Rethinking Higher Education Quality in a Rapidly Changing World

Educational Purpose, Institutional Transformation, and the New Quality Imperative

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Abstract

Higher education is expanding while its purposes, delivery arrangements, and grounds of public legitimacy are being renegotiated. Neither formal accreditation, technological sophistication, graduate employment nor institutional prestige can independently establish that a university provides a high-quality education. This chapter develops a multidimensional account of quality grounded in educational purpose and attentive to the interconnected conditions under which academic promises become credible practice. It critically examines the historical purposes of universities; competing conceptions of quality; Africa's expanding and unequal higher-education landscape, with Rwanda as the principal policy context; digital and artificial-intelligence transformation; and pressures arising from geopolitical, environmental, economic, and institutional disruption. A critical interpretive synthesis of selected scholarly and official documentary sources brings critical realism, institutional theory, socio-technical thinking, constructive alignment, and evaluative argumentation into a complementary analytical architecture. The resulting six-domain Quality Concepts and Evaluation Matrix differentiates regulatory compliance, academic quality, educational effectiveness, learner protection, institutional sustainability, and public value. A related evidence-traceability logic explains why a document, performance measure, or accreditation outcome must be interpreted relative to a specific claim, normative source, implementation context, and justified evaluative warrant. The chapter identifies key safeguards against compliance ceremonialism, technological determinism, misleading employability measures, and inequitable expansion. It offers practical diagnostic questions and an explicitly proposed framework for institutions and reviewers without presenting that framework as regulator-approved or empirically validated. The argument establishes educational purpose as the organising criterion for the volume's subsequent regulatory, institutional, curricular, and accreditation analyses.

Keywords: higher education quality; educational purpose; African higher education; Rwanda; digital transformation; quality governance; evidence traceability

1.1 Introduction: The changing environment of higher education

A university can hold an accreditation certificate, employ distinguished academics, advertise an advanced learning-management system and produce impressive employment statistics while still failing to deliver an intellectually demanding, inclusive and sustainable education to a substantial proportion of its students. The opposite possibility also deserves attention: a modestly resourced institution may support serious scholarship, meaningful learning and responsible community engagement without enjoying the prestige associated with international rankings. These are not anomalies at the margins of university evaluation. They expose a foundational difficulty: quality in higher education is a judgement about purposes achieved under defensible conditions, rather than a property established by one credential, asset, metric or reputation.

The difficulty becomes more pressing as higher education moves simultaneously towards greater participation, digital provision, accelerated technological change and more complex public accountability. UNESCO's 2026 global trends report records 269 million tertiary students in 2024 and a global gross enrolment ratio of approximately 44%, while identifying sharply uneven participation across regions (Gutović et al., 2026). Growth creates opportunities for intellectual participation and social mobility, but also exposes tensions between available resources and educational commitments. The expansion of programmes, institutions and credentials does not automatically increase the quality of graduates' knowledge or the trustworthiness of academic awards. Institutions must show what students are expected to learn, how they are enabled to learn it, whether they actually demonstrate it, and whether the arrangements can be maintained over time.

This chapter argues that higher-education quality should be understood as a multidimensional, purpose-referenced and evidence-dependent public judgement. The phrase *purpose-referenced* means that evaluation must begin with an explicit account of what a university or programme is supposed to achieve. *Multidimensional* means that no single legitimate interest, including statutory conformity or labour-market relevance, exhausts the educational undertaking. *Evidence-dependent* means that claimed quality must be supported by material capable of demonstrating more than institutional aspiration. *Public judgement* recognises that academic institutions exercise responsibilities affecting learners, employers, professional communities, governments and society, even when their missions and ownership arrangements differ.

The position avoids two unsatisfactory extremes. A purely managerial approach can mistake conformity with auditable procedures for genuine learning. An entirely relativist approach, by contrast, can allow each institution to determine quality solely by reference to its preferred mission, leaving learners without meaningful minimum protections and public authorities unable to defend academic standards. Harvey and Green's (1993) enduring account of competing quality conceptions, and Harvey's (2024) reconsideration three decades later, demonstrate why definitions of quality cannot be separated from power, values and the criteria through which evaluation occurs. The task is not to abolish disagreement, but to make evaluative purposes, evidence and reasoning sufficiently explicit to support responsible decisions.

The chapter proceeds from first principles to operational implications. It examines the educational purposes that justify universities; analyses different quality concepts; situates these concepts in African and Rwandan developments; evaluates massification, digital transformation and emerging systemic pressures; and develops a theoretical account of the relationships among institutional capability, programme assurance and regulatory judgement. It concludes with a proposed six-domain evaluation matrix intended to inform institutional self-review and professional discussion. Subsequent chapters take its philosophical account of quality into the separate questions of legal authority, institutional capability, curriculum, delivery, assurance, accreditation and resilience.

Methodologically, this chapter is a critical conceptual and documentary synthesis, not a new empirical survey or a completed systematic review. Its evidence base comprises the author's 2026 doctoral manuscript and an editorial blueprint used as antecedent project documents, together with selected established scholarship and identifiable official publications of UNESCO, the African Union, Rwanda's Ministry of Education and Higher Education Council, and international quality-assurance bodies. The selection is purposive rather than exhaustive: sources were retained for foundational conceptual relevance, direct regulatory or policy authority, or their capacity to challenge the chapter’s principal propositions. No reproducible database search log was generated specifically for this chapter; consequently no screening totals, exhaustive coverage claims, field observations or causal effects are asserted. Official sources establish their own stated requirements or policy priorities, not evidence that those requirements have been fully implemented at every institution. Sources and links are recorded in the references; the conceptual synthesis is the author's interpretation, not an official regulatory determination.

The question of educational purpose is not adequately settled by listing the outputs that institutions can count. Biesta (2009) distinguishes qualification, socialisation and subjectification as educational functions that may coexist without being reducible to one another. For higher education, qualification includes the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and professional competence, socialisation includes entry into scholarly and professional traditions, and subjectification concerns the development of independent agency and judgement. The distinction complicates any quality framework centred exclusively on graduate wages, completion or research income. Those indicators may be important, but they do not capture every legitimate intellectual and civic responsibility. It also demonstrates why a university must justify not only whether its declared outcomes have been reached, but whether they collectively represent an education worthy of a higher qualification.

1.2 Historical and philosophical purposes of higher education: Knowledge, truth, intellectual formation, professional competence, and public service

The university has never had only one purpose. Its historical forms have combined the preservation and questioning of knowledge, intellectual formation, preparation for learned professions, research, cultural transmission, social recognition and service to political or religious authorities. Different eras have weighted these purposes differently. Medieval European institutions were shaped by traditions of theology, law, medicine and the liberal arts; later research universities intensified the connection between systematic inquiry and advanced teaching; modern mass higher-education systems added expectations of economic development, social inclusion and internationally mobile qualifications. This familiar European genealogy does not exhaust the history of advanced learning. African scholarly and religious institutions, indigenous systems of knowledge transmission and later colonial and postcolonial universities had distinctive relationships to language, authority, knowledge, state formation and collective life. Treating one historical model as the universal origin of higher learning would obscure that plurality.

It is important, however, not to romanticise a unified historical university ideal. The development of universities reflects unequal access to learning, changing conceptions of authority and continuing disputes over who may produce legitimate knowledge. Teferra and Altbach (2004) show that African higher education has had to negotiate simultaneous responsibilities for nation building, research, professional education and expanding access under difficult resource conditions. Its institutions have therefore developed in interaction with international scholarly norms and locally specific social, political and economic demands. The appropriate philosophical question is not whether an African institution reproduces a supposedly universal European model, but whether its mission, teaching, inquiry and institutional conduct meet defensible academic standards while addressing the population and context it actually serves.

These historical trajectories matter because present-day discussions of quality often privilege the purposes most easily converted into performance indicators. Research output, student numbers, income generation, completion, graduate employment and international partnerships are comparatively countable. Truth-seeking, intellectual humility, moral discernment, disciplinary judgement, civic responsibility and the ability to reconsider one's assumptions are harder to measure. Their relative invisibility does not make them dispensable. A university that systematically discourages criticism or rewards the production of plausible but unreliable knowledge may perform well on administrative dashboards while betraying an essential scholarly function. The freedom and responsibility to interrogate claims remain constitutive of advanced learning even in institutions with primarily professional or applied missions.

The university's responsibility to knowledge and truth begins with a commitment to enabling learners to distinguish defensible knowledge from assertion, rhetoric, misinformation and authority unaccompanied by reasons. This obligation does not imply that all disciplines employ identical methods or that every important proposition admits

experimental verification. Mathematics, historical inquiry, clinical sciences, theology, engineering, law and the arts have different standards of argument and evidence. The common educational obligation is that claims be open to reasoned examination under standards appropriate to the field. Academic quality consequently includes epistemic integrity: transparent methods, intellectual honesty, openness to criticism and responsible interpretation of uncertainty. When generative AI makes fluent language inexpensive, this requirement becomes more rather than less important.

Intellectual formation is equally fundamental because a degree is not merely the aggregation of course credits. It represents a developmental journey through which learners acquire conceptual depth, methodological discipline, progressively greater independence and the capacity to make reasoned judgements. Such formation requires well-sequenced curricula, sustained scholarly engagement, feedback and assessment that invite explanation rather than simple reproduction. Biggs's (1996) constructive-alignment principle is relevant because desired learning cannot be inferred from module titles: outcomes, learning activities and assessment tasks must generate consistent expectations. Yet alignment is not sufficient if learning outcomes themselves are narrow, trivial or detached from disciplinary standards. Quality therefore requires scrutiny both of alignment and of the intellectual worth of what is aligned.

Professional competence provides another legitimate reason for advanced study, since many learners reasonably expect higher education to prepare them for economically meaningful work. Governments require qualified teachers, engineers, health professionals, accountants and researchers; employers need graduates capable of applying knowledge under uncertainty. Professional preparation must nonetheless resist reduction to immediate employer preference. Work changes, technologies become obsolete and specific tasks are automated. Robust graduate capability therefore includes conceptual understanding, transferable reasoning, communication, ethical responsibility and the ability to learn beyond initial qualification. Employability should be interpreted as a contribution to durable professional agency, not merely as the attainment of any paid work shortly after graduation.

Beyond these individual and professional purposes, universities shape public health, legal institutions, teaching quality, democratic deliberation, scientific capacity and cultural memory. The International Commission on the Futures of Education (2021) presents education as a public and common good, reinforcing the proposition that educational institutions have responsibilities that exceed private credential transactions. This does not require denying the legitimate private benefits of higher education. Graduates may obtain greater income, professional status and personal fulfilment, while communities gain research, skilled service and informed citizenship. Public and private benefits coexist, but they need not coincide. A university can maximise high-fee enrolments or commercially valuable programmes while neglecting under-served communities or socially essential disciplines.

The ethical dimension of higher education is expressed in the decisions that graduates make and in the conduct of the institution itself. Advanced study involves decisions with consequences for patients, clients, students, workers, ecosystems and public resources. Curriculum ethics cannot therefore be contained in an optional lecture while the institution tolerates academic dishonesty, exploitative working arrangements or opaque admissions. The ethical dimension concerns both what is taught and how an institution conducts itself. Learners are educated partly through their encounter with the lived institution: whether feedback is fair, decisions are explained, diverse students are supported and scholarly disagreement is treated responsibly. Institutional conduct is therefore an educational influence, not simply an administrative backdrop.

The relationship among these purposes is neither automatically harmonious nor permanently antagonistic. Employability and intellectual formation may reinforce each other when professional programmes require rigorous inquiry and ethical judgement. Research and teaching may reinforce each other when discoveries inform curricula and students participate meaningfully in inquiry. Yet tensions arise when research incentives displace undergraduate teaching, revenue imperatives drive admission beyond feasible capacity, or externally prescribed competencies

narrow the space for critical scholarship. Such tensions require governance capable of negotiating priorities rather than assuming that a single performance indicator speaks for all educational purposes.

The first evaluative principle follows: before deciding whether a programme is good, an institution or reviewer should articulate its educational, scholarly, professional, ethical and public commitments and distinguish legitimate institutional differentiation from deficiencies below minimum academic or learner-protection thresholds. Purpose is a necessary reference point, but an institution's chosen purpose cannot legitimise poor assessment, unsafe practical training, inaccessible student support or misleading claims about the recognition of qualifications. Educational mission guides judgement within, not outside, applicable academic and legal obligations.

1.3 Competing conceptions of higher-education quality: Excellence, fitness for purpose, transformation, accountability, relevance, and public value

The term *quality* is often used as though universities, regulators, students and employers already agree on its meaning. Harvey and Green (1993) famously distinguished quality as exceptional, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation. The classification remains useful because each understanding changes the evidence required for assessment. A high admissions threshold might support a claim of exclusivity; reliable administrative processes might support procedural consistency; employment data might support an aspect of vocational relevance; sophisticated learning evidence might support transformation. None can be exchanged for another without an explicit argument. Harvey (2024) further emphasises the conceptual and epistemological complexities in attempts to define standards and assurance.

Excellence typically concerns distinction against a demanding benchmark. It can protect academic ambition against downward convergence, but its use becomes problematic when selectivity, wealth or international prestige are substituted for educational contribution. A university enrolling highly prepared students may produce impressive completion results with little demonstrable added learning; another serving students facing substantial disadvantage may make an exceptional educational contribution while obtaining less impressive raw scores. Excellence should therefore be assessed through the quality of educational processes, scholarly standards and demonstrable achievement, not merely through the inherited advantages of the institution or its entering cohort.

Consistency and conformance treat quality as meeting defined specifications reliably. They are indispensable where a student must be able to trust published course requirements, assessment rules, the accuracy of grades or the safety of laboratories and clinical placements. However, repeated execution of a weak process remains weak education. A module can be administered flawlessly while its assessment fails to measure the advertised outcomes. Conformance is therefore a necessary component of accountable provision in many domains, but it does not determine whether the specifications themselves represent a worthwhile education.

Fitness for purpose asks whether an institution achieves what it sets out to do. It respects legitimate mission differentiation, particularly among research-intensive, teaching-intensive, regional, professional and faith-based institutions. Its weakness is potential circularity: if the mission is vague, conveniently redefined or intellectually undemanding, success on its own terms establishes little. The complementary notion of fitness of purpose asks whether declared aims are themselves educationally appropriate, socially defensible and consistent with external standards. In credible evaluation, both questions must be asked. Institutional distinctiveness should be respected without converting self-description into self-accreditation.

Transformation addresses the changes that learning produces in students' understanding, capabilities, dispositions and agency. It is compelling because education is a developmental undertaking rather than a storage service for content. Yet attribution is difficult. The student who excels at graduation may have entered with substantial advantages, developed through work or independent study, or benefited from influences beyond the university.

Valid claims of educational transformation require baseline-sensitive interpretation, appropriate assessment, longitudinal evidence where feasible and cautious attribution. Testimonials and satisfaction scores may illuminate experience but do not, by themselves, establish transformation.

Accountability and value for resources focus on the responsible use of time, money, infrastructure and public trust. High-quality education must be feasible and adequately supported. Nevertheless, low unit cost is not synonymous with efficiency when lower expenditure produces weaker learning, staff overload or disproportionate dropout among disadvantaged groups. The pertinent question is whether resources are converted into defensible outcomes without unjustifiable waste or transfer of hidden costs to learners. Digital programmes illustrate the issue: low classroom costs may be offset by connectivity, device, platform, content-maintenance, technical-support and accessibility expenses, some borne by students rather than institutions (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

Relevance and public value refer to higher education's responsiveness to legitimate needs beyond the campus. Labour-market relevance matters, but public value also includes discovery, cultural preservation, independent critique, access to knowledge, public health, environmental stewardship and the development of professionals who exercise judgement with integrity. The pursuit of immediate market responsiveness may be counterproductive when long-term societal needs are uncertain or when employers demand short-term tool familiarity without conceptual foundations. Conversely, invoking academic autonomy to avoid any examination of social needs is not defensible. Universities should be capable of explaining how their curricula and research serve identifiable publics while protecting inquiry from purely instrumental demands.

A further difficulty concerns the *unit of quality*. An institution may be well governed but operate a weak programme; a programme may have a coherent curriculum but inadequately equipped teaching laboratories; a single lecturer may teach brilliantly in a system with unfair or unreliable assessment. Quality judgements must identify whether the object is an institution, academic programme, module, student outcome, professional practice, digital platform, regulatory process or national system. Aggregation can obscure critical differences. Institutional reputation cannot validate an unreviewed qualification, and a compliant programme dossier cannot demonstrate the quality of every subsequent teaching encounter.

The assessment of quality also involves competing interests. Students may reasonably prioritise fair cost, usable support and employment prospects; academics may emphasise scholarly freedom and depth; professional regulators may prioritise public safety; employers may require reliable competences; governments may value development outcomes; institutions may emphasise mission and survival. These claims cannot simply be averaged. Some are threshold obligations, especially legality, academic integrity and safety. Others permit legitimate trade-offs and contextual judgement. A defensible quality system therefore needs an explicit hierarchy: identify mandatory obligations; establish academic and learner-protection minima; examine multidimensional excellence and enhancement; then assess proportional trade-offs without allowing strength in one domain to conceal failure in another.

Table 1.1

Conceptions of Higher Education Quality and Their Distinct Evidence Demands

Conception	Governing question	Possible evidence	Interpretive limitation
Excellence	How demanding and distinguished is performance?	Disciplinary review, external examining, strong student work, research quality.	Reputation and selective admission may reflect pre-entry advantage.
Conformance	Are defined requirements reliably met?	Validated curricula, audit trails, moderation, regulatory records.	A perfectly followed specification may still be educationally weak.

Conception	Governing question	Possible evidence	Interpretive limitation
Fitness for purpose	Are credible institutional aims achieved?	Programme outcomes, mission mapping, evidence of enactment.	Institutional self-definition cannot override minimum standards.
Transformation	What worthwhile learning or capability develops?	Direct assessment of achievement, progression and portfolio evidence.	Attribution and baseline differences constrain causal inference.
Resource stewardship	Are time and money used responsibly?	Full-cost models, resource adequacy, service and student outcomes.	Low expenditure may externalise costs or damage quality.
Public value	How does provision serve legitimate social purposes?	Research and professional contributions, equity, engagement, knowledge access.	Public benefits are plural and not fully reducible to one score.

Note. Analytical synthesis of Harvey and Green (1993), Harvey (2024), and the present chapter. Indicators are examples rather than universal requirements.

The table clarifies why different quality concepts demand different evidence. Its most important message is that an indicator acquires significance only in relation to the claim being tested. A published policy is relevant evidence of formally adopted intention; it is weaker evidence of practice. A high graduate-employment proportion is relevant to one dimension of professional outcomes; it is weak evidence of students' mastery of historical research or critical reasoning. Good evaluation makes these inferential boundaries visible rather than relying on the persuasive power of familiar institutional statistics.

The historical challenges of African higher education should not be presented as a timeless list of deficits. Teferra and Altbach (2004) located pressures on financing, academic staffing, research capacity and access within specific institutional and political histories. Subsequent digital initiatives and regional qualification frameworks alter the available responses, but do not remove those underlying tensions. Analytically, regional comparison must therefore ask not merely whether two countries use the same quality-assurance terminology, but whether their legal authority, organisational arrangements, resources and educational risks are functionally comparable. A standard drafted for a highly resourced setting may express a worthwhile quality principle while specifying an implementation pathway unavailable to a small or emerging African provider. Evaluators should distinguish what is educationally indispensable from the locally variable means by which it can be realised.

1.4 African higher education and Rwanda's evolving educational priorities

African higher education cannot be accurately represented as a homogeneous sector. Systems differ in colonial legacies, languages, institutional missions, public financing, private-sector participation, research capacity, regulatory structures, cross-border arrangements and relationships with employment. Diversity exists within countries as well as between them. Public research universities, specialised institutions, newer private providers, faith-based colleges, professional universities and open or distance-learning institutions operate with substantially different histories and resources. Any general account must therefore avoid treating one country's legal arrangements or one institution's challenges as a continental norm (Shabani et al., 2014).

A common structural issue is the relationship between demographic demand and the resources available to sustain credible participation. UNESCO's 2026 global report identifies a tertiary gross enrolment ratio of approximately 9% in sub-Saharan Africa, against a much higher global ratio (Gutović et al., 2026). A gross enrolment ratio is an age-based participation measure, not a direct measure of completion, teaching quality or institutional capacity. It nevertheless indicates a substantial access challenge. An expansion agenda is justified, but the means of expansion matter. Rapid growth without proportional investment in academic staffing, learning resources, student support and quality-assurance capability can produce nominal access without an equivalently meaningful education.

Postcolonial educational development also requires attention to whose knowledge is legitimised and whose needs are prioritised. African universities participate in international disciplinary communities while serving local societies with distinctive languages, professional demands, historical experience and knowledge traditions. Uncritical importation of curricula or quality models can reproduce epistemic dependence when local priorities are poorly represented. An equally uncritical appeal to localisation can, however, deprive learners of access to demanding international disciplinary standards. The desirable approach is neither wholesale transplantation nor intellectual isolation. It is disciplined contextualisation: internationally credible learning at a level and depth appropriate to the qualification, combined with serious engagement with African evidence, scholarship, languages and problems.

Regional initiatives respond to the need for greater comparability without erasing national responsibility. The African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA) provide a continental reference for internal and external assurance and agency responsibilities (HAQAA Initiative, 2018). The African Union's Digital Education Strategy and Implementation Plan 2023–2028 links education technology with digital skills, infrastructure and system capacity (African Union Commission, 2022). The Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy adds a wider policy context for responsible, equitable and development-oriented AI adoption (African Union Commission, 2024). These documents are important professional and policy benchmarks, but they should not be described as automatically replacing domestic laws, ministerial orders or an authorised national regulator's operative requirements.

Rwanda offers a concrete context for evaluating the intersection of educational ambition and institutional capability. The Ministry of Education's *Education Sector Strategic Plan 2024–2029* places inclusion, educational quality, competencies, skills and socio-economic transformation at the centre of sector planning (Ministry of Education, 2024). The Rwanda Qualifications Framework, established through Ministerial Order No. 003/MINEDUC/2021 of 20 October 2021, supplies a national architecture for qualification levels, learning outcomes and credit-related expectations (Republic of Rwanda, 2021). Such instruments matter because they provide reference points against which programme claims can be evaluated; their existence does not establish that every programme is appropriately designed or enacted.

Rwanda's Higher Education Council (HEC) has also published guidance relevant to internal quality assurance and digitally mediated provision. The *Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) Mechanisms for Higher Education* address institutional mechanisms for academic accountability (Higher Education Council, 2021). The *Guidelines and Assessment Tools for the Virtual Learning and the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Rwanda's Higher Learning Institutions* and the March 2026 distance-learning guidance provide more specific references for emerging delivery models (Higher Education Council, 2025, 2026). These documents make it increasingly difficult to treat online learning and AI simply as discretionary technical additions. Their precise legal status, applicable version and particular requirements must nevertheless be checked for each actual accreditation or programme-development decision, rather than inferred from a chapter-level policy overview.

There is an important distinction between an official strategy's desirable outcomes and the evidence needed to show that an institution is progressing towards them. A strategic plan may identify research, innovation, employability, internationalisation or digitalisation as national priorities. To translate those priorities responsibly, universities need to demonstrate programme relevance, qualification-level integrity, workload feasibility, competent staffing, fair admissions and assessment, accessible resources, and arrangements for monitoring outcomes. Public policies supply objectives and constraints, not an automatic conclusion of quality. The movement from policy ambition to institutional practice therefore requires an intermediate architecture of capability, evidence and professional judgement.

Comparative African experience warns against equating the visibility of QA documents with the strength of quality cultures. Shabani et al. (2014) document advances in African quality-assurance systems alongside persistent capacity and harmonisation challenges. Institutional theorists would predict some degree of formal conformity under regulatory and reputational pressure (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Such conformity may be valuable if it establishes common expectations, yet risks becoming ceremonial when documentation is detached from pedagogy and student experience. A sufficiently rigorous analysis should ask what norms require, what institutions declare, what actions can be demonstrated, which outcomes are reasonably attributable, and what happens when the evidence does not support the promise.

The Rwanda-centred approach adopted in this volume is therefore neither a claim of national exceptionalism nor an attempt to create a universal African checklist. It begins with verifiable national authority, uses regional and international sources as comparative lenses, and asks which quality-governance functions are sufficiently general to inform other systems after adaptation. Subsequent regulatory analysis will examine legal mandates and documentary provenance in detail. Here the decisive point is philosophical: public legitimacy requires a recognisable relationship between educational purposes, national expectations, institutional capacity and evidence of student learning.

International evidence also warns that mass participation may expand opportunity while reproducing stratification. Marginson (2016) argues that high-participation systems alter the distribution of educational opportunities without automatically eliminating the influence of social origin or institutional hierarchy. McCowan (2016), examining equity in higher-education access, highlights the limitations of concentrating on formal entry while overlooking the wider conditions under which participation becomes meaningful. For an African programme review, these arguments imply that fair admissions should be assessed alongside the distribution of resources, the academic quality of available pathways and the actual likelihood that entrants can progress. Numerical expansion is a necessary part of equity for previously excluded groups, but it is not its sufficient condition.

1.5 Massification, access, affordability, graduate employability, and educational inequality

The expansion of higher education is frequently treated as an unqualified social good. Broadening access can indeed advance fairness, social participation, professional opportunity and the development of knowledge economies. Yet access is not meaningful when the conditions of participation make progression improbable. A learner admitted to a low-cost programme may face hidden expenses for transport, broadband, devices, required software, electricity, fieldwork or examinations. A geographically accessible institution may provide inaccessible learning materials to a student with a disability. A scholarship can relieve tuition burden while leaving living costs unaffordable. Quality evaluation must therefore distinguish entry into an institution from the practical capability to participate, learn, progress and graduate.

Massification also alters the relationship between students and institutional systems. Small, selective provision can depend heavily on informal contact between lecturers and learners. Large and diverse cohorts require dependable mechanisms for orientation, academic advising, workload allocation, assessment moderation, grievance resolution and timely support. Growth can increase the demand for laboratories, library licences, supervision capacity and digital infrastructure faster than budgets adjust. The question is not whether large institutions are necessarily inferior. It is whether their design and resource allocations keep pace with the educational responsibilities created by expansion. Increased scale without increased coordination is a risk, not evidence of enhanced impact.

Affordability has at least three dimensions. First is the direct price paid to the institution. Second is the full cost of participation, including opportunity cost and the economic burden imposed on households. Third is institutional financial sustainability: an apparently affordable programme may be subsidised in ways that are unstable or depend on underpaid staff and deferred investment. A responsible quality policy cannot maximise one dimension while

ignoring the other two. Fee restraint must be considered with student protection and realistic costing, especially when promises of self-paced or fully online study depend on continuing access to learning resources, qualified academic support and functioning assessment systems.

The relationship between social inequality and institutional performance is likewise complex. Raw progression and employment rates can reward institutions that enrol students with greater prior educational, digital, financial and social advantages. Institutions serving first-generation, working, rural or low-income students may face different barriers. Fair comparison therefore requires attention to entering circumstances, programme mix and data definitions. Adjustment cannot be used to excuse low standards; its function is to avoid attributing all outcome differences to teaching quality. A nuanced evaluation combines minimum academic expectations with investigation of who succeeds, who withdraws, under what conditions and with what evidence of institutional response.

Graduate employability is an important but frequently overextended indicator. It can be defined as employment at a particular point, the ability to secure suitable work, the possession of transferable capabilities or longer-term career resilience. Results differ depending on which definition is used, whether informal employment and self-employment are recognised, and whether employment quality, earnings, underemployment or job relevance are included. Labour-market outcomes are further shaped by macroeconomic conditions and networks outside institutional control. A university should explain how its graduate profile is linked to professional expectations and gather credible outcome evidence, but it cannot validly treat every employed graduate as proof that all programme outcomes were achieved.

A constructive alternative is to evaluate *capability for work and further learning*. This shifts attention from immediate placement alone to disciplinary understanding, applied problem solving, professional communication, ethical judgement, technological literacy, adaptability and opportunities to continue learning. Such capabilities cannot be inferred merely from the availability of internships or employers on advisory committees. They require curriculum-level embedding, appropriate practice environments, valid assessments and, where applicable, verified performance in authentic contexts. Work-integrated learning should also be scrutinised for supervision, accessibility, safety and equitable availability. Employment may be a downstream outcome; educational quality must also be demonstrated within the learning process itself.

The demand for relevance can create a false opposition between traditional scholarship and economic necessity. Philosophy, history, languages, mathematics, foundational sciences and theoretical inquiry may not all translate into immediately marketable job titles, yet they can strengthen reasoning, disciplinary innovation and public understanding. Conversely, highly vocational fields require theoretical foundations precisely because practical environments change. Curricula should therefore balance near-term professional competence, disciplinary depth and adaptable intellectual formation. Narrow skills inventories are insufficient if they displace the knowledge enabling graduates to critique tools, detect errors or exercise responsibility when standard procedures fail.

Digital provision is often proposed as the principal solution to unequal access. It can remove travel barriers, accommodate flexible schedules and extend resources across geography. But it can also shift essential costs onto students and amplify inequalities in connectivity, home learning space, language, accessibility and digital confidence. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report cautions that technology should be evaluated for appropriateness, equity, scalability and sustainability rather than introduced on the presumption of benefit (UNESCO, 2023). Institution-wide expansion through a learning-management system is therefore credible only when it includes low-bandwidth options, accessible design, responsive academic support, realistic learner workloads and appropriate practical arrangements.

Table 1.2

A Participation-to-Achievement Lens for Inclusive Expansion

Stage	Quality question	Illustrative evidence	Principal caution
Admission	Can eligible learners enter through fair, clear routes?	Admission criteria, selection audits, published fees.	Enrolment alone does not establish equitable access.
Affordability	Can learners meet full participation costs?	Total student cost estimates, scholarships, device and data access.	Low tuition can coexist with high hidden costs.
Engagement	Can students meaningfully participate?	Accessible resources, tutorial support, attendance and support reviews.	Clicks and attendance do not directly measure learning.
Progression	Do learners advance under credible standards?	Cohort pathways, reassessment records, disaggregated progression.	Differences may reflect intake and external circumstances.
Achievement	What can graduates demonstrably do?	Moderated student work, practical performance, capstones.	Completion rates alone cannot prove mastery.
Transition	Can graduates use and extend learning?	Graduate follow-up, employer feedback, professional outcomes.	Employment is influenced by wider economic conditions.

Note. Proposed analytical tool developed for this chapter; selection of measures must respect data minimisation, privacy and local circumstances.

A rigorous equity evaluation should also avoid treating disadvantage as a single, stable category. A working student in a regional town, a student with a mobility impairment and a refugee seeking recognition of prior qualifications may encounter quite different barriers, even when each is formally eligible for the same degree. The institution should therefore identify its actual learner profile, the cost and accessibility assumptions embedded in curriculum and assessment design, and the difference between providing a support service and ensuring that eligible students can use it. Evidence must be proportionate and privacy-preserving: aggregate participation indicators can suggest where inquiry is needed, but they cannot by themselves explain individual learning experiences or justify intrusive surveillance. The objective is to improve students' substantive opportunity to achieve demanding standards rather than to reduce those standards in response to unequal circumstances.

The practical implication is that a quality evaluation of expanding provision should use a *participation-to-achievement* perspective. It should inspect admission and affordability, actual learning access, participation conditions, academic progression, demonstrable achievement and transition beyond graduation. A single annual enrolment figure cannot show the integrity of that chain. Nor should an institution delay attention to disadvantage until graduates begin to disappear from cohort statistics. Responsible assurance includes anticipatory design, ethically gathered monitoring evidence, and corrective action that can be demonstrated to have reached affected students.

1.6 Digital transformation beyond technology adoption: Organisational, pedagogical, institutional, and cultural change

The digitalisation of an administrative procedure, the digitisation of a printed textbook and the transformation of an educational institution are different activities. Digitisation converts information into digital form. Digitalisation uses digital technologies to support or reorganise particular processes. Digital transformation entails more extensive changes in strategy, responsibilities, competencies, processes, learning relationships and the production and use of evidence. The distinctions matter because universities sometimes describe the installation of a learning-management system or the availability of recorded lectures as institutional transformation. These may be useful enabling resources without amounting to a substantive change in how education is designed, governed and evaluated (Castro Benavides et al., 2020; OECD, 2023).

The organisational dimension begins with governance. A digital learning strategy needs decisions about academic ownership, investment priorities, accountability for course quality, data stewardship, learner support, staff development and the limits of outsourcing. If an ICT office controls platform configuration while departments independently determine pedagogy and finance separately determines affordability, critical dependencies may be overlooked. Strategic alignment requires cross-functional responsibilities and escalation routes for problems that exceed individual units. Leadership also needs reliable information about the actual costs, service limitations and educational consequences of technology. Procurement approval is not equivalent to educational validation.

Pedagogically, effective digital provision should be designed around what learners must do to meet programme outcomes. Students may need to interpret disciplinary evidence, practise clinical judgement, write research proposals, collaborate on design tasks, perform laboratory procedures or defend professional decisions. These cannot be assured by uploading presentation slides alone. Course quality depends on the purposeful relationship between materials, explanation, interaction, guided practice, assessment and feedback. Digital media can extend the range of learning experiences, but their educational value is conditional on task design and support. Constructive alignment remains relevant across modalities precisely because online and blended environments are not exempt from disciplinary expectations (Biggs, 1996).

A related distinction concerns emergency continuity and deliberately designed online education. Hodges et al. (2020) showed why teaching moved online rapidly under pandemic restrictions should not be confused with education designed from the outset for online delivery. The former prioritised immediate continuity under abnormal constraints; the latter requires planned interaction, accessibility, assessment, academic support, staff preparation and iterative improvement. The distinction is neither a dismissal of the efforts made during a crisis nor a blanket judgement against remote methods. It prevents an institution from claiming durable capability merely because instruction continued for a period using available communication tools.

Digital transformation is also cultural. Staff and students need reasons to trust new systems, opportunities to contest poor design and time to develop capability. Institutions whose performance systems reward research publications but allocate no workload for course development may announce ambitious digital teaching policies while discouraging their practical implementation. The same decoupling can arise when lecturers are expected to maintain extensive online interaction without staffing or technical support. Sustainable transformation requires revising incentives, workload models, professional development, service structures and feedback mechanisms, not simply issuing more guidance. Institutional capability must be enacted through ordinary academic work.

The data dimension requires particular caution. Learning platforms generate access logs, submissions, grades and patterns of interaction, but such traces do not directly reveal understanding, motivation or educational value. A learner may download materials without reading them or learn effectively through offline study that produces little platform activity. An analytics dashboard may therefore create a false sense of precision if engagement proxies are mistaken for learning. Responsible use requires conceptual validity, data minimisation, protection of privacy, attention to algorithmic error and transparent mechanisms for human review (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013). Data should inform conversation and support, not replace educational judgement.

Accessibility and infrastructure convert digital transformation into an equity issue. A course designed for continuous high-speed video assumes reliable connectivity, electricity, devices, data affordability and an adequate environment for study. Those assumptions cannot safely be universalised. Alternative formats, accessible documents, captioning, mobile usability, downloadable resources and planned offline access may be essential. Yet accessible design does not mean that all practical education can be delivered fully remotely. Clinical, laboratory, field and studio programmes may need supervised physical components, credible simulations and discipline-specific safeguards. Quality lies in matching modality to educational demand rather than defending an ideologically preferred delivery model.

The resilience dimension is inseparable from digital dependence. Platform outages, vendor changes, expired licences, cyber incidents, data losses and shifts in pricing can interrupt teaching or compromise confidential student information. Universities should know which functions are mission-critical, which rely on external providers, how backups are tested and how assessment can continue when primary systems fail. This is not an argument that digital provision is inherently less resilient than campus provision. Physical institutions also face infrastructure and environmental risks. It is an argument that every delivery model requires explicit continuity planning appropriate to its dependencies and educational consequences.

An institution can be digitally advanced in one domain and immature in another. Excellent research computing can coexist with inaccessible undergraduate learning materials; sophisticated dashboards can coexist with poor feedback; a polished website can coexist with weak admissions verification. It is therefore misleading to infer a common maturity level across every function from selected examples of innovation. Institutional digital quality should be evaluated as a configuration of interdependent capabilities, with attention to the weakest components whose failure would make an educational promise implausible. Such a configuration needs periodic reassessment because software, staffing, courses and student circumstances change over time.

The central conclusion is that technology should be assessed through the educational functions it supports. This requires reversing a common evaluative sequence. Instead of beginning with the question, 'Which technologies has the university purchased?', reviewers should ask which educational outcomes and institutional responsibilities are at stake, what forms of provision are appropriate, which people and processes must sustain them, what evidence establishes effective operation, and which risks remain. Technology becomes an element of assured educational practice rather than a proxy for modernity.

These pressures also expose a governance asymmetry. Universities commonly make commitments with a multi-year horizon, yet many underlying technical, regulatory and environmental conditions may change before a cohort completes its programme. The practical challenge is neither to rewrite every curriculum whenever a new tool appears nor to assume that an original accreditation decision guarantees continuing adequacy. Institutions require a controlled process for identifying material change, evaluating its consequences for learning outcomes and learner protection, recording the reason for any modification, and seeking fresh approval when an applicable rule requires it. This temporal discipline is an essential complement to academic freedom because it protects the substance of an educational promise when the means of fulfilling that promise must change.

1.7 Emerging pressures: Artificial intelligence, global crises, changing labour markets, environmental risks, and geopolitical fragmentation

Universities now operate in environments where curricular knowledge, institutional infrastructure and regulatory expectations can change on different timescales. A qualification may be approved for several years while AI applications evolve within months, employment conditions alter rapidly and a disruptive event interrupts teaching almost immediately. The resulting governance problem is temporal: a programme that was plausibly ready at approval may become inadequate later without any change in its formal accreditation status. Quality assurance must therefore combine stable educational principles with mechanisms for detecting material change, reassessing risk and correcting course.

Artificial intelligence changes not only the tools of academic production but also the evidence by which competence is established. Generative AI can assist with explanation, translation, drafting, programming, accessibility and formative feedback, but can also produce convincing inaccuracies, obscure authorship and complicate the interpretation of assessment submissions. Institutions face questions about the knowledge graduates should retain unaided, the tools they should be able to use critically, and the performances by which individual competence can be

trusted. UNESCO's guidance calls for human-centred regulation and pedagogical appraisal of generative AI, including attention to privacy, inclusion and institutional preparedness (Miao & Holmes, 2023). UNESCO's AI competency framework for teachers underscores that staff capability involves human agency, ethics, AI foundations, pedagogy and professional learning, not merely fluency with a particular application (Miao & Cukurova, 2024).

The assessment challenge should not be reduced to detecting prohibited software use. Research testing AI-text detection tools has identified important reliability limitations, with implications for false accusations and the evidential weight of automated classifications (Weber-Wulff et al., 2023). A detection result therefore cannot displace the institution's responsibility to establish fair evidence, make context-sensitive judgements and provide due process. More fundamentally, an assignment that measures only the production of polished generic prose may no longer provide sufficient evidence of independent reasoning when such prose can be generated externally. Possible educational responses include staged drafting, explicit AI-use conditions, situated professional tasks, oral defence, practical performance, portfolios and verification of reasoning. Different responses are appropriate in different subjects. The aim is to restore the relationship between a learning claim and trustworthy evidence of achievement rather than to impose one universal assessment technique.

Labour-market change creates a parallel challenge for curriculum renewal. Automation, digital platforms, demographic change and shifting trade arrangements can alter tasks and occupational opportunities. Universities face pressure to update curricula, but an endlessly reactive curriculum risks becoming a catalogue of transient software features. Curricular renewal should distinguish durable disciplinary foundations from new tools, professional practices and emerging knowledge. Advisory input from employers can illuminate demand while remaining one source among academic evidence, professional standards, student experience and public interest. Continuous review should identify when new competencies are educationally justified and when fashionable terminology has been introduced without demonstrable learning value.

The COVID-19 pandemic made academic continuity a visible governance concern. Interruptions can affect laboratories, clinical placements, student mobility, assessment conditions, supervision and access to learning resources. Resilience planning must therefore identify which outcomes can be achieved through alternative modalities, which require postponed or reorganised practical experience, and how academic standards will be protected during accommodation. Flexibility should not be mistaken for the elimination of standards, particularly in professions where deficient competence can harm others. Emergency measures need bounded approval, documentation and subsequent review rather than indefinite normalisation.

Physical and environmental conditions also matter to educational continuity. Heat, severe rainfall, flooding, drought, electricity instability and damage to infrastructure can threaten campus operations and the practical ability of learners to participate. Climate-related physical hazards and associated adaptation challenges are documented in the IPCC synthesis assessment, although risks for any individual campus require local evidence rather than generic climate attribution (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023). Their consequences vary with geography, facilities, transport and local conditions. Claims about specific causes of particular weather events or intentional environmental intervention require evidence proportionate to the attribution being made. In the present chapter, the relevant and defensible proposition is narrower: institutions should use credible hazard information to evaluate the vulnerability of buildings, laboratories, student housing, communications and access routes, and should maintain proportionate educational continuity arrangements. The specialised assessment of contested environmental technologies belongs to the volume's later resilience analysis.

Geopolitical instability introduces additional risks to educational participation and institutional operations. Armed conflict, displaced populations, trade restrictions, sanctions regimes, cyber threats and interruptions to international mobility can affect students, academic partnerships, subscriptions, equipment supply and research collaborations.

Universities may also encounter ethical questions about research security, academic freedom and discrimination. Risks are not uniform across countries or institutions, and blanket geopolitical narratives can obscure the immediate needs of affected students. The appropriate educational response is evidence-informed scenario planning: identify plausible dependencies, develop alternative pathways, ensure learner protection and distinguish actual restrictions from speculation. Academic continuity arrangements must protect standards without neglecting the exceptional circumstances of students and staff.

A different form of vulnerability arises when universities depend heavily on external digital infrastructure. Outsourcing learning systems, cloud storage, identification services or AI-enabled assessment can improve reliability and allow smaller institutions to obtain tools beyond their internal technical capacity. It can also generate dependence on a small number of providers, restrictive licences, foreign data-processing arrangements, opaque technical changes and limited portability. These are governance questions requiring due diligence and contract management, not proof that all centralised services are inherently harmful. Universities should evaluate data location, security obligations, exit arrangements, interoperability, access continuity and control over academic records before transferring mission-critical functions to external parties.

The cumulative pressure of these changes is to expose the inadequacy of a one-time declaration that an institution is 'future ready'. Readiness is always relative to a particular task, cohort, programme, date and set of risks. Enduring institutional capability consists instead in the organisational ability to detect changing conditions, interpret relevant evidence, mobilise resources and revise practice while preserving standards. This distinction, developed in the author's doctoral synthesis (Sangwa, 2026), will be operationalised later in the volume. It prevents the language of resilience and innovation from degenerating into an unverifiable institutional slogan.

Effective risk governance must also avoid treating every conceivable hazard as equally probable or requiring the same investment. Reviewers should consider severity, likelihood, exposure, timing, reversibility and existing safeguards, while recognising that very high-consequence obligations may demand protection even when likelihood is uncertain. A university should not be judged deficient merely for lacking an elaborate response to a remote hypothetical event. It may, however, be judged unprepared when a foreseeable and material failure would make delivery, assessment or learner protection impossible and no credible contingency is available. Proportionality is an essential condition of sound educational governance.

1.8 Theoretical foundations: Critical realism, institutional theory, socio-technical systems, constructive alignment, and evaluative reasoning

The conceptual problem identified in this chapter crosses several levels of reality and cannot be adequately explained by a single theoretical lens. A regulator may issue requirements; university leaders may adopt formally compliant policies; lecturers may implement different practices; students may experience different conditions; and evaluators may draw different conclusions from the same records. These phenomena involve normative authority, organisational structures, technical systems, educational activity, evidence and professional judgement. The chapter therefore uses five complementary perspectives, each with a distinct analytical function. Their value lies in disciplined integration, not in pretending that they constitute one theory.

The principal epistemological caution comes from critical realism: the representation of a condition must not be mistaken for the condition itself. This perspective assumes that social structures, practices and mechanisms can exist and exert effects independently of whether an observer has measured them accurately, while knowledge of those structures remains fallible and historically situated (Bhaskar, 1979; Sayer, 2000). Applied to universities, the distinction is decisive. A published student-support policy is an observable representation. Whether support is delivered promptly is an event or practice. The combination of staffing, financial arrangements, competence and

institutional routines that enables dependable support is an underlying capability. Evidence about the first cannot simply be substituted for evidence about the second or third. Conversely, an absence of easily accessible records does not, by itself, prove the absence of actual practice, although it may limit confidence in a claim requiring verification.

Critical realism also discourages simplistic causal inference. If a university purchases a new platform and its graduation rate subsequently rises, many mechanisms may be involved, including admissions changes, student composition, assessment policy, economic conditions or changes in record keeping. Temporal association does not establish technological causation. Evaluators should investigate plausible mechanisms, consider rival explanations and recognise the limits of documentary access. In a secondary-data chapter, critical realism supports cautious interpretation rather than supplying a licence to infer hidden institutional facts. Its contribution is an explicit understanding of why evidence and reality are related but not identical.

Institutional theory explains why formal conformity may become separated from educational practice. Meyer and Rowan (1977) explain how organisations may adopt formal structures reflecting widely accepted expectations and how those structures can become disconnected from everyday activity. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe coercive, mimetic and normative processes that contribute to similarity within organisational fields. These ideas help explain why universities may establish offices, policies, quality manuals or digital strategies in response to regulatory obligations, competitors and professional expectations. Formalisation is not necessarily empty: it can create accountability, consistency and shared procedures. The risk arises when the institutional reward attaches principally to possessing documentation rather than to achieving the activities documentation promises.

This theory makes a strong contribution to analysing accreditation, but it must not be overstretched. Similar organisational structures can arise through legitimate professional learning and practical effectiveness, not only pressure for legitimacy. Nor does the existence of an accreditation dossier prove ceremonial compliance. Institutional theory suggests questions for inquiry: who demanded the policy, what incentives shape implementation, how is compliance tested, which actors can challenge unsupported claims, and what evidence closes the gap between formal design and actual practice? It supplies plausible explanatory mechanisms, not a predetermined finding about a particular university.

Socio-technical systems thinking shifts attention from individual resources to the relationships among them. Digital higher education is produced through the interaction of people, processes, technology, academic norms, resources and external conditions. A technically functional learning platform can fail educationally when staff workloads prohibit interaction, course navigation is incoherent, support is inaccessible or assessment workflows are unreliable. Conversely, a motivated lecturer may be constrained by unstable connectivity or institution-wide data rules. Socio-technical thinking rejects technological determinism by asking how changes to one part of the system affect the others (Castro Benavides et al., 2020; OECD, 2023). It helps move analysis from equipment inventories to actual configurations of institutional capability.

A crucial implication is that some requirements are non-compensatory. A programme cannot reasonably claim safe clinical competence solely because its online materials are excellent if it lacks required supervised practical experience. Strong institutional marketing cannot compensate for inaccessible assessment, and an exemplary curriculum map cannot compensate for absent essential staff. In many other areas, institutions can choose functionally equivalent arrangements suited to their scale and resources. Socio-technical analysis therefore requires both attention to essential thresholds and flexibility about means. It should not prescribe the same expensive technology architecture to every institution in order to achieve comparable educational functionality.

Constructive alignment offers a complementary account of coherence within teaching and learning. Biggs (1996) argues that intended learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment tasks should reinforce one another. This is more than a curriculum-formatting rule. If a programme promises critical appraisal, assessment limited to factual

recall provides weak evidence of that outcome. If it promises autonomous professional judgement, tasks must progressively require justified decisions. The theory creates a language for reviewing the credibility of curriculum architecture. However, programme quality extends beyond internal pedagogical alignment. Outcomes must be at the appropriate qualification level; content must meet disciplinary expectations; workload must be feasible; and institutional staffing, resources and learner support must make the design implementable.

The book therefore distinguishes *constructive alignment* from the broader proposed concept of *implementation alignment*. Constructive alignment concerns the coherence of learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment. Implementation alignment asks whether these educational commitments are matched by actual institutional capacity, programme organisation, delivery conditions, staff deployment, digital arrangements, assessment procedures, support and monitoring. It is possible for the former to be strong and the latter weak. The extension is offered as a conceptual proposal derived from the doctoral integration (Sangwa, 2026), not as an independently tested construct or an amendment to Biggs's original theory.

Evaluative reasoning connects the institutional and educational evidence to a defensible conclusion. Toulmin's (2003) account of argument identifies the relationship among claims, evidence or grounds, warrants, backing, qualifiers and rebuttals. In university evaluation, a regulator may establish a requirement concerning qualified staffing, the institution may claim readiness and present CVs, but the reviewer must still explain why the evidence is sufficient or insufficient. Qualifications alone may not demonstrate contractual availability, teachable workload or continuity. A warrant makes the inferential step explicit. A qualifier records the limits of confidence. A rebuttal identifies circumstances or contradictory evidence that could change the conclusion. These elements are especially important when reviewers must exercise professional discretion under broadly expressed standards.

Evaluative reasoning is not a substitute for legitimate regulatory authority. Before a reviewer decides whether evidence is sufficient, the relevant standard must be identified, dated, interpreted in context and distinguished from optional international guidance or personal preference. Neither Toulmin's argumentation structure nor a locally designed rubric can authorise a sanction not supported by applicable procedure. The model's contribution is to improve the transparency and contestability of professional reasoning inside an authorised decision process. This principle later underpins the Evidence-Traceable Accreditation Judgement (ETAJ) model and its operational instruments (Sangwa, 2026).

Table 1.3

The Complementary Theoretical Roles in Quality Governance

Perspective	Central explanatory contribution	Appropriate professional use	Boundary
Critical realism	Separates formal representations, enacted activity and underlying capabilities.	Treat policies, operational tests and outcomes as distinct evidence types.	Mechanisms are inferred fallibly, not directly demonstrated by policy.
Institutional theory	Explains legitimacy, formal conformity, incentives and possible decoupling.	Investigate whether documented QA structures are actually used.	Conformity can also reflect genuine learning and improvement.
Socio-technical systems	Locates quality in interacting people, processes, resources and technology.	Test dependencies, bottlenecks, failure modes and service ownership.	No uniform technology model is suitable for every institution.
Constructive alignment	Tests coherence of learning outcomes, activities and assessments.	Map outcomes to progression, methods and valid demonstrations.	Alignment cannot establish worthiness of outcomes or delivery capability.
Argumentation theory	Makes the warrant between evidence and evaluative finding explicit.	Record claim, evidence, backing, uncertainty and reasoned conclusion.	Does not confer regulatory authority or validate criteria.

Note. Author's synthesis informed by Bhaskar (1979), Meyer and Rowan (1977), Biggs (1996), Sayer (2000), and Toulmin (2003).

These theories jointly support a bounded proposition: quality is generated through educational and organisational processes, represented by imperfect evidence, and judged through normative criteria and fallible reasoning. Critical realism clarifies the gap between records and reality; institutional theory explains incentives shaping formal conformity; socio-technical thinking illuminates interacting conditions; constructive alignment addresses educational coherence; and argumentation analysis disciplines decisions. None can replace the others without losing part of the problem. The framework remains a theoretically reasoned architecture requiring further empirical scrutiny rather than a validated causal explanation.

Fragmentation must also be distinguished from legitimate division of labour. Separate decision rights protect academic expertise, institutional oversight and regulatory independence; these functions should not be merged into a single administrator or automated score. The avoidable weakness arises at their interfaces, where a handover leaves no responsible owner, evidence becomes detached from its underlying claim, or an adverse finding is recorded without a mechanism for verification and closure. Integration should therefore be evaluated by the quality of cross-functional coordination and reviewable reasoning, not by the number of offices consolidated or reports submitted. This distinction matters particularly in smaller institutions where one individual may hold several formal roles and additional safeguards for independence, moderation and conflicts of interest become necessary.

1.9 Why fragmented quality-assurance approaches are increasingly inadequate

Higher-education quality work is commonly distributed among academic boards, departments, registrars, quality-assurance offices, ICT services, libraries, student-affairs units, finance teams and external regulatory bodies. Specialisation is necessary because no individual unit can master every technical and disciplinary requirement. Fragmentation arises when the outputs of these units are treated as independent accomplishments rather than dependent parts of a common educational commitment. A teaching department may approve a curriculum before the library determines whether essential resources are licensed; ICT may install a platform without testing assessment workflows; finance may approve enrolment targets that exceed staffing assumptions. Each unit can claim procedural completion while the proposed programme remains operationally incoherent.

One source of fragmentation is the separation of institutional accreditation or governance from programme-level evaluation. A university's general capacity to operate is relevant but does not establish that a specific engineering, nursing or history programme is adequately designed and resourced. Conversely, a programme's academic dossier may be internally coherent while depending on unstable institutional services. These are related but distinct claims requiring different evidence. An integrated approach therefore asks whether general capability has actually been mobilised for the programme under review, rather than allowing either institutional reputation or programme paperwork to stand in for that relationship.

Another source is the separation of curriculum approval from the conditions of teaching and assessment. Programme specifications may describe outcomes, module credits, prerequisites and assessment strategies in considerable detail. Yet implementation may expose missing learning resources, incompatible timetables, unrealistic student workload or untested digital systems. A sophisticated document can conceal these risks because a textual plan is easier to present than a functioning educational environment. Programme assurance should therefore use staged evidence: conceptual rationale at design, approved specifications at validation, operational demonstrations before delivery, and learning and support evidence during implementation. The expected evidence necessarily changes with the programme lifecycle.

A third source is the fragmentation between internal quality assurance and external review. Internal QA may collect annual reports, student feedback and corrective-action plans, while external reviewers receive a separate dossier prepared shortly before a visit. If the two evidence systems are disconnected, institutions may invest in episodic

compliance rather than continuous learning. A more credible arrangement allows routine monitoring to produce records useful for both institutional improvement and proportionate external accountability. It also protects the internal function of quality assurance: staff must be able to recognise weaknesses and learn from them, not merely generate favourable narratives for inspection (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; HAQAA Initiative, 2018).

A fourth source is the substitution of metrics for educational explanation. Student satisfaction, graduation rate, publication count, learning-platform login frequency and graduate employment can each be relevant, yet each carries definitional and interpretive limitations. High satisfaction can coexist with undemanding assessment. High completion can reflect robust support or weaker standards. High login frequency may reflect confusing course architecture rather than productive learning. Metrics are evidence only when their meaning, source, quality, timeframe and relationship to the evaluated construct have been established. Evidence triangulation is therefore more valuable than the accumulation of indicators without an explicit evaluative question.

A fifth source is the disconnect between policy and practical authority. Institutions may borrow a respected international framework and present it as if it were binding domestic law, or they may treat informal advice as an accreditation requirement. Such errors are particularly consequential where national laws, ministerial orders, HEC instruments, continental guidelines and professional benchmarks coexist. The responsible sequence begins with normative provenance: identify the issuing body, legal or professional status, date, applicability and scope. Only then should reviewers map an institutional claim and consider evidence of compliance. This chapter intentionally does not assign legal force to individual Rwanda guidance clauses; that belongs to a dated, instrument-specific legal and regulatory analysis.

Finally, fragmentation is temporal. Approval decisions can become detached from monitoring, documented weaknesses can remain unresolved, and changes to staffing, software, academic regulations or institutional ownership can invalidate assumptions supporting the original judgement. This is not necessarily a failure of initial review; evidence can be sufficient at one point and subsequently become outdated. It becomes a governance failure when the system has no means of detecting consequential change or revisiting earlier assumptions. Continuous enhancement therefore needs explicit responsibility, review cycles, verification of corrective actions and appropriate escalation when learner or academic integrity is at risk.

Table 1.4

Fragmentation Risks and Their Necessary Governance Connections

Fragmented interface	Typical disconnection	Risk to educational quality	Corrective connection
Mission ↔ measures	Prestige or revenue metrics displace education aims.	Institutional success without sufficient learning value.	Define the purpose and valid evidence of success.
Institution ↔ programme	Generic resources are assumed sufficient for all awards.	Individual programmes remain operationally unready.	Verify programme-specific deployment and feasibility.
Curriculum ↔ practice	Approved documentation is not enacted in courses.	Unachieved learning outcomes or inaccessible provision.	Test course, staffing, assessment and support operation.
Internal ↔ external QA	Review dossiers are detached from routine monitoring.	Episodic compliance instead of improvement.	Use continual records and verifiable action closure.
Metric ↔ inference	Proxy statistics are presented as definitive outcomes.	Misleading comparisons and decisions.	Specify construct, definition and alternative explanations.
Approval ↔ follow-up	Change after accreditation is not reassessed.	New risks invalidate earlier assurances.	Monitor material change, conditions and corrective action.

Note. Original diagnostic framework; risks are possibilities to investigate, not claims about all institutions.

These failures should not be interpreted as a claim that every African institution suffers from the same defects or that all existing QA frameworks lack integration. Many universities and agencies already employ robust review, audit and

improvement procedures. The chapter's argument is analytical: the adequacy of a system depends on the integrity of its connections, not merely on the existence of its parts. Fragmentation is a risk to be tested through evidence, not an accusation presumed against institutions. The appropriate response is to make consequential relationships and decision rules visible while controlling administrative burden.

The chapter's evaluation instruments are deliberately diagnostic rather than determinative. Their dimensions indicate what practitioners should investigate and how different forms of evidence may relate to distinct quality claims. They do not supply statutory decision categories, validated weights, empirically established cut-off values or universal minimum staffing ratios. In a real regulatory exercise, an evaluator must first determine the current applicable instrument, the authorised decision-maker, the programme's discipline and delivery mode, and the evidence that the governing standard actually requires. The matrix can then expose omitted questions and improve the transparency of review, but cannot override the legal rules or professional standards that define the decision.

1.10 Towards integrated, evidence-traceable, enhancement-oriented quality governance

The proposed alternative is to treat quality governance as an interconnected arrangement linking educational purpose, institutional capability, curriculum and programme assurance, evidence-based judgement, implementation, monitoring and improvement. This architecture does not abolish the distinction among university management, academic autonomy and external regulation. Rather, it clarifies how each performs part of a shared accountability function. Institutional leaders provide resources and governance; academic communities determine academically justified content and assessment within applicable standards; quality-assurance units organise monitoring and evidence; and authorised reviewers make bounded judgements under established requirements. Integration means traceable coordination, not unchecked centralisation, as illustrated in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Purpose-Referenced, Evidence-Traceable Quality Governance: An Extended Conceptual Architecture



Note. Original conceptual extension of the Integrated Evidence-Traceable Quality Governance (IETQG) architecture informed by Sangwa (2026). Proposed analytical model, not independently field-validated or regulator-approved.

The architecture begins with mission and public value because institutional processes must be assessed against educational reasons. The second layer concerns enduring institutional capability: governance, people, infrastructure,

finance, data, support and capacity to adapt. The third concerns the particular curriculum and programme: rationale, qualification level, outcomes, course sequence, teaching practice, assessment, inclusion and practical implementation. The fourth concerns the evidentiary and evaluative processes through which an authorised reviewer determines whether the relevant claims are warranted. The fifth concerns the activities through which implementation generates new evidence for corrective action, periodic review and institutional learning. These layers are distinguishable but functionally connected.

The critical feature of the figure is its feedback, not merely its downward order. A linear model could imply that quality is established once a programme passes approval. In practice, the student experience, changing risks, assessment outcomes, faculty deployment and programme modifications continue to test the quality claim. Monitoring therefore has to inform resource allocation, curriculum revision, reviewer expectations and subsequent decisions. The feedback loop also prevents permanent dependence on an initial assessment of digital readiness when technologies and delivery practices change.

The six-domain Quality Concepts and Evaluation Matrix operationalises this orientation at the level of professional questioning. It distinguishes **regulatory compliance**, concerning the applicable authorising requirements; **academic quality**, concerning the integrity and level of knowledge and disciplinary standards; **educational effectiveness**, concerning what students are enabled to learn and demonstrate; **learner protection**, concerning fairness, inclusion, safety and credible information; **institutional sustainability**, concerning the capacity to sustain the educational offer; and **public value**, concerning the contribution to society and legitimate stakeholder needs. These domains are complementary rather than independent. They should be examined together while preserving the specific standards, evidence types and materiality relevant to each.

Table 1.5

The Six-Domain Quality Concepts and Evaluation Matrix

Dimension and test	Core question	Indicative evidence to request	Limit or essential threshold
1. Regulatory compliance	Is the programme authorised and consistent with current applicable requirements?	Verified source/version register, qualifications mapping, approvals, required submissions.	Guidance is not automatically law; material legal failures are not compensable.
2. Academic quality	Are level, content, scholarly standards, research and assessment intellectually credible?	Academic benchmarks, coherent curricula, external examination, assessed student work.	Reputation and module lists do not establish learning depth.
3. Educational effectiveness	Are intended learning outcomes genuinely enabled and demonstrated?	Alignment maps, moderation, achievement evidence, feedback and progression.	Student satisfaction and completion are insufficient proxies.
4. Learner protection	Is participation accessible, fair, safe and transparently represented?	Accessible materials, support records, fair process, fee disclosure, safeguarding.	Serious safety, integrity or accessibility failures require direct remedy.
5. Institutional sustainability	Can the approved educational service continue under reasonably foreseeable conditions?	Staffing allocation, recurrent budgets, systems testing, continuity and risk plans.	One-time readiness is not enduring capability.
6. Public value	Does the offering serve defensible educational, professional and social needs?	Programme rationale, graduate profile, stakeholder input, engagement and outcomes.	Short-term employer demand does not exhaust education's purpose.

Note. Original proposed academic instrument. Its dimensions and examples are not official HEC accreditation criteria and have not undergone independent empirical validation. Reviewers must first apply binding national and profession-specific thresholds.

This matrix is designed for disciplined interpretation, not numerical camouflage. It would be misleading to assign a score of 90% for regulatory compliance and then average it with a 50% score for learner safety to declare the overall programme satisfactory. Certain deficiencies cannot be compensated by strengths elsewhere. A more defensible

procedure identifies material threshold failures first, then distinguishes evidence insufficiency from confirmed non-conformity, and only afterwards considers relative strengths, enhancement opportunities and context. Scores, if used, need operational descriptors, reviewer training, calibration and validation before they can be relied on for consequential decisions. The matrix in this chapter is a proposed academic tool, not an official HEC instrument.

The method of using the matrix begins with a concrete evaluative claim. Suppose a university claims that its new blended postgraduate programme is ready for admission. The review should identify the applicable qualifications and programme requirements, then ask whether the graduate profile and assessments are academically appropriate, whether scheduled staff are actually available, whether the platform and resources work, whether students can access the required learning experiences and whether the recurrent costs are funded. Evidence may include approved specifications, curriculum mapping, contracts or verified allocations, functioning course spaces, assessment demonstrations, support protocols and tested continuity arrangements. The review must not confuse possession of an artefact with verification of the practice it is meant to demonstrate.

The next step is to record the evaluative warrant. A reviewer who finds insufficient evidence of staffing should distinguish at least three possibilities: qualifications are appropriate but contracts or deployment are unverified; staffing is demonstrably insufficient for the proposed cohort; or adequate staff are available but the dossier was poorly assembled. These conditions warrant different conclusions and remedial requests. The reviewer should explain what standard applies, what evidence has been verified, why the material supports a particular finding, which uncertainty remains and how it could be resolved. Such clarity improves procedural fairness because the institution can understand and respond to the real issue.

Table 1.6

Illustrative Evidence-Traceability Record for a Proposed Blended Programme

Record field	Hypothetical completed entry
Review reference	C1-QA-STAFF-01; programme-specific, version 1.0.
Applicable authority	Current, relevant national staffing requirements to be verified from official source and version.
Institutional claim	Programme can sustain scheduled teaching and postgraduate supervision.
Submitted evidence	Curriculum teaching allocation, lecturer CVs, workload projections and contracts.
Verification and limitation	Qualifications appear relevant; two proposed supervisors have no verified time allocation.
Evaluative warrant	Qualifications indicate competence, but available capacity for the proposed cohort remains insufficiently demonstrated.
Finding and proposed action	Evidence insufficiency; request signed workload allocation and revised supervision-capacity model before readiness can be established.
Follow-up and closure	Assigned academic dean; documentary verification before enrolment; record and date the outcome.

Note. Fully hypothetical pedagogical illustration, not a real accreditation finding or statutory decision category. Adapt to the legally authorised workflow and evidence requirements.

The example record in Table 1.6 is deliberately concise. It illustrates how traceability can be implemented without demanding a disproportionately large dossier. The record's identifier enables a later reviewer or quality officer to locate the applicable rule, institutional claim, evidence, warrant, follow-up requirement and outcome. It does not guarantee truth or remove professional discretion. A false source can be perfectly traceable; a correct judgement can still be poorly explained. Effective governance therefore combines provenance, verification, substantive expertise, transparent reasoning and accountability for action.

The proposed approach extends two conceptual contributions from the author's doctoral research. The Integrated Evidence-Traceable Quality Governance (IETQG) framework, developed in the author's 2026 doctoral manuscript, links institutional capability, programme assurance, accreditation judgement and enhancement into an analytical architecture. The Evidence-Traceable Accreditation Judgement (ETAJ) model specifies the reasoning chain from applicable authority through institutional claim, evidence, verification, warrant, finding, response and follow-up (Sangwa, 2026). The present chapter develops the prior framework in one important direction: it places educational purpose and a differentiated conception of quality explicitly above the institutional and regulatory layers. This is an interpretive extension for the reference volume, not a claim that the model has been field-tested, adopted by HEC, or shown to improve reviewer reliability.

A second extension concerns resilience and the limits of interchangeability. The original governance logic emphasises sustaining digital provision and tracking evidence; the expanded view treats learner protection and continuity as central questions of quality in volatile environments. It recognises that cross-level relationships may fail through bottlenecks, and that an otherwise strong institution may need disciplinary or programme-specific controls. For example, evidence needed for a history programme cannot be assumed sufficient for supervised clinical training. Likewise, the arrangements appropriate to a small specialised college may differ from those of a multi-campus public university. Comparability should concern defensible educational functions and thresholds, not the mechanical replication of organisational forms.

The third extension is an explicit test of public value. Accreditation protects minimum standards and institutional legitimacy, but the larger educational undertaking also requires examining whether programmes create worthwhile opportunities for learning, research, social participation and responsible professional action. Public value cannot be converted into a single uncontroversial score, and governments should not use it to abolish academic independence. It can nevertheless be investigated through programme rationale, evidence of community and disciplinary need, responsible engagement with stakeholders, graduate capabilities and demonstrable contribution, interpreted with awareness of mission and context. This prevents compliance from becoming the endpoint of quality governance.

A final safeguard concerns proportionality of documentation. Evidence traceability does not justify unlimited paperwork. Institutions should maintain a manageable register of material claims, applicable sources, owners, verification methods, risks, decisions and corrective actions, reusing records generated through normal academic operation wherever feasible. Evidence should be collected because it clarifies consequential questions, not because every possible artefact can be uploaded. A mature system is capable of explaining why evidence is needed, how it will be assessed, when it should be updated and what action follows. Documentary economy and intellectual rigour are compatible when the architecture is purposeful.

The practical implications below follow from a central asymmetry of responsibility. Universities bear primary responsibility for delivering what they promise; academics determine the integrity of disciplinary learning within lawful institutional governance; regulators provide external assurance that defined standards and public safeguards are met; and students and society experience the consequences of failures that may not be visible in a dossier. A useful quality system therefore allocates responsibilities without assuming that any one actor possesses complete knowledge of educational performance. It creates routes through which concerns can be reported, verified, corrected and incorporated into future decisions.

1.11 Implications for universities, regulators, students, employers, and society

For university governing bodies and executive leaders, the foremost responsibility is to translate mission statements into viable educational commitments. Councils and executive teams should be able to explain how institutional strategy, enrolment assumptions, academic staffing, learning resources, finance, risk management and internal QA

support the actual portfolio of programmes. They should not treat a favourable external decision as evidence that every internal process is functioning. Periodic review ought to examine whether programme commitments can still be sustained after changes in funding, staffing or technology. Where weaknesses are identified, leadership is responsible for allocating resources, defining accountability and verifying correction rather than merely approving action-plan documents.

Academic senates, curriculum committees and faculties carry particular responsibility for the intellectual integrity of qualifications. Programme approval should scrutinise the level, scope and coherence of learning outcomes; progression across modules; disciplinary sufficiency; credible assessment; assessment moderation; and the availability of appropriate teaching and research expertise. Curricular responsiveness should not degenerate into fashionable module naming without substantial content, and compliance should not override academic reasoning. Academic bodies should insist that the proposed learning experience is educationally justified and feasible under the resources and modalities claimed. They should also require periodic reconsideration when new knowledge or changes to professions make the curriculum materially outdated.

Within these governance arrangements, internal quality-assurance professionals must maintain a connection between institutional policies and evidence of enactment. The most useful QA information is not necessarily the largest dataset. It is information that allows an institution to identify an educational claim, test the claim against relevant standards and practice, locate a material weakness, assign an improvement action and determine whether the action worked. Review cycles should be sensitive to programme stage and risk rather than uniformly burdensome. Internal QA should also report limitations and contrary evidence honestly: protecting the institution's reputation by hiding weaknesses undermines the legitimacy of the quality system.

External regulators and programme reviewers protect public trust through competent, impartial, legally grounded and evidence-sensitive judgement. Reviewers should establish source authority and applicability before asking for evidence, distinguish compulsory requirements from professional advice, and document the warrants supporting material findings. A deficiency in the dossier should not automatically be represented as proof of an absent institutional capability; equally, a credible-looking dossier should not be accepted as proof of full operational implementation. Independent expertise, conflict-of-interest management, reviewer calibration, procedural fairness and proportionate follow-up strengthen both the consistency and legitimacy of accreditation decisions (HAQAA Initiative, 2018).

At the point of educational delivery, lecturers and instructional designers should design evidence-rich learning experiences rather than merely transmit content. Lecturers should understand the difference between what a module covers and what students can demonstrably do at its conclusion. Assessment should be sufficiently authentic and controlled to sustain confidence in the qualification, particularly where AI can mediate the production of student work. Staff also need a realistic workload, relevant professional development and specialist support. Holding individuals responsible for institutional quality while withholding the conditions needed to deliver it is an accountability contradiction that senior management must address.

From the learner’s perspective, a credible quality system must provide accurate, intelligible information about programme recognition, workload, delivery arrangements, fees and associated costs, assessment, learner support, progression and complaint procedures. Students should have reasonable channels to report inaccessible materials, unreasonable workloads or failures to provide advertised services without fear of retaliation. Their views constitute indispensable evidence about lived provision, although satisfaction alone does not determine academic standards. Learner protection requires the ability to use feedback alongside assessment, performance, accessibility and other evidence while preserving confidentiality and fair treatment.

Employers and professional bodies contribute an important, though not exclusive, source of evidence about changing roles, competencies, professional conduct and the constraints graduates encounter in practice. Their participation is valuable when it informs academic design and appropriately supervised experiential learning. It should not become control over curricula in the interest of one firm or short-term occupational fashion. Professional regulatory requirements must be correctly distinguished from general stakeholder preferences. A thoughtful university seeks dialogue with employers while retaining responsibility for disciplinary knowledge, independent thinking, research capability and the wider public interest.

At the system level, governments and communities depend on universities to sustain credible knowledge and responsible graduates. Education policy should therefore balance expansion and workforce development with academic freedom, equitable access, research infrastructure and the integrity of qualifications. National data systems can support policy learning, but their indicators should be interpreted transparently and with regard to measurement limitations. Civil society, employers, families and communities also have an interest in universities that communicate accurately about their services, preserve disciplinary integrity and contribute to national development without overstating outcomes.

Table 1.7

Differentiated Responsibilities for Purpose-Referenced Quality

Actor	Primary responsibility	Evidence and accountability emphasis
Council / executive	Resource viability, strategic accountability and continuity.	Funded capability, risk review, verified institutional action.
Senate / faculties	Disciplinary standards, curriculum coherence, assessment validity.	External peer scrutiny, moderated achievement, programme decisions.
Internal QA	Evidence systems, monitoring, improvement and closure.	Transparent registers, audits, implementation follow-up.
HEC / authorised reviewers	Applicable standards, proportional evidence-based evaluation.	Provenance, verified warrants, fair procedures and recorded findings.
Lecturers / design teams	Educational implementation and valid learning experiences.	Operational courses, student work, assessment and timely feedback.
Students / support units	Meaningful participation, learner voice, fairness and protection.	Accessible resources, complaints, support records and outcomes.
Employers / professions	Professional relevance and supervised practice expectations.	Structured consultation, appropriate practical competency evidence.
Government / society	Public trust, equity, knowledge, accountability and development.	Reliable statistics, transparent policy, responsible public outcomes.

Note. Original differentiated responsibility map for higher-education professionals; actual mandates depend on jurisdiction and institutional statutes.

A hypothetical illustration shows how differentiated responsibilities work. Consider a regional university proposing a blended Master of Education programme for employed teachers. A strong rationale may identify demand for flexible postgraduate learning and a defensible graduate profile. Senate must still test the academic level, research methods, supervision, curriculum progression and assessment plan. The digital learning team must demonstrate that courses and support systems function under the intended connectivity conditions. Finance and academic management must evidence sustained staffing and the cost of research supervision. The QA unit must verify alignment and establish monitoring indicators. An external reviewer evaluates the evidence against the applicable requirements, explaining any uncertainty or conditions. No actor can legitimately substitute another actor's documentary approval for its own function.

The illustration also shows why responsible quality governance is not simply stricter regulation. A requirement for an expensive proprietary platform would be difficult to defend as a universal quality condition if an accessible, secure and educationally equivalent alternative meets the applicable standard. Conversely, low institutional cost would not excuse the absence of adequate postgraduate supervision. Context-sensitive judgement means evaluating the educational function and applicable threshold before deciding whether the proposed means are sufficient. The objective is demanding but fair accountability capable of recognising institutional diversity without diluting learner protection.

For researchers, the chapter yields a programme of testable questions. Do evidence-traceability instruments improve the consistency or explainability of reviewer conclusions under controlled conditions? Which dimensions of institutional capability most strongly predict implementation problems across different modes of delivery? How can educational transformation be evaluated without penalising institutions serving disadvantaged student populations? Which digital indicators are genuinely informative about learning, and which introduce measurement error or surveillance harms? What costs and outcomes follow from alternative governance configurations? Such questions require empirical methods beyond this conceptual chapter, including comparative case study, observational research, calibration experiments and longitudinal programme evaluation.

1.12 Conclusion: Establishing the intellectual agenda for educational quality transformation

Higher education quality is too consequential to be equated with prestige, compliance, connectivity, graduate employment or a single outcome indicator. Each may supply relevant information, but each leaves important questions unanswered. Quality emerges from the relationship between worthwhile educational purposes, intellectually credible curricula, supportive and sustainable institutional conditions, students' genuine opportunities to learn, reliable evidence and defensible evaluation. The chapter has therefore argued for a purpose-referenced, multidimensional and evidence-dependent account that protects both academic ambition and public accountability.

The African context makes this account especially important. Expanded participation, increasingly digital provision, national development expectations and continental harmonisation initiatives create valuable opportunities while exposing institutional differences in resources, access, regulation and capacity. Rwanda's strategic and higher-education guidance provides a concrete policy setting, but it does not eliminate the need for interpretive care: a legally applicable requirement, a national strategy, a continental benchmark and an academic recommendation do different kinds of work. Quality judgements remain credible only when these forms of authority and evidence are not confused.

The proposed six-domain framework contributes a practical grammar for asking more precise questions. Regulatory compliance concerns legitimate thresholds; academic quality concerns disciplinary substance and standards; educational effectiveness concerns credible learning; learner protection concerns equitable and safe participation; institutional sustainability concerns continuity of the educational offer; and public value concerns contribution beyond the campus. The domains cannot be reduced to a compensatory average or converted into a final accreditation judgement without authorised criteria and validated procedures. Their value lies in revealing what a single metric or document conceals and in guiding proportionate requests for evidence.

The conceptual synthesis also identifies why quality governance must be integrated across levels and across time. A well-resourced institution may fail to implement a particular programme; a convincing curriculum can be undermined by staffing, assessment or support; and a sound decision today may require reconsideration after material change. The book therefore approaches quality as a continuing relationship among educational purpose, institutional capability, programme assurance, evidence-traceable judgement and enhancement. The IETQG and

ETAJ constructs provide an organised vocabulary for exploring that relationship, while their empirical and regulatory limits remain explicit.

A final implication follows for scholarly and professional practice. Rigorous quality assurance should be neither a ritual of documents nor an unbounded demand for more information. It should be a disciplined capacity to explain what educational commitments matter, what requirements legitimately apply, which evidence supports the claims, why the evidence warrants a conclusion and what action protects learning when reality falls short of the promise. Having established that intellectual foundation, the analysis can turn to the national legal and institutional arrangements through which Rwanda and other African systems recognise qualifications, authorise provision and make consequential accreditation decisions.

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