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A PRISMA-Guided Systematic Review of Internal Quality Assurance and Stakeholder Engagement in Higher Education: Beyond Accreditation with a Focus on the Global South

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Abstract: This study synthesizes academic literature on Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) and stakeholder engagement in higher education, focusing on systems operating beyond formal accreditation. Using a PRISMA-guided Systematic Literature Review (SLR), this research analyzed 22 studies published between 2010 and 2025 from four major databases (Scopus, Taylor & Francis, ScienceDirect, and ERIC) through thematic synthesis and bibliometric mapping. The findings reveal that IQA is conceptualized as an autonomous, improvement-focused system that fosters a quality culture through diverse models. Effective multi-stakeholder engagement, involving faculty, students, and staff, is identified as crucial for success. While challenges such as leadership and resource constraints exist, they can be overcome by enablers like strong leadership and participatory cultures. This review contributes uniquely by synthesizing IQA practices outside formal accreditation, emphasizing participatory engagement for developing an intrinsic quality culture, and highlighting emergent research from Global South contexts. The findings can inform policymakers, higher education leaders, and practitioners in creating effective IQA systems and guide future research..

Keywords: *Beyond accreditation, higher education, internal quality assurance, quality culture, stakeholder engagement.*

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, global higher education has undergone significant transformations in response to external pressures such as financial crises, globalization, and the growing demand for institutional accountability. As public funding declines, universities transition from state-supported to state-assisted models, requiring diversified financial strategies and increased transparency. These changes have prompted universities to adapt to a more competitive and complex environment (Adam, 2020). The massification of higher education has expanded access to a more diverse student population, including non-traditional and minority groups, challenging institutions to offer inclusive curricula and adaptable teaching methods (Wolhuter & Jacobs, 2021).

While these challenges continue to shape higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital transformation, driving the widespread adoption of online and hybrid learning formats (Sultan et al., 2023). Moreover, the internationalization of higher education remains a core agenda, with cross-border collaborations expanding through digital platforms. As these shifts unfold, global quality standards like ISO 9001 and the ENQA framework have become benchmarks for institutional accountability and transparency (Akhtar et al., 2025).

The COVID-19 crisis was a punctuated equilibrium, catalyzing reforms across higher education systems. Institutions were required to reevaluate their missions, restructure governance, and develop more agile, collaborative, and inclusive responses to address the challenges of the post-pandemic world (Purcell & Lumbreras, 2021). In this context, external accreditation systems such as BAN-PT in Indonesia, EQAR in Europe, and ABET in the U.S. have played a central role in ensuring institutional quality. These frameworks have promoted improvements in documentation, self-evaluation, and auditing practices (Kayal & Khalife, 2025; Sudianto & Simon, 2020).

Despite the rise of formal accreditation frameworks such as BAN-PT in Indonesia, EQAR in Europe, and ABET in the U.S., these systems have revealed limitations. Concerns include excessive bureaucratic burdens, a focus on compliance rather

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than genuine quality enhancement, and inconsistent evaluations (Fesenko et al., 2022). As a result, there has been growing interest in internal quality assurance (IQA) systems, which emphasize reflective practice, institutional ownership, and contextual relevance. IQA is increasingly considered essential for fostering long-term educational quality through continuous data collection, participatory evaluation, and localized improvement processes. Crucially, the effectiveness of IQA depends on the active engagement of internal stakeholders, faculty, students, and administrative staff who play a central role in shaping a robust quality culture (Carvalho & Teixeira, 2021; Umbase, 2023).

At the heart of effective IQA systems is the active engagement of internal stakeholders, faculty, students, and administrative staff who play a crucial role in creating a robust quality culture. Beyond surveys, students actively contribute to governance and quality committees, enabling a more responsive and student-centered decision-making process (Serrano et al., 2025; Stalmeijer et al., 2016). Similarly, administrative staff help operationalize quality policies and coordinate system-level efforts (Jingura & Kamusoko, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021). Collaborative IQA models that integrate multiple stakeholders have proven effective in improving adaptability and sustainability, particularly in diverse institutional settings (Maryuni et al., 2024; Warta et al., 2023).

However, despite these promising developments, the implementation of IQA faces significant challenges. These include structural limitations, cultural resistance, and inadequate human resources, which hinder effective stakeholder engagement and alignment (Mukhatayev et al., 2024; Tamrat, 2021). To overcome these challenges, a holistic strategy that combines policy reform, capacity building, and integrated information systems is necessary (Ta & Nguyen, 2023). In the post-pandemic era, IQA has evolved from a mere compliance mechanism into a strategic tool for fostering institutional credibility, societal relevance, and educational excellence.

Several prior meta-syntheses and systematic reviews have examined IQA, but these reviews often focus on formal accreditation systems and overlook the emerging trends of institution-led quality assurance. For example, (Chakraborty et al., 2019; Ferrero-Ferrero et al., 2018) explored stakeholder engagement in accreditation and sustainability contexts, but did not address IQA systems beyond accreditation. Similarly, Manatos et al. (2015), highlighted the integration of quality management practices across universities but did not consider the evolving role of internal motivation in IQA systems. This study, therefore, complements previous reviews by focusing on autonomous IQA systems driven by internal needs and institutional ownership, particularly in the Global South, where these systems are underrepresented in existing literature.

A critical gap remains in the literature, however, between theoretical frameworks and the practical implementation of IQA systems. Much of the existing research focuses on external accreditation frameworks, leaving a gap in the study of autonomous IQA systems driven by internal motivation rather than regulatory mandates. This gap is especially prominent in developing countries and Global South contexts, where localized needs and participatory approaches are underexplored (Ayala-Orozco et al., 2018; Wakunuma et al., 2021). To bridge this gap, this study synthesizes existing research on IQA and stakeholder engagement, moving beyond the confines of formal accreditation. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are IQA systems and stakeholder engagement strategies conceptualized and operationalized within higher education institutions to foster quality cultures independent of formal accreditation frameworks?
2. What are the primary barriers and enabling factors in the implementation of these autonomous IQA systems?
3. What are the significant research gaps in the academic literature concerning the implementation of autonomous IQA systems across diverse institutional and regional contexts?

This review contributes to the field by being one of the first to systematically synthesize IQA practices that explicitly operate outside the regulatory frameworks of formal accreditation. The study's dual focus on participatory engagement and the inclusion of research from the Global South provides a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of quality assurance. By examining under-researched areas and synthesizing diverse models, this research aims to move the discourse toward more equitable, adaptive, and globally relevant approaches to higher education quality assurance.

Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, following the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol, as a guiding framework (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA ensures a structured, transparent, and reproducible process for identifying, selecting, analyzing, and reporting academic literature, enhancing the reliability of evidence-based findings (Ramasamy, 2022; Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021). The review synthesized research on internal quality assurance (IQA) and stakeholder engagement in higher education institutions, specifically focusing on studies addressing IQA systems beyond the scope of formal accreditation frameworks. This methodology ensures methodological rigor and academic accountability, which strengthens the reliability of the review's findings.

Search Strategy, Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria, and Adherence to PRISMA 2020

The preparation phase of this systematic review began with the clear formulation of the research objectives, development of a comprehensive search strategy, and establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria. A Boolean search string was developed and applied across four selected academic databases: Scopus (n = 289), Taylor & Francis (n = 756), ScienceDirect (n = 1137), and ERIC (n = 121). The search string used was: ("internal quality assurance" OR "self-accreditation" OR "internal quality management") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "tertiary education" OR "college") AND ("stakeholder engagement" OR "quality culture" OR "educational improvement") AND ("Global South"). The literature search was conducted from January to March 2025 and was limited to publications published between 2010 and 2025. A total of 2,303 records were initially retrieved, which were exported into Zotero reference management software to facilitate systematic deduplication and screening.

The inclusion criteria specified that only peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers written in English and published between 2010 and 2025 would be considered. Eligible studies were also required to explicitly address either internal quality assurance or stakeholder engagement in the context of higher education institutions. Studies were excluded if they were non-peer-reviewed materials (such as editorials, book chapters, or theses), written in languages other than English, or focused on topics outside the scope of internal quality assurance (e.g., external accreditation frameworks, primary or secondary education, or unrelated quality contexts). The detailed inclusion and exclusion parameters are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria Type	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, research reports with empirical data or conceptual or theoretical frameworks (e.g., Delphi, policy analyses).	Editorials, book chapters, theses, non-peer-reviewed publications, and studies without clear research methods.
Year of Publication	Publications from 2010 to 2025 focusing on contemporary issues in IQA and stakeholder engagement in higher education.	Publications before 2010 or after 2025.
Language	Articles written in English to maintain consistency and accessibility for the review team.	Non-English publications, to maintain consistency and ensure accessibility of the studies for the review team.
Focus Area	Studies on internal quality assurance, stakeholder engagement, quality management, and policy perspectives in higher education institutions.	Studies on external accreditation, primary/secondary education, or unrelated topics.
Methodology	Empirical studies with clear research methods (qualitative, quantitative, mixed) and reliable results, as well as non-empirical studies that provide conceptual frameworks or expert opinions on IQA and stakeholder engagement.	Opinion pieces, conceptual papers lacking theoretical frameworks, and studies without clear research methods.

Table 1 presents the detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria that guided the study selection process. As shown in the table, only empirical studies with clear research methods (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods) were considered, ensuring that all included studies provided reliable and valid data. Additionally, non-empirical studies providing conceptual frameworks or theoretical perspectives (such as Delphi studies and policy analyses) were also included to enrich the understanding of IQA and stakeholder engagement. Studies that were conceptual papers lacking robust theoretical frameworks, opinion pieces, or studies without clear research methods were excluded. This structured approach adhered to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, which are well-established for enhancing the methodological rigor, reproducibility, and academic accountability of systematic literature reviews, ensuring a transparent and rigorous process throughout the review.

Study Selection and Data Extraction Process

The initial 2,303 records underwent systematic screening, with 1,800 records assessed based on titles and abstracts according to predefined eligibility criteria. From these, 248 full-text articles were retrieved for further review. Disagreements during the screening process were resolved through discussions between two independent reviewers to ensure consistency in applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria. In cases where the reviewers could not reach a consensus, a third reviewer was consulted to resolve the disagreement, ensuring a collaborative and transparent decision-making process. This method ensured that all decisions were made with thorough consideration and minimized potential bias.

After the eligibility assessment, 212 articles were excluded for reasons such as non-relevance to IQA or stakeholder engagement (171), non-final publication status (10), non-English language (11), and insufficient methodological quality (20). Ultimately, 22 studies were included in the final synthesis.

Inter-Rater Reliability and Quality Assessment

To ensure the reliability of the study selection and data extraction process, inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, which measured the agreement between the two independent reviewers (Belur et al., 2018; Cole, 2023; Rohde et al., 2022). Discrepancies during the data extraction phase were resolved through consensus discussions, and in cases of unresolved disagreements, a third reviewer was involved to achieve a final consensus. Regular calibration sessions were conducted to ensure consistency in the application of the predefined criteria and to minimize potential bias across the screening and extraction phases.

In addition to inter-rater reliability, the quality of the included studies was evaluated using a fit-for-purpose appraisal tool appropriate to the study design. For quantitative studies, the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies was used, while the MMAT (Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool) was applied for studies employing both qualitative and quantitative components. These tools were selected for their robustness in assessing methodological rigor, relevance, and transparency across different study types. The JBI checklists are particularly well-suited to appraising diverse study designs, ensuring that only studies meeting high-quality standards were included in the final synthesis.

Only studies that met the predefined quality thresholds based on a comprehensive appraisal using the tools mentioned were retained for synthesis. Studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria (as outlined in Table 1) were excluded from the final analysis, ensuring the rigor and integrity of the review process. Additionally, the impact of quality on study inclusion, weighting, and sensitivity analyses was explicitly reported. Where necessary, studies with lower quality scores were given less weight in the synthesis, and sensitivity analyses were conducted to explore the influence of study quality on the overall findings.

Reporting and Synthesis of Eligible Studies

Following the screening and eligibility assessment, the reporting phase involved organizing and synthesizing the 22 eligible studies. The data extraction process focused on key aspects of IQA implementation and stakeholder engagement practices, with the studies analyzed in relation to the four research questions guiding this investigation. Specifically, the analysis examined the conceptual frameworks, institutional contexts, stakeholder roles, and the challenges or enabling factors identified across the studies.

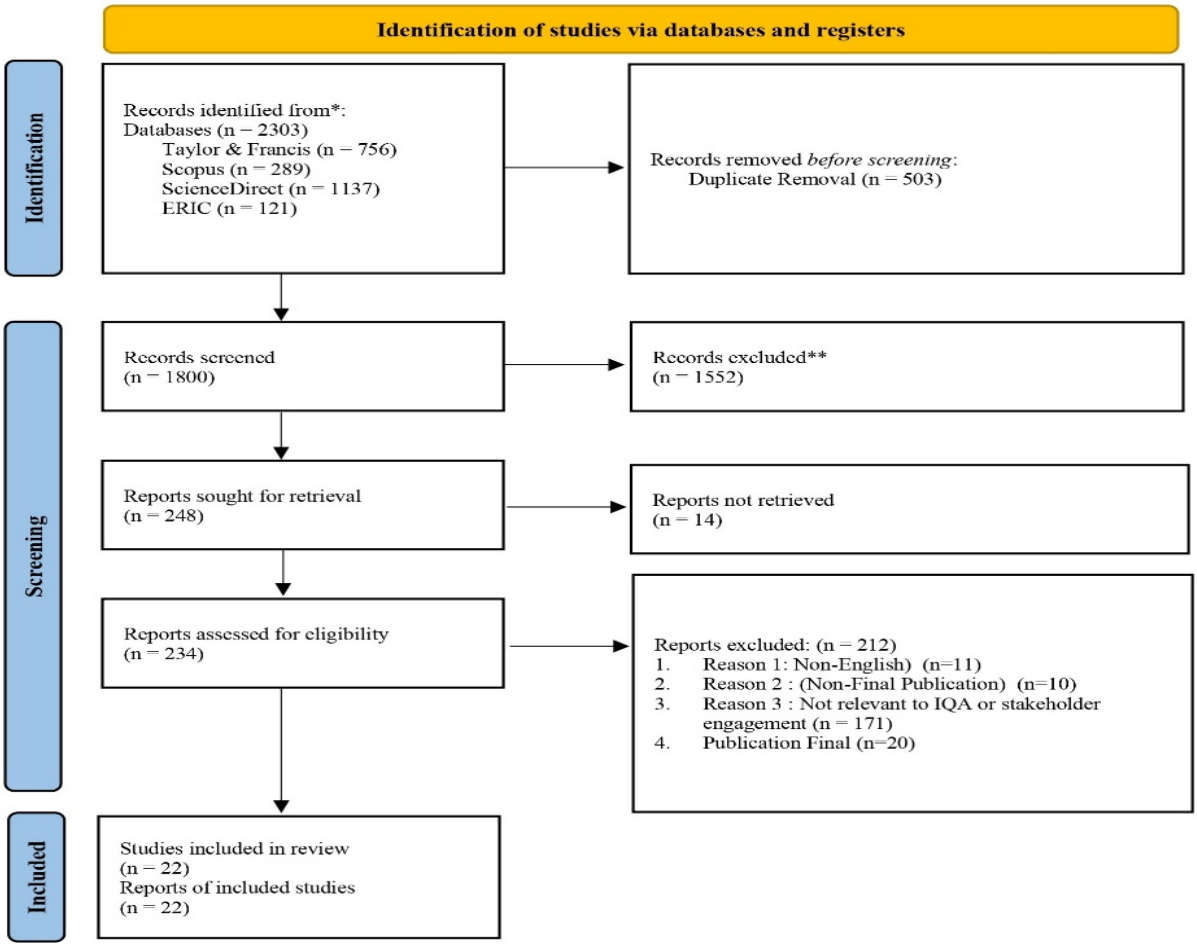

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for Study Selection

As shown in Figure 1, the study selection process was systematically documented (Page et al., 2021). Of the initial 2,303 records retrieved across four major academic databases (Scopus, Taylor & Francis, ScienceDirect, and ERIC), 503 duplicates were removed. The remaining 1,800 records underwent title and abstract screening, from which 1,552 were excluded due to irrelevance. A total of 248 full-text articles were retrieved, and after 14 inaccessible reports were removed, 234 articles were assessed for eligibility. Ultimately, 22 studies met the predefined inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. This transparent reporting process ensured methodological rigor and provided a strong foundation for the subsequent thematic synthesis.

Thematic Synthesis and Bibliometric Mapping

The thematic synthesis process was conducted to systematically identify recurring patterns across the selected studies, ensuring a rigorous, transparent, and reproducible analysis. The coding process began by thoroughly reviewing each study to understand its key findings and context, with a focus on concepts related to Internal Quality Assurance (IQA), stakeholder engagement, and challenges/enablers identified by the authors. To enhance reliability, we employed a structured codebook that was developed through an iterative process. This codebook included both broad themes (e.g., "IQA conceptualization" and "stakeholder engagement") and more granular sub-themes (e.g., "institutional contexts," "challenges," and "enabling factors").

The coding was conducted by a team of three independent coders, each trained in the use of the codebook and thematic analysis techniques. The unit of analysis was the individual study's key findings, with each coder independently tagging relevant text with labels that captured the essence of the concept being discussed. To maintain high inter-rater reliability, a consensus-based approach was employed for any discrepancies in coding. Calibration sessions were held periodically to resolve disagreements and ensure that all codes were applied consistently. The final coding structure was developed through these discussions, which allowed for the identification of key trends and patterns across the literature. Reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha to quantify the level of agreement between coders, ensuring that the final themes accurately reflected the data.

To address concerns of methodological underpowering, the bibliometric analysis methodology was enhanced by expanding the corpus. Initially, the analysis included only a small set of 22 studies; however, we broadened the scope to include all relevant records from the title/abstract stage, significantly increasing the sample size to ensure a more stable network structure. This expansion strengthens the representativeness of the analysis, providing a more comprehensive view of the IQA literature.

For the bibliometric mapping, VOSviewer software was utilized, applying keyword co-occurrence analysis to identify relationships between key terms like "internal quality assurance," "stakeholder engagement," and "accreditation." The analysis uncovered major thematic clusters such as "universities," "accreditation," and "teaching and learning," reflecting the primary areas of focus in the field. To ensure transparency, a supplementary codebook is included, outlining the methodological steps involved, such as inclusion/exclusion criteria, keyword selection, and clustering methodology.

Findings

The studies reviewed explore the conceptualization of Internal Quality Assurance (IQA), stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and the challenges and enablers identified across various contexts. These studies highlight different approaches to IQA and the methodologies employed in diverse settings, shedding light on the factors that contribute to fostering a quality culture in higher education. Table 2 provides a summary of these key findings, offering a clear overview of how IQA is conceptualized and applied in different countries and institutions. While common challenges, such as incomplete documentation and uneven implementation, are evident, factors like strong governmental support serve as significant enablers of successful IQA practices.

Table 2. Summary of Key Findings from Reviewed Studies

No	Author(s) & Country	Focus of IQA Conceptualization	Stakeholder Involvement Mechanism	Challenges/Enablers Identified	Methodology & Context
1	(Prabowo et al., 2017)/ Indonesia	Emphasizes SPMI using PPEPP cycle to meet national standards.	QA unit staff responded to questionnaires on documentation and QA implementation stages.	Challenges: incomplete documents, uneven implementation. Enabler: stronger government support.	Quantitative survey of private universities in Indonesia.

Table 2. Continued

No	Author(s) & Country	Focus of IQA Conceptualization	Stakeholder Involvement Mechanism	Challenges/Enablers Identified	Methodology & Context
2	(Nguyen et al., 2021)/ Vietnam	IQA includes institutional policies for self-assessment, monitoring, and quality enhancement aligned with standards.	Stakeholders engaged via evaluation councils, feedback surveys, and quality evidence processes.	Enablers: QA awareness, improved leadership, strong staff/student support, high QA responsibility.	Qualitative interviews with 32 stakeholders from six universities in Vietnam's higher education context.
3	(Graham et al., 2023)/ South Africa	IQA framed with social realism: interaction of structure, agents, and culture to enhance quality systems.	QA units, faculty deans, peer mentorship for lecturers, and Student Representative Council participated in QA activities.	Challenges: slow progress, limited funds, staff shortages, high workload, resistance, mistrust in peer mentoring.	Interpretive case study with semi-structured interviews involving 12 stakeholders at two Namibian universities.
4	(Gora et al., 2019)/ Romania	IQA includes educational, infrastructural, practical, and research factors affecting student competencies.	Students involved in learning, practice, and research; teachers deliver quality learning activities.	Enablers: Strong education, practice, and research improve student skills and employability.	Quantitative PLS-SEM survey of 496 students from two public universities in Romania.
5	(Pham et al., 2020)/ Vietnam.	IQA framed as self-assessment influencing leadership, teaching, student support, and training quality.	Leaders led committees; lecturers self-assessed; students gave feedback via surveys.	Enablers: leadership awareness, teacher development, student support, and stakeholder input in curriculum design.	Qualitative study with interviews and focus groups involving 33 stakeholders from three Vietnamese universities.
6	(Kadhila & Iipumbu, 2019)/ Namibia	IQA based on strong quality culture is more effective than externally driven systems.	Uses student feedback, examiner reports, and institutional self-reflection for quality enhancement.	Challenges: bureaucracy from external QA. Enablers: strong quality culture, internal ownership.	Conceptual and critical literature analysis focused on Namibia's higher education system.
7	(Carvalho & Teixeira, 2021)/ Portugal	IQA as a student-centered system using pedagogical questionnaires and Juran trilogy for continuous improvement.	Students complete questionnaires; follow-up discussions held with course directors.	Challenge: student disengagement. Enabler: transparent communication of improvement actions to students.	Conceptual paper with a small survey of 25 students at the University of Minho, Portugal.
8	(Fauzi et al., 2024)/ Indonesia	IQA (SPMI) as a 7-step annual cycle managed by a central Quality Assurance Institute (LPM).	LPM coordinates with leadership, faculty, and students via audits and quality review meetings.	Challenges: time constraints, limited HR, data issues. Enablers: quality culture and auditor training.	Qualitative case study of SPMI implementation at a state Islamic institute in Kediri, Indonesia.
9	(Khtere, 2020)/ Egypt	IQA via faculty performance appraisal using Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs) to assess roles.	Faculty act as instructors, planners, mentors evaluated via peer review, student feedback, documents.	Enabler: EPAs for objectivity. Challenge: mistrust from poorly designed systems.	Three-round Delphi study with 29 experts at Imam Abd-Elrahman University, Egypt.

Table 2. Continued

No	Author(s) & Country	Focus of IQA Conceptualization	Stakeholder Involvement Mechanism	Challenges/Enablers Identified	Methodology & Context
10	(Do et al., 2020)/ Vietnam	IQA as supervision, inspection, and evaluation mechanisms to ensure HEI quality and accountability.	Teachers surveyed on IQA and culture; leaders and lecturers interviewed on QA mechanisms and perceptions.	Enabler: private HEI autonomy supports stronger IQA implementation and quality culture vs. public HEIs.	Mixed-methods: 222 teacher questionnaires and interviews in public/private HEIs in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.
11	(Noda et al., 2021)/ Japan	IQA analyzed via Elken & Stensaker's 'quality work'—focusing on actor intentionality in learning outcomes assessment.	Academics and administrators develop QA committees, training programs, and ICT systems for quality data management.	Challenges: unclear methods to measure outcomes, risk of IQA reduced to compliance exercise.	Comparative study of self-evaluation reports and interviews in Japan and Taiwan HEIs.
12	(Anane & Addaney, 2016)/ Ghana	IQA as a systematic process led by a QA and Planning Unit (QAPU) for continuous teaching improvement.	Management, staff, and students engaged via committees, consultations, and expert input sessions.	Challenges: staff misunderstanding QA, fear of victimization. Enablers: strong leadership and internal ownership.	Descriptive study of QA system implementation at a new public university in Ghana.
13	(Beerkens & Udam, 2017)/ Netherlands	IQA examined via 'collaborative governance' to align diverse stakeholder expectations in QA.	Rectors, staff, and students engaged through focus groups to share perspectives on QA purposes.	Challenge: conflicting expectations. Enabler: stakeholder dialogue aligns QA system effectiveness.	Qualitative study with 12 focus groups involving 68 stakeholders in Estonian higher education.
14	(Warta et al., 2023)/ Indonesia	IQA as a cyclical system (standard setting to improvement) led by a Quality Assurance Institute.	QAI/LPM coordinates IQAS with leaders, faculty, and staff via audits, training, and feedback.	Challenges: weak leadership, lack of auditors, procedural routine. Enablers: QA expertise, auditor training.	Qualitative case study at Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Swadharma, Indonesia, using observation and interviews.
15	(Lyytinen et al., 2017)/ Finland	QA conceptualized as managing stakeholder relationships, balancing academic goals and external expectations.	Rectors, QA managers, and academics involved through interviews and Delphi panel participation.	Challenge: need for flexible QA balancing internal academic and external stakeholder priorities, and centralized/unit dynamics.	Mixed-methods: interviews (25 QA personnel) and Delphi study (48 experts) in Finnish HE institutions.
16	(Chen & Hou, 2016)/ Taiwan	IQA via 'self-accreditation'—institutions set their own QA standards, stressing autonomy and fitness-for-purpose.	Institutions define QA criteria; faculty engage in setting program goals and learning outcomes.	Challenge: risk of omitting hard indicators. Enabler: promotes institutional uniqueness through tailored QA.	Content analysis of 28 institutions' QA standards + 3 university case studies in Taiwan HE system.
17	(Erofeeva et al., 2020)/ Russia	IQA via Quality Function Deployment (QFD) to align services with student, employer, and state needs.	Teachers and students surveyed on lab work quality to inform QFD and define educational needs.	Challenge: graduate–labor market mismatch. Enabler: QFD identifies key educational features valued by stakeholders.	Qualimetry (600 surveys) and QFD applied in five Russian universities.

Table 2. Continued

No	Author(s) & Country	Focus of IQA Conceptualization	Stakeholder Involvement Mechanism	Challenges/Enablers Identified	Methodology & Context
18	(Ahmad & Rizvi, 2025)/ Pakistan	IQA as an institutional process via QECs to drive improvement and bridge external QA demands.	QECs engage faculty, staff, and students through awareness, self-assessment facilitation, and feedback.	Challenges: limited autonomy, staff shortages, weak tech use, low engagement. Enabler: QECs raise quality awareness.	Qualitative multiple case study with interviews/focus groups of 17 stakeholders in Pakistani universities.
19	(Hou et al., 2018)/ Taiwan	IQA via self-accreditation, allowing institutions to build QA frameworks aligned with their strategic direction.	QA offices, program directors, and faculty developed standards, conducted reviews, and self-evaluations.	Challenges: reviewer mismatch, arbitrary criteria elimination, inconsistent reviews. Enabler: strengthened IQA capacity.	Mixed-methods: document analysis, focus groups (24), and survey (175) across 30 self-accrediting institutions in Taiwan.
20	(Tavares et al., 2016)/ Portugal	IQA was analyzed via strengths/weaknesses in reports using Harvey & Stensaker's quality culture lens.	Staff and students involved in self-assessment and evaluation activities as reported institutionally.	Weaknesses: limited participation, procedural focus. Strengths: structured QA and effective information systems.	Qualitative analysis of self and external assessment reports from 12 Portuguese HEIs under IQA certification.
21	(Legemaate et al., 2021)/ Netherlands	Enhancing quality culture through collective ownership using Socio-Technical Systems Design (STSD) principles.	Participatory STSD approach engaging lecturers, support staff, and leaders in QA co-design and implementation.	Challenges: low lecturer ownership and an imbalance in accountability versus enhancement. Enablers: leadership, teamwork, shared vision.	Conceptual paper proposing STSD to strengthen quality culture in higher education based on a literature review.
22	(Vukasovic, 2014)/ Norway	IQA is institutionalized by aligning regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements within faculties.	Admin and junior academics engage in regulatory development and promoting IQA understanding.	Challenges: IQA is not taken for granted; constant clarification is needed. Enablers: ESG use, connecting IQA to prior norms.	Comparative case study of two faculties (Croatia & Serbia) using document analysis and group interviews.

Conceptualization and Practice of Internal Quality Assurance

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) in higher education institutions was conceptualized in various ways, with studies emphasizing its role as both a compliance mechanism and a strategic, development-focused system. Various studies indicate that IQA is not merely perceived as a tool to meet external standards, but also as a strategic internal mechanism for continuous quality enhancement and autonomous institutional development. One primary conceptualization of IQA is as a framework that enables institutional autonomy in designing and executing quality assurance (Fauzi et al., 2024; Hou et al., 2018; Prabowo et al., 2017) emphasize the PPEPP cycle as a model for compliance with national standards while simultaneously fostering autonomy in quality management. In fact, 10 out of 22 studies (45%) reported that IQA is employed beyond accreditation requirements to drive institutional improvement (Fauzi et al., 2024; Prabowo et al., 2017).

Moreover, IQA is often conceptualized as a strategic planning tool, with models such as Quality Function Deployment (QFD) (Erofeeva et al., 2020), or Socio-Technical Systems Design (STSD) (Legemaate et al., 2021) focusing on meeting diverse stakeholder needs and enhancing institutional performance. Studies like (Kadhila & Iipumbu, 2019) argue that IQA should be seen as a dynamic, participatory process aimed at continuous improvement, rather than solely for compliance. According to (Gora et al., 2019; Kadhila & Iipumbu, 2019; Khtere, 2020; Legemaate et al., 2021). These conceptualizations show that IQA, by emphasizing the development of a quality culture, aligns with the broader goal of fostering long-term institutional resilience.

The practice of IQA, particularly in the context of faculty performance and professional development, was noted to integrate frameworks like Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs) in Egypt (Khtere, 2020). 9 of 22 studies (40%) found

that such frameworks facilitate a more tailored, development-oriented approach to quality management within higher education.

Strategies and Mechanisms for Internal Stakeholder Engagement in IQA Processes

Stakeholder engagement in IQA processes within higher education institutions is crucial for successful implementation. 18 out of 22 studies (82%) identified academic staff, students, and administrative personnel as key stakeholders in the process, with academic staff playing a central role in developing quality standards and preparing self-assessment reports (Ahmad & Rizvi, 2025; Pham et al., 2020; Warta et al., 2023). Among the strategies identified, the active participation of stakeholders in quality assurance committees and peer reviews of teaching was reported in 15 studies (68%) as essential for fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility within the institution (Graham et al., 2023; Vukasovic, 2014).

The role of institutional leaders, including deans and department heads, was found to be critical in facilitating engagement through strategic decision-making (Ahmad & Rizvi, 2025; Fauzi et al., 2024; Warta et al., 2023). 9 studies (40%) reported that when leadership is actively involved, engagement and trust among stakeholders improve, which in turn enhances the quality assurance process (Anane & Addaney, 2016). For example, (Carvalho & Teixeira, 2021; Pham et al., 2020) highlighted how leadership engagement directly correlates with stronger internal quality culture and the institutionalization of quality processes.

Students, too, are actively involved in IQA through pedagogical surveys, self-assessment committees, and curriculum development (Carvalho & Teixeira, 2021; Warta et al., 2023). 13 studies (55%) found that involving students in feedback mechanisms significantly impacts the continuous improvement of teaching and learning processes. Additionally, 60% of studies showed that engaging students in decision-making, particularly in curriculum design, leads to more inclusive and responsive quality management practices (Graham et al., 2023).

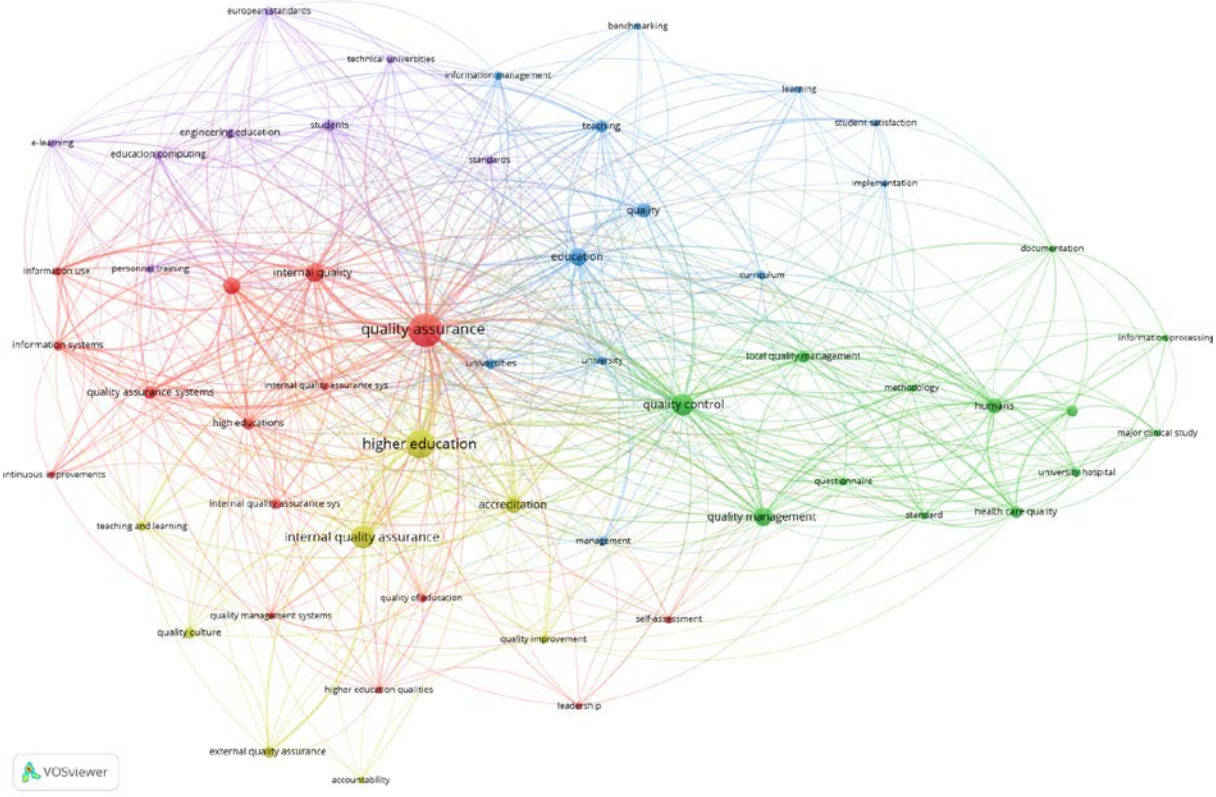

Figure 2. Bibliometric Mapping of IQA and Stakeholder Engagement Literature (1990–2025)

As illustrated in Figure 2 of the bibliometric analysis, which complements the thematic synthesis by providing a visual representation of co-occurrence, the term "quality assurance" serves as the central node, connecting to various thematic clusters. Key terms like "internal quality assurance," "higher education," and "quality management systems" form the core of the network, linking to related concepts such as "universities," "accreditation," and "teaching and learning." These connections highlight the multifaceted approach to quality assurance within higher education institutions, with a focus on continuous improvement, student satisfaction, and quality culture.

The visualization also reveals the global reach of quality assurance, with links to regional practices such as "European standards" and "benchmarking." Additionally, it shows the expanding application of quality assurance concepts to areas

beyond education, including "healthcare quality" and "university hospitals." These connections indicate emerging trends in the field, emphasizing the need for adaptable quality assurance models that can address both academic and professional sectors.

Main Challenges and Enabling Conditions for IQA and Stakeholder Engagement in Various Institutional and Regional Contexts

The effectiveness of Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) and stakeholder engagement in higher education is shaped by a variety of challenges and enabling conditions that vary across institutions and regions. Key challenges reported in several studies include limited leadership commitment and insufficient time for leaders to drive IQA efforts (Ahmad & Rizvi, 2025; Fauzi et al., 2024; Warta et al., 2023). For example, 12 of 22 studies highlighted the issue of leadership constraints. Other frequent challenges are insufficient staff capacity, lack of specialized IQA expertise, and a shortage of trained auditors (Ahmad & Rizvi, 2025; Graham et al., 2023; Kadhila & Iipumbu, 2019), with 10 studies reporting these human resource limitations. Additionally, 9 studies pointed to inadequate financial resources, poor technological infrastructure, and issues with data synchronization between institutions and central systems (Ahmad & Rizvi, 2025; Fauzi et al., 2024). Another significant challenge identified in 8 studies is the lack of stakeholder engagement, particularly among students, due to low awareness and resistance to IQA processes being seen as bureaucratic or punitive (Anane & Addaney, 2016; Carvalho & Teixeira, 2021).

On the other hand, several enabling conditions were found to enhance IQA effectiveness. Strong, visible commitment from leadership is crucial, as noted in 14 of 22 studies, which emphasize that effective leadership engagement fosters a culture of continuous improvement (Anane & Addaney, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2021). Well-resourced and clearly defined governance structures, such as quality assurance units, are also important, with 10 studies highlighting their role in ensuring effective IQA (Fauzi et al., 2024). Additionally, 12 studies emphasize the importance of systematic capacity-building programs, including training for both general staff and specialized roles like auditors (Ahmad & Rizvi, 2025; Legemaate et al., 2021). Moreover, implementing well-defined, cyclical IQA processes and maintaining transparent communication strategies were identified in 8 studies as key practices that support stakeholder engagement and enhance system efficacy (Carvalho & Teixeira, 2021).

Significant Trends and Gaps in Literature

The review of 22 studies reveals several dominant trends and gaps in the literature. IQA is increasingly framed not just as a compliance measure but as a strategic, context-responsive process aimed at building a quality culture and supporting institutional autonomy. 12 of 22 studies conceptualized IQA as a mechanism for continuous improvement, extending beyond mere accreditation (Tavares et al., 2016). Diverse models of IQA were observed, with approaches ranging from state-mandated frameworks, such as Indonesia's SPMI, to more adaptive models like Taiwan's self-accreditation. 7 studies explored such models, showing a shift toward more localized and flexible approaches to quality assurance.

Stakeholder engagement remains a core enabler, with 15 studies highlighting its importance for effective IQA implementation. Mechanisms such as quality committees, internal audits, and curriculum forums are commonly used to institutionalize participatory processes. Despite this, 8 studies noted persistent challenges related to leadership commitment, resource limitations, and negative perceptions of IQA.

Methodologically, 15 of 22 studies employed qualitative approaches such as case studies and interviews, with 7 studies using quantitative methods like surveys. Notably, 6 studies used Delphi techniques to co-design frameworks with expert stakeholders. Geographically, Southeast and East Asia, particularly Indonesia and Vietnam, dominate the literature, with 10 studies focused on these regions, while Africa, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa are underrepresented.

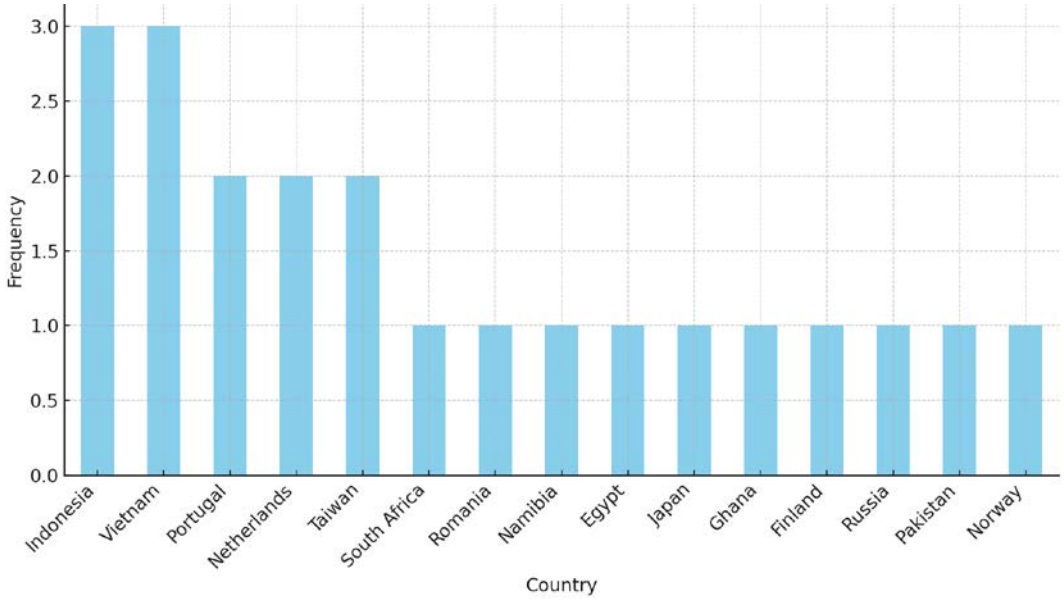

Figure 3. Country Representation of IQA Studies in the Final Review

As shown in Figure 3, Indonesia and Vietnam are the most frequently studied countries in the context of Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) systems, with Indonesia and Vietnam leading the way. These countries are often at the forefront of IQA research, indicating a growing recognition of the importance of improving quality assurance frameworks in higher education, especially in Southeast Asia and Europe. However, the distribution of IQA research shows a clear geographical imbalance, with regions like Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa being underrepresented in the literature.

This imbalance highlights the need for more research from the developing and Global South regions. While stakeholder engagement is often discussed, empirical studies exploring its impact on institutional culture and educational outcomes remain limited. Additionally, there is a need for longitudinal research to track the evolution of IQA systems over time, as most current studies rely on short-term or cross-sectional data. Addressing these gaps will be crucial for creating a more equitable and contextually grounded understanding of IQA across global higher education systems.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review, covering 22 studies from 2010 to 2025, provides valuable insights into internal quality assurance (IQA) systems in higher education, particularly focusing on institution-driven models beyond traditional accreditation frameworks. The findings show that IQA is evolving from a compliance-driven mechanism to a strategic tool aimed at fostering continuous improvement and institutional autonomy. This aligns with trends observed in other reviews but adds a focus on autonomous systems, such as self-accreditation in Taiwan and the SPMI cycles in Indonesia (Fauzi et al., 2024; Prabowo et al., 2017).

The studies highlight the importance of fostering a quality culture within institutions, with IQA increasingly conceptualized as a dynamic, context-responsive process. This shift is reflected in various models, including the Quality Function Deployment (QFD) in Russia (Erofeeva et al., 2020), and competency-based evaluations in Egypt (Khtere, 2020). In comparison to other reviews, this review provides a more in-depth examination of how institutions can drive quality internally, with a particular emphasis on autonomy in the design and implementation of IQA systems (Tavares et al., 2016; Warta et al., 2023).

Additionally, stakeholder engagement is a central theme, with the review highlighting various participatory mechanisms like quality committees, internal audits, and feedback loops (Ahmad & Rizvi, 2025; Anane & Addaney, 2016; Carvalho & Teixeira, 2021). However, challenges remain, including limited leadership commitment, insufficiently trained staff, and negative perceptions of IQA as a bureaucratic burden (Anane & Addaney, 2016). These challenges underscore the need for governance safeguards to ensure that autonomy does not lead to indicator dilution or reduced accountability.

In practice, the review calls for HEIs to develop bespoke IQA systems that align with their unique missions, contexts, and stakeholder needs (Chen & Hou, 2016; Hou et al., 2018). It suggests that institutions should adopt fit-for-purpose models, avoiding generic templates, and ensuring that stakeholder engagement is integrated throughout all IQA phases from design to evaluation. This approach aligns with recommendations from previous reviews but stresses the need for a shift towards institutional autonomy in quality assurance frameworks, supported by transparent communication strategies and active participation from faculty, students, and administrative staff.

While promoting autonomy, the review also emphasizes the importance of accountability mechanisms. Institutional leaders should maintain a visible, sustained commitment to IQA and ensure that the findings lead to tangible

improvements rather than merely fulfilling compliance requirements (Anane & Addaney, 2016; Warta et al., 2023). The review also highlights risks associated with institutional autonomy, such as potential gaming of indicators or equity issues. Therefore, autonomy must be balanced with strong governance frameworks to preserve public accountability and ensure genuine quality enhancement.

Finally, this review contributes to the growing body of research by offering a focused synthesis on institution-driven IQA systems and stakeholder engagement, adding to the broader conversation on flexibility in quality assurance systems (Graham et al., 2023; Tavares et al., 2016). However, it also identifies gaps, particularly in the empirical study of stakeholder engagement's impact on institutional culture and educational outcomes. Further research is needed, especially longitudinal studies, to understand the long-term effects of these systems in diverse higher education contexts.

This systematic review provides valuable insights into the conceptualization and implementation of Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) systems, particularly those operating beyond formal accreditation frameworks. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, there is a geographical imbalance in the reviewed studies, with a significant underrepresentation of research from Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of studies are concentrated in Southeast Asia, Europe, and North Africa, which limits the generalizability of the findings to higher education systems in developing regions where IQA practices may differ.

Second, the methodological diversity of the studies is skewed toward qualitative approaches such as case studies, interviews, and document analysis, which provide detailed context-specific insights but may not be broadly applicable. While some quantitative and mixed-methods studies are included, their contribution is relatively small, limiting the overall ability to generalize the results across diverse contexts.

Third, the review focuses on studies published between 2010 and 2025, a period that might not capture the long-term effects of IQA systems. Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of IQA over an extended period are scarce, making it difficult to assess the sustained impact of these systems on institutional effectiveness and quality culture. Lastly, while the review synthesizes studies on the implementation and conceptualization of IQA, there is limited research on empirical outcomes, such as improvements in student learning, institutional performance, or stakeholder satisfaction. Most studies focus more on the processes and mechanisms of IQA, rather than on concrete, measurable outcomes.

This systematic literature review synthesized 22 academic studies published between 2010 and 2025, focusing on Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) systems and stakeholder engagement in higher education, particularly beyond formal accreditation frameworks. Findings for Research Questions 1 reveal that IQA systems are increasingly viewed as strategic, internally driven processes aimed at fostering continuous improvement and institutional autonomy, rather than merely complying with external standards. To achieve this, institutions have adopted various models, such as self-accreditation, the PPEPP and SPMI cycles, and innovative methods like Quality Function Deployment (QFD) and Socio-Technical Systems Design (STSD). These models are designed to be context-sensitive, aligning with each institution’s unique goals and capacities, and they reflect a broader shift towards fostering a quality culture that emphasizes self-regulation and internal development.

In response to Research Question 2, the review identifies significant barriers in the implementation of autonomous IQA systems. Primary challenges include weak leadership commitment, limited human and financial resources, and low stakeholder engagement due to bureaucratic perceptions of IQA as a mere compliance exercise. In contrast, enabling factors that promote successful implementation include strong leadership, clear and supportive institutional policies, capacity-building initiatives, and a shared vision for quality across all institutional levels.

Finally, Research Question 3 highlights substantial research gaps in the existing literature. First, there is a need for empirical studies focusing on genuinely autonomous IQA systems that operate independently of formal accreditation frameworks. Second, deeper research is required on the role of participatory engagement in building intrinsic quality cultures and aligning quality practices with institutional needs. Third, the literature lacks sufficient studies from Global South contexts, which would reflect local priorities and challenges in implementing IQA. Longitudinal studies tracking the sustained impact of IQA systems over time, particularly in diverse institutional and regional contexts, are also notably scarce.

In conclusion, this review reinforces the importance of institutional autonomy, participatory engagement, and strategic quality enhancement in the successful implementation of IQA systems. For practitioners, the findings suggest that fostering a collaborative quality culture through active stakeholder engagement and strong leadership commitment is key to the success of IQA systems. For researchers, the identified gaps highlight the need for more in-depth, longitudinal, and geographically diverse studies, particularly focusing on the real-world challenges and enablers of autonomous IQA systems in varied institutional contexts.

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Generative AI Statement

As the author(s) of this work, we used AI tools, specifically Gemini (Google) and ChatGPT (OpenAI), to assist with drafting, improving language clarity, translating into academic English, and reformatting the manuscript to meet the journal's guidelines. After using these tools, we thoroughly reviewed the manuscript, including proofreading, factual checks, and ensuring adherence to academic standards. We take full responsibility for the final content and integrity of the work.

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