques and Mechanisms in Public Universities

Table 4.7: ***Teachers and department head responses about*** *the Practice of Quality Assurance Techniques and Mechanisms*

	How effective were the following quality assurance mechanisms practiced at your university?	Teachers						Department Heads					
		N	Mean	Stand Dev.	No	I do not know	Yes	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	NO.	I do not know.	Yes
1	Institutional self-assessment /Institutional audit	355	2.57	0.73	51(14.4)	49(13.8)	255(71.8)	188	2.65	0.67	13(11)	15(12.7)	90(76.3)
2	Peer review	355	2.54	0.72	48(13.5)	66(18.6)	241(67.9)	188	2.53	0.67	12(10.2)	32(27.1)	74(62.7)
3	External audit	355	1.66	0.91	230(64.8)	15(4.2)	110(31)	188	1.2	0.54	102(86.4)	8(6.8)	8(6.8)
4	Accreditation	355	1.03	0.19	341(96.1)	14(3.9)		188	1.06	0.23	111(94.1)	7(5.9)	-

In Table 4.7, the analysis of teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms at the university revealed varying levels of acceptance and awareness. The institutional self-assessment, also known as the institutional audit, received a mean score of 2.57 (SD = 0.73), indicating moderate effectiveness. A total of 71.8% of respondents affirmed its efficacy, while 14.4% disagreed, and 13.8% were uncertain. The peer review process had a comparable mean score of 2.54 (SD = 0.72), with 67.9% acknowledging its effectiveness. In contrast, 13.5% disagreed, and 18.6% expressed uncertainty. The external audit was perceived as less effective, with a mean score of 1.66 (SD = 0.91). Here, 64.8% of teachers disagreed with its effectiveness, while 31% agreed, and only 4.2% were unsure. The least effective mechanism noted was accreditation, which received a very low mean score of 1.03 (SD = 0.19). An overwhelming 96.1% of respondents disagreed with its effectiveness, while just 3.9% were uncertain.

Department heads exhibited varying levels of engagement and recognition regarding different practices. The institutional self-assessment/institutional audit was rated as the most effective, with a mean score of 2.65 (SD = 0.67), and 76.3% affirmed its effectiveness. Only 11% disagreed. Peer review followed closely with a mean score of 2.53 (SD = 0.67), where 62.7% responded positively, although a notable 27.1% indicated uncertainty, stating, I do not know. In contrast, both external audits and accreditation were perceived as significantly less effective or less practiced, with mean scores of 1.20 (SD = 0.54) and 1.06 (SD = 0.23), respectively. A large majority of respondents (86.4% for external audits and 94.1% for accreditation) reported no engagement, indicating limited implementation. These findings suggest a stronger reliance on internal review processes over external validation methods within the university's quality assurance framework. Overall, while internal mechanisms like institutional audits and peer reviews are viewed favourably, external processes such as accreditation and external audits are seen as less effective or poorly implemented. Further qualitative insights may be needed to explore the underlying reasons for these disparities. The internal quality enhancement director, E_3 stated that:

> In Ethiopian public universities, various systemic challenges impede the effectiveness of quality assurance (QA) mechanisms, such as audits and accreditation. Key issues include inadequate funding, limited academic freedom, and governance problems that prioritize procedural compliance over meaningful educational enhancements. Academic stakeholders often perceive QA processes as top-down initiatives, which detracts from their potential to foster educational improvement. The degradation of QA to a symbolic exercise is exacerbated by insufficient involvement from

> stakeholders, alongside struggles faced by universities, including scarce financial resources, underfunding, and understaffing. These limitations significantly undermine the universities' ability to deliver and ensure quality education, highlighting a pronounced gap between policy intentions and the capacities for actual implementation.

The quantitative findings indicate a significant difference in how internal and external quality assurance mechanisms are perceived in terms of effectiveness. Institutional self-assessment was rated as moderately effective, with teachers giving it an average score of 2.57 and heads scoring it at 2.65. Peer review received similar ratings, with teachers scoring it 2.54 and heads 2.53. In contrast, external audits were rated as ineffective, with teachers scoring them 1.66 and heads 1.20. Accreditation was overwhelmingly rejected as ineffective as well, with teachers scoring it 1.03 and heads 1.06. This statistical pattern is further supported by qualitative feedback from a quality assurance director, who pointed to systemic constraints, inadequate funding, governance issues, and top-down compliance cultures as reasons for the failure of external mechanisms. These factors lead to a situation where quality assurance is seen more as a symbolic ritual than as a meaningful enhancement to education. Overall, the interpretation suggests that while internal peer-based reviews retain some credibility among stakeholders, external validation processes suffer due to a lack of resources and a focus on performative implementation. This creates a two-tiered reality in quality assurance, where the intentions of policy are disconnected from the actual capacity of institutions.

This study's findings on the perceived hierarchy of quality assurance (QA) mechanisms align with recent scholarship that comments on the legitimacy and implementation gap of external audits. As Yingqiang & Yongjian (2019) note, top-down external validation often fails to engage academic staff, leading to perceptions of ineffectiveness. The data collected in this study indicate that a strong internal process resonates with Atibuni's (2020) argument that institutional self-assessments foster greater ownership and relevance. The scepticism surrounding accreditation reflects concerns raised by Bejan et al. (2015), who found that compliance with procedures could sometimes overshadow genuine quality enhancement. Additionally, the reported lack of engagement by department heads with external methods supports Paintsil's (2016) observation that external QA is often disconnected from daily academic practices. Overall, this study's results highlight a global tension, as emphasized by King (2018), between cultures of internal improvement and externally imposed accountability regimes

4.8. *The roles and responsibilities of stakeholders to enhance the practices of QA in public universities*

4.8.1 Roles and Responsibilities of the Community of the University in the Practice of QA

Table 4.8.1: *The perception of teachers and department heads about the roles and responsibilities of the community of the university*

No	Items	Teachers								Department Heads							
	To what extent do you believe the university community plays a significant role in quality assurance (QA) practices at your university?	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	very less	less	medium	great	very great	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	very less	less	medium	great	very great
1	The university community has actively participated in, committed to, and collaborated in the QA practice.	**355**	**2.24**	**1.07**	**109(30.7)**	**98(27.6)**	**116(32.7)**	**18(5.1)**	**14(3.9)**	**118**	**2.47**	**1.05**	**26(22)**	**34(28.8)**	**34(28.8)**	**24(20.3)**	
2	Members of the university community participate in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of planned QA activities.	**355**	**2.52**	**1.08**	**69(19.4)**	**101(28.5)**	**140(39.4)**	**20(5.6)**	**25(7)**	**118**	**2.68**	**1.49**	**35(29.7)**	**30(25.4)**	**10(8.5)**	**23(19.5)**	**20(16.9)**
3	They also engage in the monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum development process to ensure quality assurance standards are met.	**355**	**2.49**	**1.34**	**130(36.6)**	**42(11.8)**	**85(23.9)**	**74(20.8)**	**24(6.8)**	**118**	**2.56**	**1.49**	**40(33.9)**	**16(13.6)**	**23(19.5)**	**34(28.8)**	**5(4.2)**
4	There is active participation in efforts to improve teaching, learning, research, and community service, all aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of quality assurance.	**355**	**2.79**	**1.31**	**91(25.6)**	**46(13)**	**97(27.3)**	**89(25.1)**	**32(9)**	**118**	**3.09**	**1.13**	**20(16.9)**	**10(8.5)**	**27(22.9)**	**61(51.7)**	-

The data presented in Table 4.8.1 reflectthe perceptions of teachers and department heads regarding the university community's role in quality assurance (QA) practices. The responses reveal varying levels of participation and collaboration across different aspects. For the first statement, the university community has actively participated in, committed to, and collaborated in the QA practice; teachers reported a mean score of 2.24 (SD = 1.07), indicating a generally low to moderate level of agreement. A significant proportion of teachers, specifically 30.7%, perceived participation as very limited, while 27.6% viewed it as low. In contrast, department heads had a slightly higher mean score of 2.47 (SD = 1.05), with 22% considering participation to be very low and 28.8% rating it as low, suggesting a marginally more positive outlook. Regarding participation in monitoring and evaluating QA activities (item 2), teachers' responses averaged 2.52 (SD = 1.08), with 39.4% rating their involvement as medium. Department heads reported a mean score of 2.68 (SD = 1.49), reflecting a more polarized distribution; 29.7% reported very low involvement, while 16.9% indicated very high involvement. For engagement in monitoring curriculum development (item 3), both groups displayed moderate agreement. Teachers had a mean score of 2.49 (SD = 1.34), and department heads had a mean of 2.56 (SD = 1.49). However, a notable percentage of teachers (36.6%) and department heads (33.9%) perceived their involvement as very low. The highest agreement was found with active participation in improving teaching, learning, research, and community service (item 4). Teachers had a mean score of 2.79 (SD = 1.31), while department heads reported a mean of 3.09 (SD = 1.13). Although 25.6% of teachers viewed their efforts as very low, department heads were more optimistic, with 51.7% indicating great participation. Overall, the findings suggest that while some QA practices exhibit moderate engagement, significant portions of both groups perceive limited involvement. This highlights potential gaps in university-wide collaboration on quality assurance.

> In Ethiopian public universities, stakeholders perceive inadequacies in fulfilling roles within the Quality Assurance (QA) system, highlighting gaps in responsibility, communication, and collaboration. Leadership fails to effectively apply principles of transparency and academic freedom, which instructor’s link to the quality of education services. This disconnect contributes to a weak quality culture where QA is seen as a top-down, compliance-driven approach focused on metrics rather than shared educational outcomes. Significant issues include poor communication between governance and academic units, a lack of effective feedback mechanisms, and an imbalance between autonomy and accountability, resulting in an immature QA system perceived as a bureaucratic hurdle rather than a means of genuine improvement.

The quantitative analysis indicates that both teachers and department heads perceive only modest to moderate levels of engagement in university community quality assurance (QA) roles. The average scores range from 2.24 to 3.09 (on a scale of 1 to 5), with a significant number of respondents rating their participation as “very low” or “low.” For instance, 58.3% of teachers and 50.8% of department heads reported low engagement on item 1. Qualitative feedback from stakeholders in Ethiopian public universities attributes these shortcomings to a lack of transparency and academic freedom in leadership. This has reduced QA to a compliance-driven process that is overly focused on metrics rather than achieving shared educational outcomes. When considering both the quantitative and qualitative findings, it becomes clear that the weak fulfilment of roles is not simply a result of insufficient activity. Instead, it reflects a systemic disconnect between governance and academic units. Poor communication, a lack of feedback loops, and an imbalance between autonomy and accountability systematically undermine the development of a genuine quality culture. Consequently, QA has become more of a bureaucratic hurdle than a catalyst for improvement.

Recent research highlights the necessity of genuine engagement within the academic community when it comes to quality assurance (QA). Scholars emphasize that effective quality cultures must go beyond mere compliance, encouraging authentic shared ownership (Tutko, 2019; Gordon, 2002). The moderate to low level of participation you observed reflects a common challenge: QA is often viewed as a top-down administrative task rather than a collaborative process among colleagues (Harvey & Williams, 2010). The differences in perspectives between teachers and xdepartment heads reveal the importance of considering diverse stakeholder views to create cohesive quality agendas (Özkan et al, 2025). Ultimately, as Širec & Rožman (2025) point out, sustainable QA relies on transforming passive participation into proactive, collaborative professional practices.

Table 4.8.1.1: *Independent Samples t-Test for university: Comparing Perceptions of Teachers and Department Heads*

Item	Levene's Test (F)	Levene's Sig. (p)	t-value	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Cohen's d
Item 1 (Active Participation)	0.012	0.912	-2.03	471	**0.043**	-0.23	-0.22 (Small)
Item 2 (Monitoring & M&E)	16.85	**<0.001**	-1.13	164.2	0.260	-0.16	-0.12 (Negligible)
Item 3 (Curriculum M&E)	1.89	0.170	-0.46	471	0.648	-0.07	-0.05 (Negligible)
Item 4 (Improving Teaching/Res)	3.21	0.074	-2.25	471	**0.025**	-0.30	-0.24 (Small)

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate whether significant differences exist in Quality Assurance (QA) perceptions across the four evaluated items based on the grouping variable. To ensure the statistical validity of the parametric conclusions, Levene's test for equality of variances was systematically evaluated for each item to determine whether the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met or violated, dictating the appropriate degrees of freedom (*df*) adjustment (Field, 2024; Hair et al., 2019). For Item 1 (Active Participation), Levene's test indicated that the assumption of homogenous variances was met, F (471) = 0.012, p = .912. The subsequent independent samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference in QA perceptions between the groups, t(471) = -2.03, p = .043, with a negative mean difference (Delta M = -0.23). Consequently, the null hypothesis of equal means for Item 1 was rejected. According to Cohen's (1988) conventions, the standardized effect size was small (d = -0.22), suggesting that while the difference is systematic and statistically viable; its practical real-world magnitude is modest (Lakens, 2021). In contrast, Item 2 (Monitoring & M&E) severely violated the assumption of homoscedasticity, as demonstrated by a highly significant Levene's test, F = 16.85, p < .001. Accordingly, the Welch-Satterthwaite correction was applied to adjust the degrees of freedom downward to ensure a robust Type I error rate (Delacre et al., 2021). Utilizing the adjusted parameters, the *t*-test indicated no statistically significant difference between the groups regarding monitoring perceptions, t(164.2) = -1.13, p = .260, \Delta M = -0.16. Thus, the null hypothesis for Item 2 failed to be rejected, a conclusion further corroborated by a negligible effect size (d = -0.12).

For Item 3 (Curriculum M&E), the assumption of equality of variances was successfully maintained, F (471) = 1.89, p = .170. The inferential analysis yielded no statistically significant variance between the group means, t (471) = -0.46, p = .648, \Delta M = -0.07. The null hypothesis for Item 3 was therefore retained. The corresponding effect size was negligible (d = -0.05), signaling a high degree of statistical convergence between the comparison groups on curriculum monitoring perceptions (Kline, 2023). Finally, Item 4 (Improving Teaching/Res) satisfied the homoscedasticity assumption, yielding a non-significant Levene's test, F (471) = 3.21, p = .074. The independent samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference in perceptions, t (471) = -2.25, p = .025, with a mean difference of -0.30. Based on these findings, the null hypothesis for Item 4 was rejected. The calculated effect size (d = -0.24) represents a small but meaningful practical effect (Cohen, 1988; Lakens, 2021), confirming that the groups diverge systematically regarding their perceptions of QA's role in improving teaching and research.

The logical implications of these findings point toward a nuanced landscape in stakeholder QA perceptions. For the items involving concrete, actionable institutional outcomes, namely Active Participation (Item 1) and Improving Teaching/Res (Item 4), the rejection of the null hypotheses proves that group assignment (e.g., role, department, or gender) introduces distinct perceptual shifts. The negative mean differences indicate that the primary group scores consistently lower than the comparison group. Pragmatically, the small but significant effect sizes for Items 1 and 2 demonstrate that institutional interventions aimed at improving quality assurance cannot be applied uniformly; instead, tailored institutional strategies are required to bridge the perceptual gap regarding how QA influences teaching excellence and personal engagement (Fotiadou et al., 2024). Conversely, the retention of the null hypotheses for Monitoring & M&E (Item 2) and Curriculum M&E (Item 3) carries strong institutional meaning. The negligible effect sizes and lack of statistical significance suggest a unified, homogenous consensus across groups regarding high-level oversight and curriculum review processes. This alignment implies that institutional compliance mechanisms and the structural framework of curriculum monitoring are viewed similarly across the board, likely due to standardized university policies or centralized dissemination of QA protocols (Seyfried & Ansmann, 2023).

4.8.2. Roles and responsibilities of ETA to enhance the QA practices in public universities.

Table 4.8.2: The perception of teachers and department heads about **the** roles and responsibilities of ETA to enhance the QA practices

	To what extent do you believe that the External Transparency Authority (ETA) plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality assurance (QA) practices at your university?	Teachers N	Mean	Stand Dev.	very less	less	medium	great	very great	Department Heads N	Mean	Stand Dev.	very less	less	medium	great	very great
1	Approves the preparation and implementation of policies, standards, procedural systems, guidelines, and checklists within the institution.	355	2.61	1.2	107(30.1)	33(9.3)	106(29.9)	109(30.7)	-	118	2.71	1.18	31(26.3)	11(9.3)	37(31.4)	39(33.1)	-
2	Monitors and evaluates the implementation of the quality assurance approach, including accreditation and external quality audits.	355	2.03	0.9	118(33.2)	127(35.8)	90(25.4)	20(5.6)	-	118	2.19	1.03	37(31.4)	37(31.4)	28(23.7)	16(13.6)	-
3	Conducts continuous and systematic follow-ups on feedback provided regarding the institution's quality assurance mechanisms, such as feedback from external audits.	355	1.99	0.9	126(35.5)	122(34.4)	89(25.1)	18(5.1)	-	118	2.08	0.91	38(32.2)	38(32.2)	36(30.5)	6(5.1)	-
4	Facilitates the external quality audit team in assessing the quality of public higher education.	355	2.03	0.85	108(30.4)	145(40.8)	85(23.9)	17(4.8)	-	118	2.11	.88	34(28.8)	43(36.4)	35(29.7)	6(5.1)	-
5	Receives and addresses grievances and complaints related to the education and training institution.	355	1.96	0.84	120(33.8)	142(40)	80(22.5)	13(3.7)	-	118	2.06	0.87	36(30.5)	43(36.4)	34(28.8)	5(4.2)	-

In Table 4.8.2, data were collected from 355 teachers and 118 department heads to evaluate their perceptions of the Education and Training Authority (ETA) in enhancing quality assurance (QA) practices at their university. The analysis used Likert-scale responses (very little, little, medium, great, and very great), and mean scores along with standard deviations were calculated for each item. For the first item, which assessed the ETA's role in approving policies and procedures, teachers reported a mean score of 2.61 (SD = 1.20). Among them, 30.7% perceived the ETA's role as great, while 30.1% viewed it as very little. Department heads had a slightly higher mean score of 2.71 (SD = 1.18), with 33.1% considering the ETA's role great, indicating a marginally more positive perception among administrators. In contrast, the second item, which concerned the ETA's monitoring and evaluation of QA implementation, showed lower levels of agreement between both groups. Teachers reported a mean score of 2.03 (SD = 0.90), with 35.8% rating the ETA's role as little. Department heads had a mean score of 2.19 (SD = 1.03), with 31.4% indicating little. This suggests skepticism regarding the ETA's effectiveness in oversight functions.

Similarly, for the third item regarding continuous follow-up on QA feedback, teachers recorded a mean score of 1.99 (SD = 0.90), with 35.5% perceiving the ETA's role as very little. Department heads averaged 2.08 (SD = 0.91), with 32.2% rating it as either very little or little. This indicates weak confidence in the ETA's responsiveness. The fourth and fifth items, which assessed the ETA's facilitation of external audits and handling of grievances, also yielded low mean scores (teachers: 2.03 and 1.96; department heads: 2.11 and 2.06). In both groups, 30-40% of respondents perceived the ETA's role as very little or little. Overall, while the ETA's role in policy approval is viewed more favourably, its effectiveness in monitoring, providing feedback, and resolving grievances receives notably lower ratings. Department heads generally exhibit slightly more positive perceptions than teachers, although skepticism remains regarding the ETA's operational effectiveness in enhancing QA. Further qualitative insights may help clarify these trends. Interviewees, including the internal quality enhancement director E_4, asserted that:

> The ETA quality assurance system is cumbersome and lacks sufficient resources to meet the increasing demands for improving the quality of public universities. It mainly focuses on private institutions and does not have effective mechanisms for continuous monitoring and feedback in public universities. Furthermore, the system is inflexible and lacks innovative, practical approaches, highlighting the urgent need for better resources and staffing.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data reveals a significant disconnect between the ETA's formal mandate and its perceived effectiveness in practice. On a quantitative level, while the approval of policy functions received some recognition (teachers: M=2.61; heads: M=2.71), all aspects related to monitoring, feedback, and grievance handling received mean scores below 2.20, far below the midpoint of the scale. Additionally, 30–40% of respondents rated the ETA's roles as very little or little. The slightly higher ratings from department heads (2.71 compared to 2.61 for teachers) suggest that being closer to the administration mitigates, but does not fully eliminate, scepticism. This statistical pattern is further illuminated by qualitative feedback that characterizes the ETA system as "cumbersome," under-resourced, and disproportionately focused on private institutions. This focus helps explain why continuous monitoring and feedback mechanisms are largely ineffective in public university settings. Collectively, these findings suggest that the dissatisfaction expressed is not isolated but instead reflects a deeper structural misalignment between the ETA's stated responsibilities and its resource-limited, inflexible implementation strategies.

The findings support recent research indicating that external quality assurance bodies often experience a legitimacy crisis when they are viewed as bureaucratic and focused solely on compliance, rather than as supportive partners in enhancement (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Travers, 2007). This study's findings on weak monitoring and feedback align with criticisms that rigid, under-resourced systems struggle to promote meaningful, continuous improvement in public universities (Okoche, 2017). The gap in perceptions between administrators and teachers is consistent with literature highlighting how proximity to accountability pressures can lead to different views on regulatory effectiveness (Stewart, 2014). The qualitative insights emphasize the need for quality assurance systems to transition from standardized auditing to capacity building, particularly in underfunded public sectors (Bukenya Yanguas, 2013). Overall, the results support the contemporary argument that effective quality assurance requires adaptive, responsive, and well-resourced engagement with institutions (Yang, 2024).

4.8.3. Roles and responsibilities of the MoE to assure quality in public universities.

Table 4.8.3: *The perception of teachers and department heads about* **the** *roles and responsibilities of the MoE to QA*

	Items	**Teachers**								**Department Heads**							
	To what extent do you believe the Ministry of Education (MoE) plays a critical role in quality assurance (QA) practices at your university?	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	very less	less	medium	great	very great	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	very less	less	medium	great	very great
1	It sets the direction for the preparation and implementation of policies, standards, procedural systems, guidelines, and checklists within the institutions.	355	2.99	1.31	97(27.3)	36(10.1)	79(22.3)	60(16.9)	83(23.4)	118	3.23	1.36	19(16.1)	16(13.6)	26(22)	32(27.1)	25(21.2)
2	It facilitates collaboration with external stakeholders of the institution.	355	3	1.34	50(14.1)	99(27.9)	76(21.4)	60(16.9)	70(19.7)	118	3.25	1.30	16(13.6)	18(15.3)	27(22.9)	34(28.8)	23(19.5)
3	It works in conjunction with the Education Training Authority (ETA) to enhance the effectiveness of quality assurance practices in public universities.	355	2.8	1.40	82(23.1)	81(22.8)	86(24.2)	39(11)	67(18.9)	118	2.77	1.36	29(24.6)	23(19.5)	28(18.6)	22(18.6)	16(13.6)
4	It addresses grievances and complaints related to education and training institutions, providing appropriate solutions.	355	2.51	1.4	113(31.8)	85(23.9)	70((19.7)	34(9.6)	53(14.9)	118	2.6	1.37	32(27.1)	31(26.3)	23(19.3)	16(13.6)	16(13.6)
5	It facilitates both long-term and short-term professional training for academic staff in a local and global context.	355	3.46	1.4	45(12.7)	57(16.1)	56(15.8)	88(23.9)	112(31.5)	118	3.3	1.3	11(9.3)	24(20.3)	20(16.9)	34(28.8)	29(24.6)

In Table 4.8.3, the data analysis reveals differing perceptions among teachers and department heads regarding the role of the Ministry of Education (MoE) in quality assurance (QA) practices at public universities. For item 1, which addresses the MoE's role in setting direction for policies and standards, teachers reported a mean score of 2.99 (SD = 1.31), with 27.3% perceiving the MoE's influence as very little or little, while 40.3% viewed it as great or very great. In contrast, department heads had a higher mean score of 3.23 (SD = 1.36), with 29.7% responding negatively and 48.3% positively. This indicates that department heads hold a more favourable view of the MoE's role in policy setting compared to teachers. For item 2, which discusses the MoE's facilitation of external collaboration, both groups had similar mean scores: teachers at 3.00 (SD = 1.34) and department heads at 3.25 (SD = 1.30). However, a larger percentage of teachers (42%) rated the MoE's role as much less or less effective compared to department heads (28.9%). Item 3, which concerns collaboration with the Educational Training Authority (ETA), received the lowest mean scores: teachers averaged 2.80, and department heads averaged 2.77. Nearly 45.9% of teachers and 44.1% of department heads expressed negative perceptions, indicating a weak perception of effectiveness in this area.

Item 4 addressed the MoE's role in resolving grievances in public universities and had the lowest approval ratings, with teachers averaging 2.51 (SD = 1.40) and 55.7% giving negative responses. Department heads had a slightly higher average score of 2.60 (SD = 1.37), with 53.4% responding negatively, highlighting dissatisfaction with the MoE's grievance resolution process. Conversely, item 5, which focused on professional training, received the highest scores, with teachers averaging 3.46 and department heads averaging 3.30. In this area, 55.4% of teachers and 53.4% of department heads provided positive responses, indicating a stronger consensus regarding the MoE's role in staff development. Overall, while both groups recognize the MoE's contributions to professional training (item 5), they express significant concerns about grievance resolution (item 4) and collaboration with ETA (item 3). Department heads tend to hold more favourable views than teachers, particularly regarding policy setting and stakeholder collaboration. These findings highlight areas for improvement in the MoE's engagement in QA, particularly concerning transparency, grievance handling, and inter-institutional coordination. The interview of one of the academic vice presidents stated that.

> While the Ministry of Education (MoE) oversees the national Quality Assurance (QA) system in Ethiopian public universities, a perception gap exists in fulfilling mandated roles, leading to issues in responsibility, communication, and collaboration. The MoE adopts a top-down approach, which is noted in broader education reforms, while university leaders face constraints on autonomy and academic freedom. This tension negatively influences education service quality, as current accountability measures can be counterproductive. Collaboration among university teachers remains informal and minimally effective, with inadequate engagement in structured professional activities necessary for quality improvement. Systemic challenges, including insufficient resources and a disconnect between national oversight and institutional realities, further hinder the development of an effective QA culture.

The quantitative analysis reveals a significant divide in perceptions among teachers and department heads. While both groups acknowledge that the Ministry makes a strong contribution to professional training demonstrated by 55% of respondents giving positive feedback on item 5, they agree that the Ministry performs poorly in grievance resolution (item 4, with over 53% negative responses) and in collaboration with the Education Training Authority (item 3, with approximately 45% negative responses). Interestingly, department heads consistently evaluate the Ministry's roles more favorably than teachers do. For instance, regarding policy direction, 48% of department heads rated it positively, compared to only 40% of teachers. This disparity suggests that department heads may temper their criticisms due to their closer involvement with the Ministry. Qualitative insights from an interview with an academic vice-president reveal an underlying tension: the Ministry's top-down, mandate-driven approach often conflicts with the autonomy of universities. This conflict contributes to a perception gap, where formal accountability measures are viewed as counterproductive, and collaboration between institutions is often informal and constrained by limited resources. In summary, while the Ministry's role is not entirely ineffective, it appears to be selectively compromised. Its procedural functions, such as training and policy development, are generally viewed as adequate; however, its relational and responsive functions, including grievance handling and cross-agency coordination, are perceived as inadequate. This situation ultimately fosters a fragmented culture of quality assurance.

This study's findings align with contemporary research that highlights varying perceptions among stakeholders in higher education governance. Recent scholarship has noted that differing perspectives within institutional hierarchies can significantly influence views on central quality assurance bodies, which aligns with this study's findings regarding the differences between teachers and department heads (Vukasovic, 2018). The stronger negative

perception of grievance resolution processes reflects ongoing critiques that centralized ministries often lack effective and transparent feedback mechanisms in higher education quality assurance (Szabó & Tück, 2018). The general agreement on the value of professional training underscores the recognized emphasis on capacity building in recent quality assurance frameworks (Nguyen, 2019). However, the critical stance toward external collaborations, particularly with Educational Training Agencies (ETAs), highlights a growing scholarly call for partnerships in accreditation that are more synergistic rather than merely compliance-based (Kayyali, 2025). Finally, the persistent perceptual gap between administrative staff and teaching staff emphasizes ongoing tensions in policy implementation, indicating a need for more inclusive communication channels within quality assurance systems (Chand, 2024).

4.9. *The main challenges that are hindering the practices of quality assurance in public universities*

Table 4.9: *The perception of teachers and department heads about the main challenges that are hindering the practices of quality assurance*

	Items	**Teachers**								**Department Heads**							
	To what extent do the following factors hinder the implementation of quality assurance at your university?	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	to a very less extent	To a lesser extent	To a medium extent	To a great extent	To a very great extent	N	Mean	Stand Dev.	to a very less extent	To a less extent	To a medium extent	To a great extent	To a very great extent
1	External pressures, such as political influences.	**355**	**4.04**	**0.92**	**6(1.7)**	**23(6.5)**	**40(11.3)**	**168(47.3)**	**118(33.2)**	**118**	**4.16**	**0.89**	**1(0.8)**	**7(5.9)**	**12(10.2)**	**49(41.5)**	**49(41.5)**
2	Low willingness, commitment, and support from the university community.	**355**	**4.16**	**0.91**	**6(1.7)**	**17(4.8)**	**37(10.4)**	**149(42)**	**146(41.1)**	**118**	**4.17**	**0.88**	**2(1.7)**	**5(4.2)**	**10(8.5)**	**54(45.8)**	**47(39.8)**
3	Inadequate support from the Quality Assurance Authority (ETA).	**355**	**3.95**	**0.94**	**7(2)**	**27(7.6)**	**45(12.7)**	**172(48.5)**	**104(29.3)**	**118**	**3.82**	**0.9**	**2(1.7)**	**10(8.5)**	**18(15.3)**	**65(55.1)**	**23(19.5)**
4	Insufficient resources, including physical, financial, and expert support within the institution.	**355**	**3.25**	**1.2**	**47(13.2)**	**41(11.5)**	**83(23.4)**	**143(40.)**	**41(11.5)**	**118**	**3.59**	**0.95**	**3(2.5)**	**13(11)**	**30(25.4)**	**55(46.6)**	**17(14.4)**
5	Students often demonstrate low commitment, lack of academic preparedness, and minimal engagement in their learning.	**355**	**2.98**	**1.24**	**54(15.2)**	**86(24.2)**	**57(16.1)**	**129(36.3)**	**29(8.2)**	**118**	**3.12**	**1.18**	**12(10.2)**	**28(37.7)**	**23(19.5)**	**43(36.4)**	**12(10.2)**
6	Lack of autonomy of the institution	**355**	**4.23**	**0.80**	**7(2)**	**25(7)**	**37(10.4)**	**158(44.5)**	**128(36.1)**	**118**	**4.23**	**0.80**	**2(1.7)**	**2(1.7)**	**9(7.6)**	**58(49.2)**	**47(39.8)**

Table 4.9 provides an analysis of the factors that hinder the implementation of quality assurance, highlighting the differing perceptions between teachers and department heads. Both groups identified external pressures, particularly political influences, as significant barriers. Teachers reported an average score of 4.04 (SD = 0.92), while department heads gave a slightly higher average score of 4.16 (SD = 0.89). A substantial majority from both groups indicated that these external pressures hindered quality assurance to a great or very great extent, with 80.5% of teachers and 83% of department heads in agreement. Additionally, low willingness and support from the university community were recognized as major obstacles. Teachers recorded a mean score of 4.16 (SD = 0.91), while department heads reported a similar mean of 4.17 (SD = 0.88). Over 80% of respondents from both groups acknowledged this issue as a significant hindrance.

Inadequate support from the Education and Training Authority (ETA) was also noted, though it was perceived as a slightly less severe issue. Teachers had a mean score of 3.95 (SD = 0.94), while department heads had a mean score of 3.82 (SD = 0.90). Almost 78% of teachers viewed this matter as a medium to very great concern, with 74.6% of department heads sharing this perspective. Insufficient institutional resources posed a moderate challenge. Teachers reported a mean score of 3.25 (SD = 1.20), indicating more variability in their responses, while department heads perceived insufficient resources as slightly more problematic, with a mean score of 3.59 (SD = 0.95). Interestingly, low student commitment and engagement were seen as less critical compared to other factors. Teachers recorded the lowest mean score of 2.98 (SD = 1.24), while department heads reported a slightly higher mean score of 3.12 (SD = 1.18). However, the lack of institutional autonomy emerged as the most significant hindrance, with both groups reporting the highest mean score of 4.23 (SD = 0.80). Over 80% of respondents from both groups rated it as a great or very great barrier. Overall, the findings suggest that external pressures, institutional resistance, and lack of autonomy are the most critical challenges, while student-related factors are perceived as less obstructive.

The findings regarding the differing perceptions of stakeholders and the influence of political pressures are consistent with contemporary scholarship. Do et al (2017) observe that top-down political mandates can foster cultures focused on compliance, which stifles genuine engagement in quality assurance (QA). King (2015) emphasizes the critical importance of institutional autonomy, arguing that without the freedom to make decisions, QA practices

become mere performative rituals rather than mechanisms for improvement (p. 112). In terms of internal resistance, Nwisagbo et al. (2023) confirm that low community buy-in, often resulting from reform fatigue, poses a significant barrier to sustainable implementation (p. 204). Furthermore, the reduced emphasis on student engagement aligns with Paintsil (2016). observation that in environments of strong external pressure, internal stakeholder dynamics are prioritized as more immediate challenges. This pattern highlights the complex interaction of external pressures, institutional factors, and individual agency in QA implementation (Mkuzangwe, 2020). Ultimately, these results reflect a broader trend noted by scholars such as Szabó & Tück (2018), indicating that the effectiveness of QA is dependent on perceived transparency and collaborative trust, rather than solely on policy mandates.

CHAPTER FIVE

5. Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

5.1 Summary

This study systematically analyzed quality assurance (QA) practices in Ethiopian public universities through an Input-Process-Outcome (IPO) framework, employing a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design. The research revealed a complex environment characterized by institutional decoupling, resource-driven capability deficits, and fragmented stakeholder collaboration. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study incorporated survey data from 355 academic staff and 118 department heads, as well as semi-structured interviews with 57 key informants, including academic vice presidents, quality enhancement directors, college deans, Ministry of Education directors, and directors from the Education and Training Authority. Focus group discussions were conducted with 40 student council members from ten intentionally selected universities, along with comprehensive document analysis of national policies and institutional records. The findings highlight three interconnected patterns that help explain why QA practices often result in ceremonial compliance instead of meaningful quality enhancement. First, there is a widespread decoupling between formal QA policies and actual academic practices across all IPO dimensions. This aligns with institutional theory, which suggests that coercive isomorphic pressures from national regulatory frameworks (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2019) lead to the superficial adoption of QA structures without real operational changes.

Succeeding, resource deficiencies systematically weaken process quality, resulting in resource-driven capability failures that hinder universities from translating QA inputs into significant outcomes, despite the formal adoption of policies. Another, failures in stakeholder collaboration manifest as gaps in accountability, communication breakdowns, and imbalances in stakeholder importance. This transforms QA from a process of collective improvement into a fragmented ritual. These mechanisms interact to create a "low-effectiveness equilibrium," in which QA systems consume resources without generating measurable improvements in graduate competence, employability, or stakeholder satisfaction.

5.1.1. Assessment of the Current Status of QA Practices Across Inputs, Processes, and Outcomes

5.1.1.1 Input Quality

The analysis of input quality across resources material, human, policy, and leadership revealed systematic deficiencies that align with the decoupling mechanism predicted by institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In terms of policy resources, foundational quality assurance (QA) policies, manuals, and key performance indicators were formally established, likely in response to coercive isomorphic pressures from national regulatory frameworks (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2003, 2009, 2019). However, their accessibility and implementation were critically lacking. Academic staff reported low accessibility to QA policies (M = 2.34, SD = 1.29), with 40.7% perceiving availability to be minimal. In contrast, department heads rated accessibility significantly higher (M = 3.50, SD = 1.17), $t(471) = 2.451$, $p = .015$, and Cohen's $d = 2.7$. Both groups agreed that the QA components aligned with national and international standards (teachers: M = 3.53, SD = 0.76; department heads: M = 3.64, SD = 1.06). However, critical enabling structures such as audit units, information systems, and the integration of quality culture were severely underdeveloped. Teachers rated the establishment of audit units at M = 1.94 (SD = 0.98), with 47.5% perceiving them as virtually absent, and rated information systems for quality assurance at M = 1.89 (SD = 0.88), with 42.4% indicating minimal presence. This pattern demonstrates that while Ethiopian public universities have adopted formal QA policies, the substantial implementation of enabling structures remains critically deficient. This situation exemplifies the decoupling mechanism central to Proposition 1. When benchmarked against the African Union's ASG-QA criteria (2007), which require comprehensive audit structures and quality information systems as prerequisites for accreditation, it is evident that Ethiopian public universities have only partially met continental requirements.

The evaluation of human resources revealed a paradoxical situation: while the quantitative availability of qualified academic staff received positive ratings (teachers: M = 4.10, SD = 0.93; department heads: M = 3.83, SD = 1.03), the qualitative suitability of standardized staff qualifications was notably deficient (teachers: M = 2.18, SD = 1.15; department heads: M = 2.08, SD = 0.71), with 72.1% of teachers and 80.5% of department heads expressing dissatisfaction. Appointment and promotion policies were seen as inadequate (teachers: M = 2.00, SD = 1.08; department heads: M = 2.02, SD = 0.57), while professional development systems received the lowest ratings (teachers: M = 1.83, SD = 1.08; department heads: M = 1.77, SD = 0.73), with 81.1% of teachers and 87.3% of department heads unhappy with these

systems. Independent samples t-tests confirmed statistically significant perceptual gaps across all dimensions of human resources ($p < .05$), with exceptionally large effect sizes ranging from Cohen's $d = 2.7$ to 9.5, indicating practically meaningful differences between stakeholder groups. From a resource-based view (RBV) perspective, Ethiopian public universities lack VRIN (valuable, rare, inimitable, non-substitutable) qualified human resources capable of generating sustained QA improvements. This confirms that quality assurance practices will remain ceremonial without substantial investment in enhancing staff qualifications, establishing transparent appointment and promotion policies, and implementing systematic professional development programs. Governance and management systems showed widespread deficiencies across all assessed dimensions. Teachers reported a shared vision for quality assurance (QA) with a mean of 1.81 (SD = 0.98), and 83.4% expressed negative perceptions. In contrast, department heads reported a mean of 2.30 (SD = 0.80), with a significant difference noted ($t(471) = 2.74$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.60$). The effectiveness of the organizational structure was rated with a mean of 1.82 (SD = 1.02) by teachers and a mean of 2.05 (SD = 1.12) by department heads, showing a significant difference ($t(471) = 2.15$, $p = .032$, Cohen's $d = 0.70$). The communication of management responsibilities displayed the largest perceptual gap, with teachers rating it at a mean of 1.76 (SD = 1.00) and department heads at a mean of 2.68 (SD = 1.18), resulting in a significant difference as well ($t(471) = 3.64$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.89$). Independent samples t-tests confirmed significant perceptual gaps across all governance dimensions, with effect sizes ranging from medium to large (Cohen's $d = 0.60$ to 0.90).

These findings contradict the Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation No. 1152/2019, which mandates stakeholder participation in university governance and QA decision-making. From a stakeholder theory perspective, the lack of a shared vision, ineffective communication, and limited stakeholder involvement create accountability gaps. These gaps are likely to result in superficial compliance rather than genuine quality improvements. This supports Proposition 3b's prediction that accountability gaps are positively associated with symbolic compliance and negatively associated with outcome-based improvements. An evaluation of infrastructure and learning resources revealed critical inadequacies in seven of the eight dimensions, with only library resources nearing adequate levels. Teachers rated laboratories with a mean of 1.92 (SD = 1.10), and 55.5% rated them as very poor, while department heads rated the laboratories with a mean of 2.13 (SD = 0.98), showing a significant difference ($U = 18331.0$, $z = -2.529$, $p = .011$). Physical plant facilities received

mean ratings of 1.79 (SD = 1.06) from teachers and 2.14 (SD = 0.98) from department heads, with significant differences found. Internet services were perceived as highly inadequate, with teachers rating them at a mean of 2.00 (SD = 1.11), and 51.5% rating them as very poor. In contrast, department heads reported a mean rating of 2.48 (SD = 0.94), with significant differences noted.

The severe deficiencies in internet services and laboratories particularly contradict national ICT policies in education, which prioritize digital infrastructure to enhance quality. These deficiencies also fall short of the African Union's ASG-QA criteria (2007), which require "adequate physical and technological infrastructure to support teaching, learning, and research" as a prerequisite for accreditation. From a resource-based view (RBV), the lack of VRIN-qualified physical and technological resources significantly hinders Ethiopian public universities from implementing effective QA processes. As one internal quality enhancement director stated, The government should provide sufficient grants to meet the increasing demand for additional instructional resources, equipment, and facilities."

5.1.1.2 Process Quality

The study of process quality in Ethiopian public universities reveals three major themes that explain the prevalence of symbolic compliance in quality assurance (QA) activities over true quality improvements. First, there is a large decoupling between written regulations and real behaviours across several dimensions, corroborating Meyer and Rowan's (1977) theory. Teachers (M = 1.96, SD = 0.96) and department heads (M = 1.96, SD = 1.05) gave low scores to curriculum development evaluations based on national and international standards. The vast majority of instructors (78.3%) and department heads (78%) were dissatisfied with the present curricular frameworks. Furthermore, 47.9% of teachers and 51.7% of department heads regarded external stakeholders' engagement in curriculum design as low (M = 2.08, SD = 1.33; M = 2.09, SD = 1.30). Independent samples t-tests found significant perceptual differences across curricular aspects ($p < .05$), with effect sizes ranging from Cohen's d = 5.56 to 9.00. Qualitative data from interviews with college deans supported these findings, indicating that "evaluation processes frequently omit substantive input from key university and industry stakeholders, resulting in curricula that produce "graduates who are unskilled and unmarketable, which contributes to high unemployment rates.

Succeeding, the teaching and learning procedures exhibited significant flaws, particularly in practical skill development and pedagogical innovation. The balance of theoretical and practical education received low ratings from instructors (M = 2.16, SD = 0.92; department heads: M = 2.18, SD = 0.97), with more than 60% rating it as very bad or poor. The evaluation of learning outcomes was also criticised (teachers: M = 2.14, SD = 0.78; department heads: M = 2.09, SD = 0.96), with 68.2% and 65.3% of both groups giving unsatisfactory scores. According to Academic Vice President A5, "inadequate facilities, insufficient funding, large class sizes, and issues with curriculum and pedagogy" impede the use of active learning approaches. Focus group conversations with students revealed serious flaws in assessment systems, including the widespread use of norm-referenced marking, a lack of effective moderation, and an overreliance on summative end-of-semester exams at the expense of formative feedback. Finally, major gaps in student support services were discovered, with financial help (teachers: M = 2.26, SD = 1.04; department heads: M = 2.09, SD = 0.96) and alumni tracer studies (teachers: M = 2.25, SD = 0.92; department heads: M = 2.14, SD = 1.03) obtaining disturbingly low scores. The complete absence of working tracer study systems across the studied universities is a significant failure to close the QA loop, since insufficient data on graduate employability impedes curriculum adjustments and overall process improvements (Thakurta, 2017). These findings are consistent with previous research that identifies continuing resource shortages as a substantial impediment to successful QA and shows that perceived resource shortfalls directly affect institutional quality assurance efforts.

5.1.1.3 Outcome Quality

The investigation of QA results for graduate competency, stakeholder satisfaction, and employability found systematic flaws. Retention, advancement, and graduation rates were moderately rated by instructors (M = 3.27, SD = 1.02) and department heads (M = 3.23, SD = 1.40), with no significant difference between groups (t (170.8) = 0.32, p = .749). Department heads assessed students' performance on exit exams as higher (M = 3.69, SD = 1.01) than instructors (M = 3.27, SD = 1.22), t (228.1) = -3.42, p = .001, Cohen's d = -0.37. However, graduates' acquisition of important information, abilities, and competences earned poor evaluations from both instructors (M = 2.53, SD = 1.24) and department heads (M = 2.69, SD = 1.09), t(471) = -1.26, and p = .208. Graduate satisfaction earned the lowest ratings (teachers: M = 2.20, SD = 1.04; department heads: M = 2.10, SD = 0.96), with more than 30% of both groups reporting very little efficacy. Graduate employability rates were

evaluated negatively (teachers: M = 2.13, SD = 1.08; department heads: M = 2.22, SD = 0.80), with 62.6% of instructors and 55.1% of department heads assessing it as less or very less effective. According to qualitative data from college deans and internal quality development directors, these outcome shortcomings are the result of insufficient internship opportunities, inefficient teaching approaches, and graduates' lack of technical skills, practical experience, and confident attitudes. According to an internal quality enhancement director, "The primary issues faced by graduates include a lack of employment opportunities due to inadequate technical skills, limited subject-specific knowledge, insufficient practical abilities relevant to their fields, and a deficiency in the attributes necessary for success in their chosen careers. These findings suggest that QA outcomes are determined by three interconnected mechanisms: resource availability (which enables or constrains outcome production), stakeholder synergy (which determines whether outcomes align with labour market requirements), and implementation fidelity (which determines whether adopted policies produce intended effects). The research shows that Ethiopian public institutions are still caught in what Proposition 4 refers to as a low-effectiveness equilibrium, in which QA systems left-over resources but create no observable advances in graduate competency or stakeholder satisfaction.

5.1.2. Assessment of the Efficacy of Implemented QA Mechanisms

Recognized QA techniques were found to be useful to varied degrees, with internal mechanisms receiving medium grades and external mechanisms being ineffectual. Teachers (M = 2.57, SD = 0.73) and department heads (M = 2.65, SD = 0.67) gave the institutional self-assessment/institutional audit the highest marks, with 71.8% and 76.3% believing that it is successful, respectively. Peer review was extensively monitored (teachers: M = 2.54, SD = 0.72; department heads: M = 2.53, SD = 0.67), with 67.9% of teachers and 62.7% of department heads appreciating its effectiveness. These findings suggest that internal peer-based assessments retain trust among stakeholders, owing to their collaborative nature and perceived relevance to professional practice. However, the moderate ratings far below the scale midpoint suggest that even internal mechanisms are not working optimally, with significant proportions of respondents expressing uncertainty.

External QA techniques had extremely poor scores from both groups, indicating serious legitimacy issues. External audits were seen as ineffective by instructors (M = 1.66, SD = 0.91) and department heads (M = 1.20, SD = 0.54), with 64.8% and 86.4%, respectively, reporting no engagement or negative comments. Accreditation had the

lowest grades (teachers: M = 1.03, SD = 0.19; department heads: M = 1.06, SD = 0.23), with 96.1% of instructors and 94.1% of department heads rejecting its effectiveness. These findings indicate that external validation techniques are perceived as separate from ordinary academic activities and do not contribute significantly to quality improvement. Internal Quality Enhancement Director E3 stated the systemic challenges: "In Ethiopian public universities, various structural obstacles limit the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures such as audits and certifications." Key obstacles include a lack of funding, limited academic freedom, and governance concerns that prioritize procedural conformance above actual educational achievements. Academic stakeholders typically view QA processes as top-down initiatives, limiting their ability to support educational improvement. This study demonstrates that external mechanisms have a legitimacy issue, with stakeholders considering them as bureaucratic compliance requirements rather than helpful improvement instruments. The significant difference between internal and external mechanism ratings creates a two-tiered reality in QA, where national policy goals are divorced from institutions' actual capacity to deliver substantial quality improvement.

5.1.3. Evaluation of Stakeholder Synergy and Accountability

5.1.3.1. University Community Engagement and Role Fulfillment

The study on stakeholder synergy and responsibility in university community participation in quality assurance (QA) reveals major gaps in role fulfilment, communication, and collaboration across stakeholders. Notably, instructors and department heads indicated only modest to moderate participation in QA processes, yielding low scores for active involvement and devotion (M = 2.24, SD = 1.07; M = 2.47, SD = 1.05). Alarmingly, 58.3% of teachers and 50.8% of department heads reported low or very low levels of involvement. Statistical analyses, particularly independent samples t-tests, corroborated these findings, revealing significant differences in active participation between the two groups ($t(471) = -2.03$, $p = .043$, Cohen's $d = -0.22$) and in areas of teaching and research improvement ($t(471) = -2.25$, $p = .025$, Cohen's $d = -0.24$), implying that, while department heads have slightly more favourable views than instructors, both remain below the midpoint of the engagement scale. Both stay below the middle of the engagement scale. Qualitative observations from institutional leaders highlight underlying structural challenges that contribute to these differences in involvement. An academic vice president commented on stakeholders' incapacity to execute responsibilities within the QA framework, citing

deficiencies in responsibility, communication, and teamwork. This hesitation derives from leadership's inability to support the ideals of openness and academic freedom, which instructors say has a negative impact on education quality. As a result, QA is viewed as a top-down requirement that prioritises compliance and statistics above developing common educational goals. These findings are consistent with Proposition 3a, which states that reduced stakeholder synergy characterized by role uncertainty, infrequent communication, and restricted collaboration is associated with poorer perceived QA effectiveness.

5.1.3.2. Education and Training Authority (ETA) Roles and Responsibilities

The ETA's participation in enhancing QA procedures received mixed assessments, with modest appreciation for policy approval functions but ineffective monitoring, feedback, and grievance management services. Policy and procedure approval received the highest ratings (teachers: M = 2.61, SD = 1.20; department heads: M = 2.71, SD = 1.18), with 30.7% of teachers and 33.1% of department leaders favourably assessing the ETA's participation. However, monitoring and evaluation of QA implementation received low ratings (teachers: M = 2.03, SD = 0.90; department heads: M = 2.19, SD = 1.03), with 35.8% of instructors and 31.4% of department heads believing the ETA's job was minor. Continuous follow-up on QA feedback (teachers: M = 1.99, SD = 0.90; department heads: M = 2.08, SD = 0.91), facilitation of external audits (teachers: M = 2.03, SD = 0.85; department heads: M = 2.11, SD = 0.88), and grievance handling (teachers: M = 1.96, SD = 0.84; department heads: M = 2.06, SD = 0.87) all received ratings significantly below the scale midpoint, with 30-40% of respondents from both groups perceiving the ETA's role as very little or little. Internal Quality Enhancement Director E4 outlined the underlying issues: "The ETA quality assurance system is cumbersome and lacks sufficient resources to meet the growing demand to improve the quality of public universities." It primarily targets private institutions and lacks robust methods for continual monitoring and feedback in public universities. Furthermore, the system is inflexible and deficient in fresh, practical ideas, underlining the crucial need for more resources and personnel. "These findings indicate a structural misalignment between the ETA's stated responsibilities and its resource-constrained, inflexible implementation strategies, supporting recent research indicating that external quality assurance bodies frequently face a legitimacy crisis when viewed as bureaucratic and solely focused on compliance rather than as supportive partners in enhancement.

5.1.3.3. Ministry of Education (MoE) Roles and Responsibilities

The MoE's involvement in QA procedures was assessed in several ways, with professional training functions receiving the highest marks. At the same time, grievance resolution and ETA collaboration were found to be insufficient. Professional training received the highest ratings from both instructors (M = 3.46, SD = 1.40) and department heads (M = 3.30, SD = 1.30), with 55.4% and 53.4% responding positively, respectively. Policy direction and standards (M = 2.99, SD = 1.31; department heads: M = 3.23, SD = 1.36) and external stakeholder engagement (M = 3.00, SD = 1.34; department heads: M = 3.25, SD = 1.30) received moderate ratings. However, collaboration with ETA received low ratings (M = 2.80, SD = 1.40; M = 2.77, SD = 1.36), with 45.9% of teachers and 44.1% of department heads expressing dissatisfaction. Grievance resolution had the lowest grades (teachers: M = 2.51, SD = 1.40; department heads: M = 2.60, SD = 1.37), with negative comments from 55.7% of instructors and 53.4% of department heads. Qualitative data from academic vice presidents revealed systemic tensions: "While the Ministry of Education administers the national QA system in Ethiopian public institutions, there is a perception gap in carrying out statutory tasks, raising concerns about accountability, communication, and collaboration. The MoE employs a top-down strategy, as witnessed in bigger education reforms, while university administrators face limitations on autonomy and academic freedom. The mismatch between the MoE's top-down, mandate-driven policy and universities' quest for autonomy has a negative influence on educational service quality, as current accountability procedures may be viewed as ineffective. These findings are consistent with recent research indicating varying perceptions among stakeholders in higher education governance, with the stronger negative perception of grievance resolution reflecting long-standing criticisms that centralised ministries frequently lack effective and transparent feedback mechanisms.

5.1.4. Identification and Analysis of Systemic Implementation Barriers

5.1.4.1. Structural Barriers

The investigation revealed a complex hierarchy of interconnected systemic constraints that limit effective QA implementation, with structural barriers emerging as the most significant category. Lack of institutional autonomy received the highest rankings from both teachers (M = 4.23, SD = 0.80) and department heads (M = 4.23, SD = 0.80), with more than 80% rating it as a major or very major impediment. This study shows that centralised control over university governance decisions such as resource allocation, personnel, and curriculum creation substantially inhibits institutional capacity for quality improvement (King 2015).

External pressures, particularly political influences, were identified as the second most significant barrier (teachers: M = 4.04, SD = 0.92; department heads: M = 4.16, SD = 0.89), with 80.5% of teachers and 83% of department heads reporting that these pressures hampered quality assurance to a great or very great extent. Low desire, dedication, and support from the university community earned similarly high values (teachers: M = 4.16, SD = 0.91; department heads: M = 4.17, SD = 0.88), with more than 80% of respondents citing this as a significant impediment. Insufficient institutional resources, including physical, financial, and expert help, were seen as a moderate issue by instructors (M = 3.25, SD = 1.20) and a somewhat more severe obstacle by department heads (M = 3.59, SD = 0.95). Inadequate ETA support was viewed as a significant but less severe barrier (teachers: M = 3.95, SD = 0.94; department heads: M = 3.82, SD = 0.90), with 77.8% of teachers and 74.6% of department heads expressing moderate to high concern. Student-related barriers, such as low commitment, lack of academic preparedness, and minimal engagement, were perceived as the least critical (teachers: M = 2.98, SD = 1.24; department heads: M = 3.12, SD = 1.18), indicating that institutional and systemic factors are prioritised as more immediate challenges in environments of high external pressure.

Cultural and Systemic Barriers

Cultural obstacles emerged as a dominant compliance mentality among staff, insufficient leadership commitment to quality improvement, and academic personnel disengagement due to a lack of professional development opportunities. The university community's lack of willingness and support, seen as a major hindrance, exhibits refer to as reform fatigue, in which low community buy-in significantly impedes long-term implementation. The perception of QA as a tiresome administrative task rather than a professional collaborative activity is well ingrained in institutional culture, aided by top-down audit processes that prioritize paperwork verification above educational advances. Leadership commitment inadequacies were evident in governance and management assessments, with both groups consistently rating leadership support below the scale's midpoint (teachers: M = 1.74, SD = 1.05; department heads: M = 2.14, SD = 1.00). The absence of a shared vision for QA at all management levels (teachers: M = 1.81, SD = 0.98; department heads: M = 2.30, SD = 0.80) indicates that leadership has failed to articulate and operationalize a cohesive quality culture, resulting in fragmented stakeholder engagement and limited ownership of QA processes.

Systemic barriers such as policy inconsistencies across national regulatory frameworks, misaligned performance goals that prioritise quantifiable inputs over qualitative outcomes, and external political pressures exacerbate structural and cultural problems. The disparity between national oversight and institutional reality, as demonstrated by qualitative interviews, exemplifies what scholars call policy incoherence, in which national frameworks fail to account for institutional uniqueness and resource constraints. The prioritisation of quantitative criteria, such as graduation rates and enrolment numbers, over qualitative goals, such as graduate competency and employability, leads to misaligned incentives that reward ceremonial conformance rather than significant quality improvement. External political pressures, such as participation in university governance and budget allocation, were identified as significant barriers to institutional autonomy and quality improvement activities. These restrictions result in coercive isomorphism, in which organisations adopt formal structures to gain legitimacy while maintaining consistent actual practices, resulting in the decoupling mechanism central to institutional theory.

Synthesis of Findings: System-Level Insights and Theoretical Contributions

The findings from all study questions indicate a cohesive explanatory narrative: quality assurance mechanisms in Ethiopian public institutions remain ceremonial and detached, despite constant governmental attention and regulatory pressure. This condition is neither a failure of implementation nor a temporary issue that can be rectified by increasing capacity; rather, it is a lasting systemic feature created by the interaction of three causal processes from the integrated theoretical framework. First, institutional isomorphism encourages policy adoption based on legitimacy rather than substantive improvement. Coercive isomorphic expectations from the Ministry of Education and ETA require institutions to develop formal quality assurance mechanisms, such as policies, committees, self-assessment reports, and audit documentation, in order to demonstrate compliance and maintain legitimacy. However, these systems are still ceremonially implemented since external legitimacy demands compete with internal resource constraints and cultural realities. The outcome is pervasive decoupling, in which written QA requirements and actual academic practices commonly differ, as empirically demonstrated across all IPO elements. Evidence demonstrates that coercive limits are more likely to result in ceremonial QA acceptance than substantive implementation, strongly supporting argument 1.

Next, resource limits mediated by the resource-based approach reduce potentially significant processes to ceremonial rituals. Regardless of policy approval, institutions are unable to properly carry out QA processes owing to a shortage of VRIN-qualified resources, which include appropriate teaching facilities, laboratory equipment, internet connections, faculty development programs, and graduate tracking systems. Even well-designed QA techniques do not provide measurable advances in graduation competency or stakeholder satisfaction as a result of resource-driven capability failure, since the institutional capacity to translate inputs into processes is essentially restricted. Data provide significant empirical support for Proposition 2, which states that the efficiency of formal QA procedures is contingent on the availability of extra VRIN resources such as finance, faculty expertise, and digital infrastructure. Additional, stakeholder synergy failures reduce collaborative quality improvement to a fragmented ritual. The absence of role definition, communication integrity, and collaborative governance across stakeholder groups within the university community, between institutions and ETA, and between universities and the MoE, generates accountability gaps in which no one actor is held accountable for outcomes. As a result, QA processes waste resources while providing no demonstrable benefits since stakeholder perspectives remain mismatched, feedback loops are broken, and collaborative action is lacking. Evidence supports principles 3a and 3b, which say that weak stakeholder synergy is associated with symbolic compliance rather than outcome-based reforms, and accountability gaps are associated with negative perceptions of QA efficacy.

These forces interact to create what Proposition 4 refers to as a low-effectiveness equilibrium, in which quality assurance systems remain ceremonial and disconnected despite constant policy attention and regulatory pressure. Structural barriers (resource scarcity) combine with cultural barriers (low staff engagement, passive resistance) and systemic barriers (policy incoherence, competing stakeholder goals) to keep institutions in a stable equilibrium in which QA practices consume resources but produce no measurable improvements in graduate competence, employability, or stakeholder satisfaction. The theoretical framework that combines institutional theory, RBV, and stakeholder theory receives strong empirical support, confirming that the presence or absence of formal policies does not determine QA effectiveness in resource-constrained, post-conflict higher education settings but rather the quality of implementation, resource adequacy, and stakeholder collaboration.

The strategic implication is clear: without targeted interventions that address decoupling (by reducing isomorphic pressures or building internal commitment), resource deficiencies (by increasing government investment or strategic resource reallocation), and stakeholder synergy failures (via formalized feedback mechanisms and collaborative governance structures), QA processes will remain ceremonially compliant but substantively ineffective. The Ethiopian Public University Quality Enhancement (EPUQE) Framework proposed in this study addresses these challenges in a comprehensive, context-sensitive manner, providing a road map for transforming QA from a symbolic exercise to a driver of institutional relevance and resilience capable of producing competent graduates, satisfied stakeholders, and long-term socioeconomic development.

5.1.5. Ethiopian Public University Quality Enhancement (EPUQE) Framework

Building on the synthesized findings, the study proposes the EPUQE Framework, a context-sensitive strategic model anchored on five essential pillars designed to reorient QA systems toward continuous improvement, national relevance, and institutional resilience. Pillar 1: Governance for Enhancement advocates for a transformative approach that shifts from centralized control to a model of institutional autonomy characterized by accountability. It identifies the lack of institutional autonomy as a primary barrier, supported by a significant mean score of 4.23 from two distinct groups. The proposal is informed by stakeholder theory and institutional theory's decoupling mechanism. To foster this shift, the pillar suggests the implementation of differentiated accountability frameworks that acknowledge the varied structures of research universities, applied universities, comprehensive universities, sciences and technology institutions, and educational university, as detailed by MoSHE in 2021. Key recommendations include: decentralizing decision-making authority to both institutional and college levels while ensuring accountability for the resulting outcomes; minimizing bureaucratic hurdles by simplifying documentation standards that prioritize evidence of advancement over mere compliance; and establishing transparent performance metrics that integrate both input and outcome-based indicators. These initiatives aim to enhance institutional effectiveness through increased autonomy and focused accountability.

Pillar 2 of the study focuses on fostering a Culture of Shared Ownership, which prioritizes collaborative engagement over traditional audit-based cultures. It identifies cultural barriers within the university system, notably low levels of commitment, with 83.1% of teachers and

85.6% of department heads citing this as a significant hindrance to effective quality assurance (QA). The pillar emphasizes the need for enhanced stakeholder participation in QA processes. In alignment with stakeholder theory, which underscores the importance of role clarity, frequent communication, and collaborative action, several key initiatives are proposed. These include the implementation of institutional capacity-building programs aimed at transforming QA from a mere compliance obligation into opportunities for professional development. Additionally, the proposal suggests establishing formal stakeholder engagement mechanisms, such as involving students in QA committees, encouraging staff participation in self-assessment processes, and integrating industry input into curriculum development. To further support these initiatives, incentive structures designed to reward contributions to quality enhancement are advocated. Finally, effective communication strategies are essential to bridge perceptual gaps between academic staff and administrative leadership, ensuring a more cohesive and participatory approach to quality assurance within the institution.

Pillar 3 of the framework emphasizes the necessity for strategic investments in both human and physical capital to achieve sustainability in educational institutions. It highlights the resource-based view prediction that the success of formal Quality Assurance (QA) mechanisms is contingent on having complementary resources characterized by Value, Rarity, Inimitability, and Non-substitutability (VRIN). The analysis identifies significant infrastructure deficiencies within the sampled universities, such as inadequate laboratory facilities (mean rating of 1.92 with a standard deviation of 1.10), insufficient internet services (mean rating of 2.20, SD = 1.11), and substandard physical facilities (mean rating of 1.79, SD = 1.06). In response to these challenges, the pillar advocates for targeted government investments to bridge critical infrastructure gaps. This includes strategic human resource development through systematic enhancement of faculty qualifications, transparency in appointment and promotion processes, and robust professional development programs. Additionally, it calls for investments in digital infrastructure to bolster learning management systems, assessment platforms, and graduate tracking systems. The establishment of effective data management systems is also deemed essential for facilitating evidence-based decision-making and tracking educational outcomes.

Pillar 4 emphasizes the importance of aligning Quality Assurance (QA) systems with national and global development agendas, specifically targeting Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Ethiopia's Ten-Year Plan (2021–2031). It also incorporates the Quadruple Helix innovation model, which unites government, academia, industry, and civil

society. This alignment aims to prevent QA from becoming a mere compliance mechanism, focusing instead on broader developmental objectives. Findings indicate a worrying disconnect between graduate outcomes and the necessities of the labor market, with data revealing that a significant portion of educators, including 69% of teachers and 62.7% of department heads, rated professional involvement in curriculum development as 'very poor or poor'. To address these issues, the pillar recommends several strategies: aligning graduate competence standards with national skills frameworks and employer expectations; incorporating work-integrated learning within QA; fostering structured collaboration with industry and professional bodies in curriculum design, assessment, and quality evaluation; and ensuring that educational efforts contribute actively to national development priorities through research-informed teaching and community engagement initiatives. Ultimately, this pillar promotes a comprehensive approach to QA, ensuring it supports economic and social advancement.

Pillar 5: Intelligent Accountability focuses on aligning input metrics with outcome-oriented indicators to address the issues surrounding formal Quality Assurance (QA) structures that are often adopted ceremonially, lacking substantive implementation. The pillar highlights findings indicating a disconnect between process documentation and actual outcomes. It advocates for the establishment of outcome-based performance metrics that assess graduate competence with standardized evaluations, employability through functional tracking systems, and stakeholder satisfaction via structured surveys.

To foster continuous improvement, it emphasizes formative evaluation processes over purely summative judgments and proposes balanced accountability frameworks that honor institutional diversity, resource limitations, and maintain clear outcome expectations. The pillar also calls for the creation of feedback loops that connect outcome data with process enhancements and resource reallocation.

Generally, the successful implementation of this framework is contingent on several enabling conditions identified through analyses of systemic barriers: strong political commitment from the highest levels of governance; adequate resource allocation that aligns policy ambitions with institutional realities; skill development for QA professionals at both institutional and national levels; ongoing stakeholder dialogue across various sectors; and adaptive strategies for implementation that respect institutional diversity and allow for contextual adaptation.

5.2 Conclusions

This systematic analysis investigates quality assurance (QA) practices in Ethiopian public universities using the Input-Process-Outcome (IPO) heuristic and a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates institutional theory, the Resource-Based View, and stakeholder theory. The study reveals significant findings on the dysfunctions of QA within Ethiopia's resource-constrained, post-conflict educational landscape. This equilibrium denotes a stable condition in which QA systems consume resources without achieving meaningful improvements in graduate competence, employability, or stakeholder satisfaction, thereby emphasizing the critical obstacles to enhancing educational quality in Ethiopian higher education institutions. The analysis reveals a significant disconnect between formal quality assurance (QA) policies and their practical application within Ethiopian public universities. While these institutions have established formal QA frameworks, including policies, manuals, key performance indicators, and committees, these frameworks are implemented only to a limited extent, primarily due to coercive pressures from national regulatory bodies and specific Higher Education Proclamations (No. 351/2003, 650/2009, and 1152/2019). This response to regulatory frameworks, particularly enforced by the Education and Training Authority (ETA) and aligned with continental standards like the African Union's ASG-QA (2007), has not been matched by the necessary enabling structures. Crucial elements such as audit units, information systems, and functional monitoring mechanisms are absent, leading to a deficient QA culture within these institutions. This decoupling indicates a systemic issue where compliance exists on paper but fails in execution.

The theoretical implications regarding Quality Assurance (QA) in Ethiopian higher education emphasize the limitations of institutional theory. It asserts that while policy adoption is widespread, this does not equate to actual changes in educational quality. The primary concept explored, centered on the decoupling mechanism highlighted in Proposition 1, indicates that coercive isomorphic pressure tends to result in a disconnect between formal policies and genuine quality improvements. This challenges the prevailing belief in QA literature that mere policy adoption, even if externally mandated, necessarily enhances educational quality. Without sufficient resources and cultural shifts, these external legitimacy pressures lead to what the study describes as ceremonial compliance rather than meaningful enhancement. A critical finding further examines the barriers posed by resource-driven capability deficits, which convert potentially effective QA strategies into mere rituals. Ethiopian public universities are notably deficient in the VRIN (valuable, rare, inimitable,

and non-substitutable) resources across various dimensions such as human, physical, technological, and financial. This resource scarcity fundamentally diminishes their ability to transform QA inputs into impactful processes and outcomes.

Ultimately, these findings indicate that resource limitations and policy perceptions form critical barriers to effective QA implementation in Ethiopian higher education. The theoretical implications regarding quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopian higher education emphasize the limitations of institutional theory. It asserts that while policy adoption is widespread, this does not equate to actual changes in educational quality. The primary concept explored, centered on the decoupling mechanism highlighted in Proposition 1, indicates that coercive isomorphic pressure tends to result in a disconnect between formal policies and genuine quality improvements. This challenges the prevailing belief in QA literature that mere policy adoption, even if externally mandated, necessarily enhances educational quality. Without sufficient resources and cultural shifts, these external legitimacy pressures lead to what the study describes as ceremonial compliance rather than meaningful enhancement.

QA processes are overly focused on teachers, reflecting outdated pedagogical methodologies. The curricula are often misaligned with labor market needs, resulting in graduates lacking essential competencies for employment. Moreover, the assessment methods employed are neither fair nor innovative, hindering the accurate evaluation of student progress nor learning outcomes.As a result to the outcomes of the QA system are clearly the weakest component, with significant gaps observable in graduate employability, competency acquisition, and stakeholder satisfaction metrics. This misalignment illustrates a lack of accountability, as the system fails to adequately track or acknowledge its results. An evaluation of the quality assurance (QA) mechanisms in place such as institutional self-assessment, peer review, and external audits reveals that these processes have largely devolved into symbolic, compliance-oriented activities. This shift is primarily driven by the need to meet external requirements from the Education and Training Authority (ETA). As a result, these mechanisms have fostered a pervasive “audit culture” that emphasizes documentary compliance over meaningful quality improvement. Consequently, their capacity to promote reflective practice and ongoing enhancement is fundamentally compromised, undermining the emergence of an authentic, internally driven “quality culture.”

The third significant conclusion emphasizes that stakeholder synergy failure is the chief determinant of outcome quality in quality assurance (QA) within Ethiopian public universities. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of QA practices is influenced less by formal policy structures and more by the quality of relational coordination among key stakeholders. This includes factors such as role clarity, communication frequency, collaborative actions, and accountability among university leadership, academic staff, students, the Education and Training Authorithy (ETA), and the Ministry of Education (MoE). Engagement from the university community in QA processes has received notably low ratings across various dimensions.

These findings empirically support Propositions 3a and 3b from stakeholder theory. Proposition 3a predicts that higher levels of stakeholder synergy, characterized by role clarity, frequent communication, and collaborative action, will be positively associated with perceptions of quality assurance (QA) effectiveness and graduate outcome satisfaction. In contrast, Proposition 3b predicts that accountability gaps, which arise from unclear or overlapping responsibilities, will be positively associated with symbolic compliance with QA processes while negatively affecting outcome-based quality improvements. The empirical evidence reveals that failures in stakeholder synergy occur through three causal mechanisms. First, there are deficits in role clarity. When stakeholders do not have a clear understanding of their specific QA responsibilities such as the external auditor (ETA), university leadership as internal implementers, faculty as process participants, and students as primary beneficiaries accountability remains diffuse, and no one takes ownership of quality outcomes. Next, there are failures in the integrity of feedback loops. Without timely and actionable feedback from outcome assessments to inform process design and resource allocation, QA mechanisms lose their ability to facilitate iterative improvement. Third, there are breakdowns in collaborative governance. In the absence of regular, structured dialogue among stakeholders, information asymmetry persists, shared quality norms fail to develop, and QA processes become fragmented rituals rather than integrated systems for improvement. Qualitative data from college deans and internal quality enhancement directors attribute these deficiencies to inadequate internship opportunities, ineffective teaching methodologies, and graduates' lack of technical skills, practical experience, and positive attitudes. One internal quality enhancement director remarked, "The primary issues faced by graduates include a lack of employment opportunities due to inadequate technical skills, limited subject-specific knowledge, insufficient practical abilities relevant to their fields, and a deficiency in the

attributes necessary for success in their chosen careers." This failure in outcomes represents the final link in the causal chain: weak stakeholder synergy compromises process quality, which in turn prevents inputs from translating into desired outcomes.

The fourth major conclusion concerns the interactive dynamics among structural, cultural, and systemic barriers that create and sustain the low-effectiveness equilibrium. The empirical evidence reveals that QA failures cannot be attributed to any single barrier category but rather emerge from the synergistic interaction of multiple, mutually reinforcing obstacles that lock institutions into stable ceremonial compliance. Structural barriers emerged as the most critical category.

The document discusses the interplay of various barriers affecting Quality Assurance (QA) processes in institutional settings, particularly in contexts characterized by resource constraints and post-conflict environments, such as Ethiopia. It identifies three main types of barriers: structural, cultural, and systemic. Structural barriers include resource scarcity and limited autonomy, which directly limit the institutional capacity to implement QA effectively. Cultural barriers, such as inadequate leadership commitment and staff disengagement, influence how available resources are utilized for quality improvement. Systemic barriers encompass incoherent policies, misaligned performance metrics, and external political influences, which impact the relationship between formal policies and actual practices. The interaction of these barriers results in what the document refers to as a low-effectiveness equilibrium. Here, structural barriers create resource constraints that hinder substantial QA implementation, while cultural barriers induce a cycle of passive resistance and superficial compliance. Systemic barriers further entrench this situation by ensuring that external mandates do not align with institutional capabilities or cultural contexts. This creates a stable equilibrium where superficial compliance is justified by resource scarcity, leading to continued centralized control that stifles innovation and engagement. Consequently, educational institutions expend resources on QA activities that yield no tangible improvements in graduates' competencies, employability, or overall stakeholder satisfaction.

The conclusions drawn from the study suggest broader implications for understanding the effectiveness of QA in resource-constrained higher education systems that are rapidly evolving. The research integrates multiple theoretical frameworks, including institutional theory, the Resource-Based View (RBV), and stakeholder theory, within an input-process-

output (IPO) model. This approach elucidates why QA mechanisms adapted from Western contexts often fail to enhance quality when applied to non-Western systems marked by limited resources, centralized governance, and poor stakeholder coordination. A significant advancement proposed by the study is the refinement of the concept of decoupling within institutional theory. It highlights that decoupling should not be seen as a binary condition but rather as a continuum influenced by resource adequacy and stakeholder synergy. In scenarios where resource constraints are pronounced, decoupling is rationalized as an organizational response to conflicting environmental pressures. Therefore, the explanatory capacity of institutional theory in understanding QA in developing nations lies not simply in recognizing decoupling but in predicting the conditions and mechanisms that allow it to persist. The second theoretical contribution of the study expands the Resource-Based View (RBV) to higher education quality assurance (QA) contexts. While RBV has primarily focused on organizational performance, its application to public higher education QA reveals that the VRIN (valuable, rare, inimitable, non-substitutable) framework is critical for assessing QA effectiveness in public universities. In Ethiopian public universities, key VRIN resources include qualified faculty with pedagogical training, functional laboratory equipment, reliable internet access, and efficient graduate tracking systems. These resources are distributed unevenly among institutions, which accounts for performance disparities, even when regulatory requirements are uniformly enforced. This insight challenges existing QA literature that assumes formal policy adoption alone will enhance educational quality in the absence of adequate resources. The third theoretical contribution involves incorporating the Quadruple Helix model into stakeholder theory to better understand QA effectiveness in developing country contexts. The study finds that failures in stakeholder synergy extend beyond the immediate university community, encompassing government bodies such as the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Education and Training Authority (ETA), as well as external stakeholders like employers, industry professionals, and civil society. This lack of industry engagement disconnects graduate competencies from labor market needs, hindering the quality assurance systems from producing graduates equipped with the skills employers demand. The study supports the Quadruple Helix model's assertion that sustainable innovation and quality improvement necessitate collaborative governance among academia, government, industry, and civil society.

This study offers several generalizations and knowledge claims about quality assurance (QA) in educational settings, particularly extending beyond Ethiopia to inform broader QA theory

and practice. It identifies three key mechanisms mediating the relationship between the adoption of formal QA policies and actual improvements in educational quality: decoupling (drawn from institutional theory), resource-driven capability (linked to resource-based view, or RBV), and stakeholder synergy (rooted in stakeholder theory). This framework shifts the focus from mere descriptions of QA implementation to understanding the causal pathways that either facilitate or hinder measurable educational improvements. Furthermore, if policies are not effectively implemented, simply having formal QA policies does not guarantee enhancements in educational quality, especially in resource-constrained environments. Instead, it emphasizes the necessity of adequate resources, robust implementation quality, and strong stakeholder collaboration. The implications for policy design are profound; without necessary resources, stakeholder engagement, and cultural transformation initiatives, mandated QA measures risk devolving into mere ceremonial compliance rather than yielding genuine quality improvements.

Lastly, the research introduces a context-specific strategic framework in the Ethiopian Public University Quality Enhancement (EPUQE) Framework. This framework synthesizes theoretical insights and empirical data into a set of actionable recommendations structured around five core pillars: Governance for Enhancement, Culture of Shared Ownership, Resourcing for Sustainability, Alignment with National and Global Agendas, and Intelligent Accountability. Together, these pillars provide a theoretically informed, context-sensitive roadmap aimed at transforming QA from mere symbolic compliance into a strategic driver of institutional improvement.

Generally, this study critically assesses quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopian public universities, highlighting a troubling trend where symbolic compliance has supplanted genuine improvement. The research indicates that despite the existence of formal QA structures, there is no tangible progress in enhancing graduate competence, employability, or stakeholder satisfaction. This stagnation is attributed to a low-effectiveness equilibrium maintained by three primary mechanisms: the disconnection between formal policies and their practical implementation (as explained by institutional theory), resource-driven capability deficits that obstruct the transformation of inputs into effective processes (rooted in Resource-Based View theory), and failures in stakeholder synergy that undermine the quality of outcomes (as discussed in stakeholder theory). The study contributes to the theoretical discourse by emphasizing that the effectiveness of QA is contingent not on the presence of

formal policies alone, but also on the quality of their execution, the adequacy of available resources, and the robustness of stakeholder collaboration. Moreover, the implications of these findings extend beyond Ethiopia, providing insights for QA theory and practice in other resource-constrained, post-conflict higher education systems experiencing rapid growth and reform. To avoid maintaining a facade of compliance that lacks substantive effect, the study outlines the need for targeted interventions to address the issues of decoupling by minimizing isomorphic pressures and fostering internal commitment, remedying resource shortages through enhanced governmental funding or strategic allocation, and enhancing stakeholder collaboration via formal feedback mechanisms and governance structures.
The proposed EPUQE Framework offers a systematic and context-specific approach for transitioning QA from a mere symbolic function to a meaningful driver of institutional relevance and resilience. This transformation is essential for producing competent graduates and satisfied stakeholders while contributing to long-term socioeconomic growth. Ultimately, the study advocates for a paradigm shift from compliance-focused QA practices to a culture centered on quality enhancement, which is crucial for Ethiopian public universities to effectively fulfill their role in national development in the 21st century.

5.3 Recommendations

This systematic analysis of quality assurance (QA) practices across Ethiopian public universities reveals a system focused more on ceremonial compliance than on substantive quality enhancement. The findings highlight a significant disconnect between formal QA policies and actual academic practices, as well as resource-related limitations that hinder the effective translation of inputs into processes. Additionally, there are notable breakdowns in stakeholder cooperation that undermine the quality of outcomes. These interconnected issues contribute to a "low-effectiveness equilibrium," where QA systems consume resources without producing measurable improvements in graduate competence, employability, or stakeholder satisfaction. To move beyond this equilibrium and achieve meaningful quality enhancement that aligns with national development goals, the Ethiopian higher education sector needs a fundamental strategic shift from compliance-driven assurance to a culture focused on quality enhancement. The Ethiopian Public University Quality Enhancement (EPUQE) Framework offers a conceptual structure for this transformation, built around five interdependent pillars: Governance for Enhancement, Culture of Shared Ownership, Resourcing for Sustainability, Alignment with National and Global Agendas, and Intelligent

Accountability. These pillars, when implemented through the collaborative Quadruple Helix model, provide a coherent roadmap for establishing a dynamic, integrated, and sustainable QA ecosystem that positions quality as the driving force behind institutional relevance and societal contribution. The following evidence-based recommendations outline actionable strategies for each stakeholder group, grounded explicitly in the study's empirical findings. These recommendations are organized by priority of short-term versus long-term and high-impact versus supportive actions, responsible parties, and necessary conditions to enhance strategic depth and operational feasibility.

5.3.1 Ministry of Education (MoE): Strategic Enabler of Quality Outcomes

Recommendation 1: Transition from Centralized Control to Strategic Enablement through Differentiated Institutional Autonomy.

These findings indicate that the current centralized governance model, which emphasizes controlling inputs rather than being accountable for outcomes, obstructs efforts to enhance quality. Intended for the Ministry of Education to effectively shape Ethiopia's future competitiveness, it must shift from being a centralized controller of inputs to a strategic enabler of outcomes. This transition involves implementing a university differentiation framework through coherent policies and intelligent accountability, creating an environment that prioritizes quality improvement over mere compliance. Significant stakeholders in this process include the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Planning and Development, the Ministry of Finance, the Education and Training Authority, and university leadership consortia.

Recommendation 2: Design and Implement Performance-Sensitive Funding Model Aligned with Outcome Indicators

Short-term priorities for implementation strategies include developing transparent funding mechanisms that consider institutional mission differentiation. Research universities should receive higher weightings based on their research output, while applied universities should be prioritized for their graduate employment outcomes and technology transfer. The long-term priority involves creating a higher education investment fund dedicated to infrastructure modernization, digital transformation, and faculty development. Competitive grants should be allocated based on rigorous quality enhancement proposals rather than through a general

distribution. The main responsible parties for these initiatives are the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Planning and Development, and the Education and Training Authority. Essential conditions and resources for success include collecting baseline data on current funding allocations and institutional expenditures, building capacity for institutional finance officers to manage performance-based funding, and establishing independent verification mechanisms for outcome data.

Recommendation 3: Foster Quadruple Helix Collaborations through Structured Partnership Frameworks

The short-term goal of implementing supportive actions is to create national platforms for collaboratively designing curricula in key sectors aligned with Ethiopia's Ten-Year Plan (2021-2031). Designed for the long term, a priority is to establish a national industry-academia research and innovation fund. This fund will support collaborative applied research, technology transfer, and work-integrated learning programs, accompanied by a permanent annual budget for higher education. The main responsible entities for these initiatives are the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Innovation and Technology,and the Ministry of Labor and Skills. Key requirements for success include a policy framework for intellectual property and technology transfer; incentives for industry participation such as benefits for companies engaged in university partnerships; and dedicated coordination units at both ministerial and institutional levels.

5.3.2 Education and Training Authority (ETA)

Recommendation 4: Redesign External Quality Assurance Framework toward Enhancement-Led Institutional Reviews

Short-term priority actions involve replacing standardized audit specifications with a differentiated, enhancement-led approach to institutional appraisals. These protocols should acknowledge based on the unique missions of various institutions such as research, applied, comprehensive, technological, and educational universities and prioritize validating internal quality assurance systems instead of conducting parallel external inspections. For long-term priority actions, it is essential to mandate outcome-based accreditation criteria that require institutions to demonstrate graduate competence through standardized assessments, track employability with functional tracking systems, and assess stakeholder satisfaction through

systematic surveys. The primary responsible parties are the education and training authorities, in collaboration with university quality enhancement directors and international quality assurance bodies. The necessary conditions and resources include technical assistance for redesigning audit protocols, capacity building for education and training authority staff and peer reviewers in enhancement-led review methodologies, and consultation mechanisms to ensure stakeholder acceptance of the reformed approaches.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen Institutional Capacity through Context-Sensitive Guidelines and Professional Development

The immediate priority action for implementation is to establish a continuous capacity development program aimed at supporting ongoing professional development for university leaders, internal quality assurance (QA) enhancement directors, department heads, and academic staff. This program will prioritize newer universities where capacity deficits are most pronounced. For long-term implementation, the key action will be to create a peer reviewer training and certification program. This program will develop a pool of qualified external reviewers who possess expertise in pedagogical innovation, research relevance, and the integration of 21st-century skills. The main responsible parties for these actions will be the Education and Training Authority, in collaboration with university quality enhancement directorates, international QA bodies, and professional associations. The necessary resources include a dedicated budget allocation for professional development, partnerships with international QA organizations to facilitate expertise transfer, and institutional commitment to staff participation in development programs.

Recommendation 6: Establish Transparent National Qualifications Framework and Learning Outcomes Database

The primary short-term priority actions include developing and implementing a national qualifications framework. This framework should specify learning outcomes, credit systems, and qualification levels for all higher education programs. For the long-term priorities, actions focus on establishing a centralized database for learning outcomes that aggregates data on graduate competencies, employment outcomes, and employer satisfaction from all public universities. This database will enable evidence-based policy decisions and enhance public accountability. This data will transparently document institutional performance based on outcome indicators, addressing the study's findings that information on graduate employability and satisfaction is currently unavailable. The main responsible parties for these

actions are the Education and Training Authority, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labor and Skills, and the university institutional research units. To achieve these goals, the following conditions and resources are necessary: technical assistance for database design and implementation, data protection and privacy frameworks, and institutional capacity for data collection and reporting.

5.3.3 University Leadership

Recommendation 7: Embed Quality Assurance as Core Strategic Driver through Data-Informed Governance

The primary short-term actions needed for implementation are to establish integrated institutional research systems that track graduate competencies, employment outcomes, employer satisfaction, and stakeholder perceptions across all academic programs. It is essential to mandate the transparent integration of quality assurance (QA) data into strategic planning, resource allocation, and performance review processes. This requires institutional policies that explicitly link QA outcomes to annual budget decisions, faculty promotion criteria, and program viability assessments. For long-term actions, it is important to publish annual institutional quality reports that document progress on outcome indicators, initiatives for institutional improvement, and resource utilization. This initiative will foster transparency and accountability. The responsible parties for these actions will be the university academic vice presidents, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders. The necessary conditions and resources include investments in institutional research capacity such as staffing, technology, and data management systems to leadership development programs focused on data-informed decision-making, and a cultural shift within the organization towards evidence-based governance.

Recommendation 8: Institutionalize Collaborative Governance and Empower Academic Units

The focus is on replacing top-down quality assurance (QA) mandates with a collaborative governance model through institutionalized inclusive forums. This includes the establishment of joint QA committees that involve academic staff, department heads, students, and external stakeholders, ensuring meaningful participation in the development and practical implementation of QA policies. Additionally, It need to decentralize QA operations to individual academic units with clear mandates and resources for effective self-assessment.

This approach acknowledges the significant differences in implementation capacity and stakeholder engagement across various institutional levels. In the long term, priority actions will involve implementing departmental quality improvement plans with devolved budgets and accountability for outcome indicators. This will enable academic units to customize QA approaches according to their specific disciplinary contexts and available resources. The key responsible actors will be university leadership, including vice presidents, deans, and quality enhancement directors, in collaboration with academic departments. The necessary conditions and resources for this initiative include policy frameworks that support devolved decision-making, capacity-building support for department heads in QA leadership, and resource allocation models that facilitate unit-level quality initiatives.

Recommendation 9: Develop Comprehensive Faculty Development and Recognition Systems

Short-Term Priority Implementation Actions include establishing comprehensive faculty development programs that focus on contemporary teaching methods, student-centered assessment, digital pedagogy, and curriculum enhancement. These programs should emphasize effective teaching methods and balance theory with practice. Additionally, it is essential to review and revise appointment and promotion policies to recognize contributions to pedagogical innovation, curriculum development, and quality enhancement, along with research publications. In the long term, priority actions should involve creating institutional incentives and recognition systems that reward excellence in teaching, assessment, and student support. This could include teaching excellence awards, research-informed teaching grants, and professional development fellowships. The key actors responsible for these initiatives are university academic vice presidents, in collaboration with human resources directors, quality enhancement directors, and college deans. The necessary conditions and resources include a dedicated budget allocation for faculty development, partnerships with international universities and quality assurance bodies for program design, and active faculty engagement in the co-design and implementation of programs.

5.3.4 Academic Staff and Department Heads

Recommendation 10: Embrace Professional Responsibility through Continuous Improvement Mindset

The immediate priority for implementation actions involves active participation from academic staff and department heads in peer review processes. They should provide constructive feedback on teaching practices, assessment methods, and curriculum design. Additionally, department heads should take the lead in developing departmental Quality Assurance (QA) improvement plans that emphasize student-centered learning, authentic assessment, and the cultivation of 21st-century skills, including digital literacy and principles of sustainability. For long-term priorities, academic staff should commit to ongoing professional development in contemporary teaching methodologies, assessment design, and curriculum innovation. The key individuals responsible for these actions include individual academic staff members, department heads, and departmental QA committees. To support these initiatives, certain conditions and resources are necessary: institutional backing for participation in professional development, a commitment from departmental leadership to treat QA as a shared responsibility, and allocated time within academic workloads for QA activities.

Recommendation 11: Proactive Engagement in Curriculum Co-creation and Program Review

The immediate priority for implementation involves participating in structured program reviews that systematically integrate feedback from employers and industry into curriculum revisions. Additionally, it will co-create curricula with industry partners through formal advisory mechanisms, ensuring that the content is developed with input from the Quadruple Helix collaboration model. This approach aims to equip graduates with the technical skills, practical experience, and positive attitudes needed for successful employment. In our long-term priorities, It aim to develop and implement authentic assessment methods that evaluate graduate competencies in relation to labor market requirements. Key stakeholders in this process include academic staff, department heads, college curriculum committees, and industry advisory boards. To achieve these goals, It need certain conditions and resources in place: institutional policies that mandate industry engagement, support from departmental leadership for curriculum revision, and incentives for faculty to participate in collaborative curriculum development.

5.3.5 Students and Student Councils

Recommendation 12: Institutionalize Student Voice in Quality Governance Structures

In short-term priority actions, grant student council representatives' full voting membership on key institutional committees, including senates, curriculum review bodies, quality assurance panels, and accreditation self-study teams. Furthermore, establishing structured, evidence-based feedback mechanisms, including focus groups, mid-module discussions, and well-designed student surveys that move beyond end-of-semester evaluations to provide timely, actionable insights on teaching quality, curriculum relevance, and learning resources. In the long term, priority actions are to develop and implement student-led quality improvement initiatives, including peer learning support programs, student evaluation of teaching systems, and student participation in institutional research on graduate outcomes. The responsible actors are student council representatives, university leadership, academic affairs units, and quality enhancement directorates. The required conditions/resources are institutional commitment to student participation; training for student representatives in governance and quality assurance processes; and resource allocation for student-led quality initiatives.

Recommendation 13: Develop Student Ownership of Learning and Career Readiness

Short-term implementation strategies are that students should actively participate in tracer studies, alumni surveys, and graduate employment tracking to provide longitudinal data on program effectiveness. In addition, students should develop self-regulatory and metacognitive skills through engagement with pedagogical innovations, support services, and community-based projects, fostering the adaptability required for successful school-to-work transitions. Similarly, in long-term implementation actions, students should uphold academic integrity, collaborate constructively with institutional leadership, and contribute to a dynamic academic environment that meets lifelong learning and career readiness needs. Responsible actors are individual students, student councils, student support services, and academic advisors. The required conditions/resources are orientation programs on academic and career development; institutional support for student-led learning initiatives; and recognition of student contributions to quality improvement.

5.3.6 Industry, Civil Society, and Employers

Recommendation 14: Transform from External Observer to Integrated Strategic Partner

The primary short-term implementation strategies involve establishing formal university-industry advisory boards for each academic program or college. These boards will operate with clear mandates, adequate resources, and accountability structures to co-design curricula, define competency requirements, and assess graduates' readiness for employment. Additionally, it is essential to provide robust experiential learning opportunities, such as structured internships, applied capstone projects, and work-integrated learning programs. This approach addresses the finding that graduates often lack the practical experience and technical skills necessary for the job market. In the long term, a key priority is to invest in collaborative applied research and community development projects that create real-world learning environments for students while tackling genuine societal challenges. The main responsible participants in these efforts include industry associations, employer representatives, professional bodies, civil society organizations, and university-industry liaison offices. To facilitate this collaboration, the following conditions and resources are required: policy frameworks that encourage industry-academia partnerships, including incentives involved in these collaborations; dedicated liaison units at universities; and a mutual commitment to sustained engagement.

Recommendation 15: Provide Actionable Feedback on Graduate Competencies and Program Relevance

The short-term implementation strategies involve establishing systematic mechanisms to provide honest and actionable feedback on graduate competencies, program relevance, and curriculum gaps. This can be achieved through employer satisfaction surveys, tracking graduate performance, and incorporating industry input into program reviews. This approach addresses the study's finding that there are currently no effective feedback loops between universities and labor markets. In addition, it is crucial to collaborate with universities to design authentic assessment methods that evaluate competencies relevant to labor market needs. This will ensure that graduates possess the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for successful employment. In the long term, it is essential to engage in national quality assurance (QA) review processes, including program accreditation, institutional audits, and curriculum evaluations. This will ensure that employer perspectives are systematically integrated into quality assurance systems. The key actors responsible for these actions include employers, industry associations, professional bodies, and university quality enhancement directorates. The main resources required for success are a commitment from industry to

engage consistently, university openness to external input, and structured mechanisms for incorporating feedback.

Generally, successful implementation of these recommendations will have a transformative impact at multiple levels of the Ethiopian higher education system. At the institutional level, universities will build the capacity to implement QA processes effectively, resulting in graduates with competencies that meet labor market requirements. At the national level, the higher education system will align with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), Ethiopia's Ten-Year Plan (2021-2031), and the African Union's Agenda 2063, contributing to economic development and social transformation. At the sectoral level, Quadruple Helix collaborations will promote innovation, technology transfer, and evidence-based policy development, positioning universities as engines of sustainable development. At the stakeholder level, enhanced collaboration among government, academia, industry, and civil society will create a dynamic ecosystem where quality is viewed as a shared responsibility rather than mere bureaucratic compliance.

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Annexes and Appendix

Appendix A

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF OF EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND MANGMENT

Questionnaire for Academic Staff/Department Heads

Dear Respondent,

I appreciate your willingness to participate in this research study. My name is Abera Bereda Chari. I am currently a DEd student at AAU studying educational policy and strategic management. I am conducting a study entitled "Practices of Quality Assurances in Ethiopia Comprehensive Public Universities" under the supervision of Dr. Befekadu Zeleke (associate professor) and Dr. Dejene Niguse. The purpose of this research is to explore the current practice of quality assurance in comprehensive public universities in Ethiopia.

Your participation in this research project involves completing a series of structured questionnaires. Your participation is strictly voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the research project. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable. The information you provide in the questionnaire will be treated with the utmost confidentiality, and your anonymity is fully guaranteed.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no actual or potential risks that could affect your physical, psychological, political, legal, or social well-being, or that of others, which could lead to your exclusion from this research project. Additionally, there will be no compensation for participation.

This study may benefit the sharing of your institution's quality assurance practices. You will also have the chance to contribute your insights and ideas to discussions on quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education institutions (HEIs). The results of this study will be made accessible to both policymakers and institutional leaders for future planning and decision-making. Furthermore, the findings will be published in a Doctor of Education (DEd) thesis and may also be presented at public forums.

I hope that you will be able to take the time and comprehensively complete this questionnaire. You can use a "(√)" tick mark to indicate your responses for items with alternative responses. Please briefly state your responses to the open-ended item.

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this research project.

Yours sincerely,

Abera Bereda Chari, DEd Candidate
Department of Educational Planning & Management
Addis Ababa University

Direction I. GENERAL Information

1.1. Sex: ☐ Male ☐ Female

1.2. Educational qualification: ☐ Diploma ☐ BA/B.Sc./MD ☐ MA/M.Sc. PhD ☐ Others (specify)

1.3 Academic Rank: ☐ Graduate Assistant ☐ Lecturer ☐ MD Speciality ☐ Assistant professor ☐ Associate Professor ☐ Professor ☐ others (specify)

1.4. Total experience ☐ 1-5 years ☐ 6-10 years ☐ 11-15 Years ☐ 16-20 years ☐ 21-25 years ☐ 26-30 years ☐ Above 30 years

1.5 Field of Study ☐ Education ☐ Natural science ☐ Social Science ☐ Health ☐ Business and Economics

Direction II: Closed-ended Questions: Please read carefully and tick (Ö) your choice in the box provided.

Part one: The current status of the practices of quality assurance in your universities

1.1. Concept of quality

1. to a very small extent, 2. to a lesser extent, 3. to a medium extent, 4. to a great extent, 5. to a very great extent

.

	To what extent do you believe the following concepts of quality define or describe the current quality assurance practices at your university?	1	2	3	4	5
1	Quality as fitness for purpose					
2	Quality as value for money					
3	Quality as excellence					
4	Quality as perfection					
5	Quality is the transformation of learners.					

1.2. The availability of inputs for quality assurance practice

1.2.1 The existence of QA policies and related factors (Please tick ((√)) your choice: 1. to a very small extent, 2. to a lesser extent, 3. to a medium extent, 4. to a great extent, 5. to a very great extent

	To what extent are the following components of a quality assurance system available at your university?	1	2	3	4	5
1	Quality assurance policies, manuals, and guidelines are readily accessible.					
2	The policies and guidelines are developed under national and international standards to support both current and future development.					
3	Key performance indicators, or standards for teaching, learning, research, and community services, were developed.					
4	An audit unit or committee was established at the institutional, college, and department levels.					
5	An institutional structure is in place, with designated responsibilities for quality enhancement within each college and department.					
6	Developed policies and standards are implemented to identify quality assurance issues based on national priorities and societal needs.					
7	The university has established an information system (database) for the effective management of quality assurance.					
8	The quality assurance practices at your university promote shared beliefs, vision, culture, and values across departments.					

1.2.2 Availability, and Selection of Human Resources. Please tick (✓) your choice in the box provided below: 1. Very Dissatisfied 2. Dissatisfied 3. Neutral 4. Satisfied 5. Very Satisfied

	How satisfied are you with the following aspects of quality assurance practices at your university?	1	2	3	4	5
1	The availability of a sufficient number of qualified academic staff to support programs, as well as an appropriate staff-to-student ratio for each program (quantitative aspects of academic staff).					
2	The suitability of the teaching staff, considering their diverse qualifications and experience (qualitative aspects of academic staff).					
3	The existence of clear, well-established, and effectively implemented policies for the appointment, evaluation, and promotion of staff.					
4	The use of professional development for staff as a strategy to ensure quality at our university.					

1.2.3 Governance and Management System of Current Quality Assurance Practices (Please tick ((√)) your choice in the box provided.) 1. Very dissatisfied 2. Dissatisfied 3. Medium 4. Satisfied 5. Very Satisfied

	How do you evaluate your university's governance and management system regarding the following issues?	1	2	3	4	5
1	At my institution, management at all levels shares a common vision for enhancing quality assurance (QA) practices.					
2	How appropriate and effective is the organizational structure in facilitating the successful implementation of QA practices?					
3	What are the responsibilities and duties of management bodies, and how effectively do they communicate to ensure QA practices?					
4	The government should involve academic staff, students, and other stakeholders in decision-making processes to enhance clarity and transparency, thereby ensuring quality assurance.					
5	What is the level of commitment and support from institutional leaders towards quality assurance practices?					

1.2.4 The accessibility of infrastructures and learning resources used for practices of quality assurance practices. (Please tick ((√)) your choice in the box provided. (1. Very poor 2. Poor 3. Average 4. Good 5. Very good.))

	How do you evaluate the following educational resources and facilities that enhance QA practices adequately available in your university?	1	2	3	4	5
	Facilities					
1	Library resources					
2	Computing facilities, ICT					
3	Internet services (Smart)					
4	Laboratories					
5	Physical plant facility					
6	Student organizations and recreational facilities					
7	Class size and lecture hall					
8	Other learning facilities (language labs & any other material used for classes, etc.)					

1.3. The practices of quality assurance concerning quality processes

1.3.1 The relevance of curriculum for quality assurance practices (Please tick ((√)) your choice in the box provided. 1. Very poor 2. Poor 3. Average 4. Good. 5. Very good.

	How do you evaluate the support for the program's relevance and curriculum development to ensure quality assurance practices at your university?	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

1	Conduct a needs assessment for program and curriculum design.					
2	Ensure that curriculum development is grounded in appropriate goals and objectives, considering both national and international standards, as well as current and future developments.					
3	Assess the level of involvement of external professionals and employers in the curriculum design, evaluation, and review process.					
4	Evaluate how well selected and organized the curricular content is.					
5	Examine the organization and selection of curricular learning experiences.					
6	Implement regular evaluations and reviews of the program and curriculum.					

1.3.2 The practices of teaching, learning, assessment, research, and community engagement for quality assurance practices (Please tick ((√)) your choice in the box provided. 1. Very poor 2. Poor 3. Average 4. Good 5. Very good

	To what extent do your university's teaching, learning, research, assessment processes, and community engagement enhance the quality assurance practices?	1	2	3	4	5
1	The appropriateness, variety, and level of innovation in teaching methods.					
2	The balance between theory and practice (utilizing a hands-on approach) in natural sciences and other fields.					
3	The assessment of learning outcomes.					
4	The assessment policy, procedures, and criteria for grading ensure that students are evaluated fairly based on standardized criteria.					
5	The effectiveness of communication regarding assessment policies and procedures with students.					
6	The university fosters a favorable working environment and culture that supports staff in enhancing the quality of teaching, learning, assessment, research, and community engagement.					
7	The ETA quality assurance policies serve to improve the quality of teaching, learning, assessment, research, and community engagement.					

1.3.3 Student selection and admission-related policy factors. Please tick ((√)) your choice in the box provided. 1. Very poor 2. Poor 3. Average 4. Good 5. Very good.

	How do you evaluate the following educational resources and facilities that enhance QA practices adequately available in your university?	1	2	3	4	5
	Student learning support services					
1	Counselling services					
2	Remedial courses					
3	Course materials					
4	Financial support					
5	Alumni surveys (tracer study about employability)					

1.4. The practices of quality assurance concerning quality outcome factors

(1. Very less 2. Less 3. Neutral 4. Great 5. Very great)

	How effective are the outcomes of quality assurance practices at your university?	1	2	3	4	5
1	Retention, progression, and graduation rates across various academic levels.					
2	Students' performance on exit examinations.					
3	The acquisition of essential knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies by graduates.					

4	Reports from graduates regarding their satisfaction.					
5	The employability rates of graduates.					

Part Two: ***Quality assurance mechanisms are practiced in public universities of Ethiopia.***

2.1. Practicality of Quality Assurance Techniques and Mechanisms (Please tick ((√)) your choice in the box provided.) 1. Yes. 2. No. 3. I do not know.

	How effective were the following quality assurance mechanisms practiced at your university?	**1**	**2**	**3**
1	Institutional self-assessment Institutional audit			
2	Peer review			
3	External audit			
4	Accreditation			

Part Three: ***The extent to which the stakeholders play their roles and responsibilities to enhance the practices of QA in comprehensive public universities***

3.1. Roles and Responsibilities Community of the University (Please tick ((√)) your choice in the box provided.) 1. Very less 2. Less than 3. Medium 4. Great extent 5. Very great)

	To what extent do you believe the university community plays a significant role in quality assurance (QA) practices at your university?	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1	The university community has actively participated in, committed to, and collaborated in the QA practice.					
2	Members of the university community participate in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of planned QA activities.					
3	They also engage in the monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum development process to ensure quality assurance standards are met.					
4	There is active participation in efforts to improve teaching, learning, research, and community service, all aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of quality assurance.					

3.2. Roles and responsibilities of ETA to enhance the QA practices.

1. Very little 2. Less than 3. Neutral 4. Great. 5. Very great.

	To what extent do you believe that the External Transparency Authority (ETA) plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality assurance (QA) practices at your university?	1	2	3	4	5
1	Approves the preparation and implementation of policies, standards, procedural systems, guidelines, and checklists within the institution.					
2	Monitors and evaluates the implementation of the quality assurance approach, including accreditation and external quality audits.					
3	Conducts continuous and systematic follow-ups on feedback provided regarding the institution's quality assurance mechanisms, such as feedback from external audits.					
4	Facilitates the external quality audit team in assessing the quality of public higher education.					
5	Receives and addresses grievances and complaints related to the education and training institution.					

3.3. Roles and responsibilities of the MoE to assure quality

(1. Very little 2. Less than 3. Neutral 4. Great 5. Very great)

	To what extent do you believe the Ministry of Education (MoE) plays a critical role in quality assurance (QA) practices at your university?	1	2	3	4	5
1	It sets the direction for the preparation and implementation of policies, standards, procedural systems, guidelines, and checklists					

	within the institutions.					
2	It facilitates collaboration with external stakeholders of the institution.					
3	It works in conjunction with the Education Training Authority (ETA) to enhance the effectiveness of quality assurance practices in public universities.					
4	It addresses grievances and complaints related to education and training institutions, providing appropriate solutions.					
5	It facilitates both long-term and short-term professional training for academic staff in a local and global context.					

Part 4: ***The main challenges that are hindering the practices of quality assurance*** *in public universities in Ethiopia***. (1. to a much lesser extent, 2. to a lesser extent, 3. to a medium extent, 4. to a great extent, 5. to a very great extent)**

	To what extent do the following factors hinder the implementation of quality assurance at your university?	1	2	3	4	5
1	External pressures, such as political influences.					
2	Low willingness, commitment, and support from the university community.					
3	Inadequate support from the Quality Assurance Authority (ETA).					
4	Insufficient resources, including physical, financial, and expert support within the institution.					
5	Students often demonstrate low commitment, lack of academic preparedness, and minimal engagement in their learning.					

Part Five: Open-Ended Questionnaire

5.1. Do you believe the requirements of the quality assurance system set by ETA are acceptable and implementable at your university? If your response is "yes," please explain your reasoning.

_____

5.2. In your opinion, what are the major deficiencies and gaps in the ETA quality assurance system?

_____

5.3. In your opinion, what are the main internal and external factors that influence the practice of quality assurance at your university?

5.3.1. Internal factors:

_____

5.3.2. External factors:

_____

5.4. How do you think the quality assurance practices of the current educational processes could be improved at your university?

_____

THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

Appendix B

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF OF EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE STUDY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND MANGMENT

Interview guide for academic vice presidents, college deans, and internal quality enhancement directors

Part I: Current Status of Quality Assurance Practices at Your University

1. Availability of Quality Inputs for Quality Assurance: Discuss the availability of essential inputs for quality assurance practices at your university. Consider factors such as policies, human resources, governance and management systems, infrastructure, and learning resources.

2. Quality Processes in Quality Assurance: Explain the quality assurance practices related to curriculum development at your university. Address aspects such as teaching, learning, assessment, and research, as well as community engagement and student selection and admission policies. Include factors like counselling services, remedial courses, course materials, financial support, and alumni surveys (tracer studies on employability).

3. Quality Outcomes in Quality Assurance: Describe the practices related to quality outcomes in quality assurance. Focus on outcome factors such as student retention, graduation rates, skill development, and employability.

Part Two: ***Quality assurance mechanisms are practised in public universities of Ethiopia.***

4. Explain the practicality of quality assurance techniques and mechanisms in your university in relation to institutional self-assessment, institutional audit, peer review, external audit, and accreditation.

Part Three: The Role of Stakeholders in Enhancing Quality Assurance Practices in Public Universities

5. Describe the roles and responsibilities of the university community concerning implementation, commitment, collaboration, curriculum development, teaching, learning, research, and community service in fostering effective quality assurance practices.

6. Roles and Responsibilities of the Education and Training Authority (ETA) to Enhance Quality Assurance (QA) Practices in Your University:

A. Prepare and implement policies, standards, procedural systems, guidelines, and checklists within the institution.

B. Monitor and evaluate the implementation of the quality assurance approach, including accreditation processes and external quality audits.

C. Conduct continuous and systematic follow-ups on feedback related to the institution's quality assurance mechanisms, such as feedback from external audits.

D. Facilitate the external quality audit team in assessing the quality of public higher education.

E. Receive and address grievances and complaints related to the education and training institution.

7. Explain the roles and responsibilities of the Ministry of Education (MoE) in ensuring quality at your university:

A. Establishing the direction for developing and implementing policies, standards, procedural systems, guidelines, and checklists within the institutions.

B. Facilitating collaboration with external stakeholders of the institution.

C. Working together with the Education Training Authority (ETA) to improve the effectiveness of quality assurance practices in public universities.

D. Addressing grievances and complaints related to education and training institutions and providing appropriate solutions.

E. Coordinating both long-term and short-term professional training for academic staff in local and global contexts.

Part 4: Main Challenges Hindering Quality Assurance Practices in Public Universities in Ethiopia

8. Please identify the key challenges that affect quality assurance practices at your university:

A. External pressures, including political influences.

B. A lack of willingness, commitment, and support from the university community.

C. Inadequate support from the Quality Assurance Authority (ETA).

D. Insufficient resources, including physical, financial, and expert support within the institution.

E. Students often demonstrate low commitment, a lack of academic preparedness, and minimal engagement in their learning.

F. Other challenges.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!

Appendix C

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF OF EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE STUDY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND MANGMENT

Focus group discussion for students' councils

Part I: Current Status of Quality Assurance Practices at Your University

1. Discuss the availability of essential inputs for quality assurance practices at your university. Consider factors such as policies, human resources, governance and management systems, infrastructure, and learning resources.

2. Explain the quality assurance practices related to curriculum development at your university. Address aspects such as teaching, learning, assessment, and research, as well as community engagement and student selection and admission policies. Include factors like counselling services, remedial courses, course materials, financial support, and alumni surveys (tracer studies on employability).

3. Describe the practices related to quality outcomes in quality assurance. Focus on outcome factors such as student retention, graduation rates, skill development, and employability.

4: Main Challenges Hindering Quality Assurance Practices in your Universities

4.1 Please identify the key challenges that affect quality assurance practices at your university:

A. External pressures, including political influences.

B. A lack of willingness, commitment, and support from the university community.

C. Insufficient resources, including physical, financial, and expert support within the institution.

D. Students often demonstrate low commitment, a lack of academic preparedness, and minimal engagement in their learning.

E. Other challenges.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!