From Compliance to Improvement: Reframing Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT:

Quality assurance has become a central governance method in modern higher education, yet institutions increasingly view evaluation as a compliance task rather than a developmental one. This paper explores the root cause of this tension by analyzing the relationship between instrumental logic (measurement, indicators, and evidence) and value logic (educational purpose, student growth, and institutional meaning) within audit-based evaluation systems. Through qualitative document analysis, the study shows how evaluation tools gradually become evaluation goals. The emphasis on measurable indicators promotes documentation practices, performative compliance, and short-term optimization, while neglecting long-term educational outcomes and institutional uniqueness. The article proposes a reconstruction model for quality assurance grounded in value-based evaluation: flexible indicators that integrate baseline standards with institutional missions, combine quantitative and qualitative evidence, engage in dialogic peer review, and implement continuous improvement cycles. The study argues that effective quality assurance doesn't mean abandoning measurement but rather repositioning it as a tool that serves educational purposes. This framework contributes to ongoing discussions on audit culture and offers policy-relevant implications for higher education regulators and institutions seeking developmental rather than performative evaluation.

Keywords: Quality assurance, Audit culture, Evaluation rationality, Higher education, Quality evaluation.

1. Introduction

Over the past twenty years, quality assurance has become a key regulatory tool in higher education governance worldwide. Governments and accreditation agencies increasingly rely on audits, performance metrics, and documentary evidence to demonstrate accountability, comparability, and transparency (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Stensaker, 2021). Although these systems were initially designed to promote improvement, universities often view evaluation as a high-stakes administrative task centered on paperwork, compliance, and inspection preparation. The growing view that institutions "prepare for audits rather than improve education" reflects broader concerns about audit culture in public organizations (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 2015).

Existing research has examined this tension primarily through the lenses of managerialism and performativity in higher education (Ball, 2012; Hazelkorn, 2015). Indicator-based evaluation reshapes institutional behavior by promoting standardization, short-term gains, and the strategic presentation of evidence (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). However, much of the literature either critiques external regulation in general or focuses on technical refinements to indicators. Less attention has been paid to the fundamental evaluative logic that enables quality assurance to shift from an improvement tool to a compliance ritual.

This article argues that the main problem stems from an imbalance between two forms of evaluation rationality: instrumental logic and value logic. Instrumental logic involves measurable procedures, indicators, and evidence used to ensure accountability, whereas value logic concerns the educational goals that evaluation is intended to support, such as student growth, meaningful learning, and institutional missions. Effective quality assurance relies not on eliminating measurement but on aligning measurement with educational significance.

Using qualitative document analysis of policy frameworks and institutional self-evaluation reports, this study examines how this imbalance emerges in audit-based evaluation practices and how it shapes institutional behavior. The article then proposes a reconstruction model for value-driven quality assurance that integrates baseline standards, contextual interpretation, and dialogic peer review. By reconceptualizing quality assurance as a developmental inquiry rather than a verification process, the study contributes to ongoing debates about enhancing the effectiveness of evaluation systems in higher education.

2. Methodology

Research design

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine how evaluation rationalities are embedded in higher education quality assurance practices. Rather than measuring the effectiveness of specific indicators, the research examines how evaluation systems shape understandings of quality and improvement. Document analysis was chosen because quality assurance primarily operates through texts-such as policy frameworks, guidelines, and self-evaluation reports—that shape institutional behavior and expectations (Bowen, 2009). The purpose of this analysis is not to assess a specific national system but to identify common structural dynamics in audit-based evaluation regimes. Because modern quality assurance frameworks share similar indicator-driven and accountability-focused structures across higher education systems, the findings can be applied analytically to broader international contexts.

Data sources

Four categories of documents were analyzed:

Policy and regulatory documents

National quality assurance frameworks, audit manuals, and evaluation guidelines issued by higher education authorities specify evaluation criteria, procedures, and expected evidence.

Institutional self-evaluation reports

Fifteen university self-assessment reports prepared for audit review were intentionally selected to represent a range of institutional types and missions. These reports are especially useful for analysis because they show how institutions interpret evaluation requirements and translate them into organizational processes and practices.

Analytical procedure

The analysis used an iterative thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

1. Familiarization with documents to recognize recurring evaluation patterns
2. Coding segments related to measurement methods, improvement claims, and educational objectives
3. Grouping codes into broader categories that reflect instrumental and value orientations
4. Interpreting the conflict between accountability standards and educational purpose

The goal was not statistical generalization but rather an analytical explanation of how evaluation logic operates across different contexts.

Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility, the study applied:

1. triangulation across policy and institutional documents

2. constant comparison between institutional types

3. thick description to support interpretation

3. Literature Review

Quality Assurance, Audit Culture, and the Challenge of Improvement

The growth of quality assurance systems has significantly transformed higher education governance over the past thirty years. Originally designed to promote accountability and public trust, evaluation tools now function as regulatory frameworks that shape institutional behavior and academic work (Harvey & Williams, 2010). External reviews, accreditation processes, and performance metrics have created a permanent environment in which universities must continuously demonstrate quality rather than merely aspire to it.

Scholars describe this transformation as the rise of audit culture in higher education (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 2015). In audit culture, organizational activities focus on visibility, documentation, and verification. Rather than directly observing educational processes, evaluation relies on evidence that can be recorded, standardized, and compared. Consequently, institutions devote significant effort to creating auditable traces of teaching and learning, such as formalized learning outcomes, assessment matrices, and procedural documentation.

A related body of literature examines the rise of performativity and managerialism in universities (Ball, 2012; Espeland & Sauder, 2007). When performance indicators are linked to reputation, funding, or accreditation, organizations adapt strategically. Universities learn to optimize what is measured, sometimes at the expense of broader educational goals. Hazelkorn (2015) shows that ranking and evaluation systems can shift institutional priorities, favoring measurable outputs over complex intellectual or developmental aims. In such contexts, evaluation no longer merely observes quality but actively shapes its operational definition.

Despite these important insights, a persistent tension remains inadequately explained: quality assurance systems are meant to improve education, yet they often foster compliance-focused behavior. Existing research typically interprets this outcome as either policy overreach or institutional gaming. While these explanations are useful, they do not fully account for why measurement so readily supplants purpose, even in well-intentioned systems.

This article examines the issue through the lens of evaluative rationality. It argues that quality assurance operates through two interconnected orientations: an instrumental logic focused on measurement, verification, and comparability, and a value-based logic centered on educational significance, student growth, and institutional mission. Improvement becomes challenging when instrumental procedures gradually redefine the original purposes for which they were intended. The issue, therefore, is not the presence of indicators but the lack of a clear relationship between measurement and meaning.

By conceptualizing quality assurance as a balance between these two logics, the study provides a framework that explains recurring patterns in audit culture research and offers a basis for rebuilding developmental evaluation practices. Unlike previous studies that mainly describe the effects of audit culture, this article clarifies the mechanism by which evaluation practices change educational goals. By conceptualizing quality assurance as a relationship between instrumental and value logics, the paper offers an analytical framework that links performativity research with practical evaluation design.

4. Results and Discussion

Indicator Standardization and the Narrowing of Institutional Meaning

Across policy frameworks and institutional self-evaluation reports, quality is primarily communicated through standardized indicators and comparable evidence. Institutions consistently organize their documentation into predefined categories, aligning their narratives with audit templates. This reflects what audit culture literature describes as the transformation of professional practice into verifiable traces (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 2015).

However, the analysis shows that standardization does more than structure reporting; it also shapes how institutions perceive themselves. Universities tend to describe their educational activities in terms of measurable compliance rather than educational purpose. Distinctive missions are reformulated to fit evaluative categories, suggesting that comparability gradually overrides contextual meaning. Similar effects have been observed in ranking-driven governance, where organizations adapt their identities to evaluation frameworks (Hazelkorn, 2015).

This pattern indicates the dominance of instrumental logic: measurement ceases to represent quality and instead becomes its definition.

Evidence Production and Performative Compliance

A second recurring theme is the rise in documentary evidence. Institutions invest significant effort in producing materials that demonstrate alignment with evaluation criteria, including reports, archives, procedural descriptions, and formalized processes. While intended to ensure accountability, this practice often shifts academic work toward preparing inspection materials.

The findings align with research on performativity in higher education (Ball, 2012; Espeland & Sauder, 2007). Evidence production becomes an anticipatory activity shaped by anticipated judgment. Educational practices are reorganized around what can be demonstrated within an audit timeframe, encouraging short-term optimization and strategic presentation.

Improvement becomes demonstrative rather than developmental: institutions demonstrate quality rather than nurturing it.

Temporal Mismatch: Short-Term Evaluation and Long-Term Education

Quality assurance operates within regular review cycles, whereas educational development unfolds over longer periods. Institutional documents emphasize immediately measurable outcomes, such as completion rates, employment figures, and awards. Less visible outcomes such as intellectual growth, critical thinking, and academic culture are often mentioned only rhetorically.

This timing mismatch helps explain why evaluation often prioritizes measurable outcomes. What can be verified during the audit cycle becomes the operational definition of quality. Similar observations have been reported in studies of accountability systems in higher education (Stensaker, 2021).

Here, the tension between instrumental and value orientations becomes clear: the evaluation timeframe shapes educational priorities.

Structural Transformation of Evaluation Purpose

Taken together, these patterns reveal a structural shift. Quality assurance mechanisms designed to drive improvement gradually become compliance rituals. Institutions adapt their behavior to anticipated judgment, and evaluation becomes episodic preparation rather than ongoing reflection.

This finding aligns with scholarship on audit culture but extends it by identifying the mechanism driving the shift. The issue is not merely external pressure or institutional manipulation; it stems from the internal dynamics of evaluation systems, in which instrumental procedures lack a clear connection to educational meaning.

Understanding quality assurance as an interaction between instrumental and value logics explains why reform efforts that focus solely on better indicators rarely solve the problem. Improvement requires reshaping the relationship between measurement and purpose, not merely improving measurement techniques.

This study relies on documentary analysis and therefore interprets evaluation practices through institutional representations rather than through direct observation of teaching. Future research could supplement this approach with interviews or ethnographic methods to explore how individuals experience evaluation processes in everyday academic work.

5. Conclusion and Practical Implications

Conclusion

This study explored why quality assurance systems designed to enhance higher education often led to compliance-focused behavior. Qualitative analysis of policy frameworks and institutional self-assessment documents revealed a consistent pattern: evaluation practices are increasingly centered on measurable indicators, documentary evidence, and audit cycles. These mechanisms, while intended to ensure accountability, gradually redefine the concept of quality.

The article views this shift as an imbalance between instrumental and value logics in evaluation. Instrumental procedures — indicators, verification, and comparability — are essential for managing large and complex higher education systems. However, when these procedures operate without a clear connection to educational purposes, they become more than merely supportive tools; they begin to define objectives. Improvement is replaced by demonstration, and evaluation becomes performative rather than developmental.

Understanding quality assurance through this relational framework clarifies a recurring paradox identified in prior research: the same mechanisms intended to improve quality may unintentionally constrain educational practice. The issue, therefore, isn't with measurement itself but with the absence of a structured link between measurement and educational significance.

Practical Implications

First, evaluation frameworks should clearly distinguish between baseline standards and developmental goals. Baseline indicators are essential for ensuring minimum quality standards, but they should remain limited and consistent. Developmental evaluation, by contrast, should enable institutions to demonstrate quality in line with their mission and context, rather than relying on uniform templates.

Second, external review processes should prioritize interpretive peer dialogue over reliance on documentary evidence. Site visits, academic discussions, and contextual interpretation can assess educational processes that cannot be fully captured by evidence alone.

Third, evaluation cycles should shift from one-time inspections to continuous improvement. Follow-up feedback, iterative reporting, and institutional self-reflection reduce the focus on short-term performance gains.

Implications for Institutions

Universities should view quality assurance not as a means to prepare for external judgment but as a tool for internal learning. This means integrating evaluation into daily academic activities, such as program review discussions, curriculum reflection, and analysis of student learning.

Institutions should also avoid equating documentation with improvement. Evidence should support reflection rather than replace it. When internal quality processes focus on educational questions—what students learn and how programs develop—external evaluation serves as confirmation rather than a measure of performance.

Final Reflection

Effective quality assurance depends on balancing coordination with meaning. Measurement remains vital but should be guided by educational objectives. Replacing indicators with interpretive tools allows evaluation to serve as a developmental inquiry rather than a compliance ritual. In this way, enhancing quality assurance doesn't mean abandoning audit systems; it means redefining their role within a value-driven view of higher education.

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8. Author Declaration

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