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Quality Assurance for 21st-Century Competencies: Insights from Nigeria and Finnish Higher Education

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Abstract. This conceptual paper compares the quality assurance systems in Nigerian and Finnish higher education. It X-rays the foundational patterns that determine their areas of divergence and proposes a conceptual framework for quality assurance that accommodates 21st-century competencies. A comparative conceptual analysis approach was employed to synthesise the existing literature, policy documents and institutional reports in this study. The approach was used to examine the historical, structural, and procedural dimensions of quality assurance in Nigeria and Finland's higher education systems. The study found a qualitative divide between the two systems. While Nigeria's compliance quality assurance system emphasises the need to address deficits in basic resources and standards, Finland's quality assurance system, built on trust, institutional autonomy, and a culture of continuous improvement, emphasises enhancement. The uniqueness of this study lies in the Contextually Adaptive Quality Assurance (CAQA) Framework. It provides a principled, flexible template for developing quality assurance systems that ensure quality in the development of essential 21st-century competencies, including critical thinking and collaboration.

Keywords: Quality assurance, Higher education, comparative education, Finland, Nigeria

1. Introduction

In recent years, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education systems worldwide have experienced significant transformation. This transformation is driven by the imperatives of the knowledge economy, accelerated digitalisation, and the growing expectation that graduates acquire 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, collaboration, digital literacy, and intercultural communication (Alzafari & Ursin, 2019; van der Merwe & van Vuuren, 2024). These competencies are increasingly used as benchmarks for assessing educational quality. However, their growing prominence challenges traditional quality assurance (QA) frameworks, which were primarily designed to evaluate readily quantifiable learning inputs and outputs rather than complex and transferable competencies (Nguyen, 2016).

Despite global advancements in quality assurance frameworks, most systems continue to depend on conventional instruments such as accreditation checklists, input–output indicators, and periodic audits. While these mechanisms remain effective for ensuring regulatory compliance and minimum standards, they are poorly suited to assessing higher-

order competencies, adaptive skills, and complex learning outcomes demanded by contemporary labour markets (Groen, 2017). As a result, many QA systems face a persistent misalignment between what higher education institutions are expected to produce and what existing evaluative tools can measure.

National differences in culture, historical development, institutional capacity, and quality assurance philosophy mediate the organisation and effectiveness of quality assurance systems. These contextual variations influence whether QA systems emphasise accountability-driven compliance or enhancement-oriented improvement (Chu & Westerheijden, 2019; Neophytou & Koutselini, 2025). While enhancement-focused systems prioritise institutional autonomy, professional trust, and continuous improvement, compliance-oriented systems tend to rely on external regulation and standardised control mechanisms (Groen, 2017; Zaskaleta, 2020). These contrasting approaches raise important questions about the adaptability of QA systems in responding to evolving competency-based demands.

Against this background, this study adopts a comparative approach to explore the convergence and divergence of quality assurance systems in Africa and Europe, using Nigeria and Finland as case studies. The selection of Nigeria and Finland is deliberate and strategic. Nigeria represents a QA system confronting persistent structural challenges, rapid expansion, and the pressures of massification, compounded by increasing private sector participation in higher education provision. These dynamics have intensified concerns about quality assurance capacity and consistency. In contrast, Finland exemplifies a mature, enhancement-oriented QA system grounded in institutional trust, strong public governance, and coherent quality cultures. Finland's higher education system has consistently maintained a high international standing (Chen, 2024; OECD, 2022), mainly attributed to trust-based enhancement practices and supportive government policies that balance quality assessment with accountability (Chen, 2024).

Global pressures to reform quality assurance do not manifest uniformly across national systems. Systems with strong institutional capacity are better positioned to integrate competency-based assessment within enhancement-oriented frameworks. In contrast, systems facing long-standing structural and resource constraints often struggle to move beyond compliance with minimum standards (Alzafari & Ursin, 2019). Comparative studies have demonstrated that while international frameworks, such as those associated with the Bologna Process and UNESCO/OECD guidelines, promote convergence, national systems continue to adapt these frameworks to local priorities and conditions (Amaral & Rosa, 2010; Kallo & Semchenko, 2016). This contextual heterogeneity underscores the importance of comparative inquiry in understanding how similar global demands generate divergent national responses.

Within this context, the central problem addressed by this study concerns the capacity of existing quality assurance systems to assure 21st-century competencies effectively across differing institutional environments. While contemporary QA discourse increasingly advocates a shift from quality control to quality enhancement, there remains a limited empirical understanding of how systems at different stages of development operationalise these paradigms and respond to competency-based expectations, particularly across developed and developing contexts. Therefore, this study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of quality assurance systems in Nigerian and Finnish higher education. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How have the quality assurance systems in Nigeria and Finland evolved historically, and what dominant paradigms shape their current structures and operational logics?
RQ2: What challenges do quality assurance systems in Nigeria and Finland face in adapting to the demands of 21st-century competency development?
RQ3: How can a Contextually Adaptive Quality Assurance framework support the assurance of complex learning outcomes in Nigerian and Finnish higher education?

1. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design of a comparative conceptual analysis approach. This approach supports the development of new frameworks by synthesising existing literature and policy sources (Mello, 2021). The conceptual comparative analysis is commonly used in education and social sciences research to examine structural differences across systems and to establish a new theoretical framework (Bauer & Knill, 2014; Klabal & Kub, 2021).

The comparative analysis employed a systematic, dimension-oriented methodology. The sources were scrutinised according to four distinct analytical

dimensions: (1) historical development, (2) governance structures, (3) operational quality assurance models, and (4) systemic challenges related to the integration of 21st-century competencies. This analytical framework facilitated a consistent cross-case comparison and supported the thematic synthesis of diverse literature.

A structured process was employed to select literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, quality assurance policy documents, evaluation reports, and institutional frameworks. The following search string ("quality assurance" OR "quality control" OR "assessment" OR "evaluation") AND ("higher education" OR "tertiary education" OR "post-secondary" OR "university") AND ("Nigeria" OR "Nigerian" OR "Finland" OR "Finnish") AND ("accreditation" OR "standards" OR "improvement" OR "policy") AND ("student satisfaction" OR "outcomes" OR "performance" OR "teaching quality") guided the selection.

2.2 Analytical Approach

The retrieved documents were manually coded and organised according to thematic categories. Each source underwent analysis to identify patterns associated with compliance, enhancement, institutional autonomy, and competency integration. Subsequently, the themes that emerged in each national case were compared to identify points of convergence and divergence, as well as the structural factors influencing quality assurance practices. This analytical approach enhanced the interpretive coherence of the comparative results.

This conceptual study is based on an analysis of existing literature and policy documents, which may not comprehensively reflect recent institutional reforms or novel practices at specific universities. The methodology does not involve empirical measurement; instead, it synthesises overarching trends to contribute to theoretical understanding and policy development.

2.3 Ethical Consideration

This research did not involve human subjects, collect primary data, or utilise confidential institutional records. The study was conducted solely by examining publicly accessible literature, policy documents, and evaluation reports. Consistent with the journal's standards for conceptual and document-based research, ethical approval was deemed unnecessary, and no identifiable personal information was employed at any point during the analysis.

2. Results

RQ1: *How have the quality assurance systems in Nigeria and Finland evolved historically, and what dominant paradigms shape their current structures and operational logics?*

The findings addressing Research Question 1 reveal contrasting historical trajectories and structural configurations of quality assurance systems in Nigeria and Finland. Findings indicate that Nigeria and Finland operate under fundamentally different quality assurance paradigms.

Comparative Analysis of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Nigeria and Finland

Table I: Comparative Overview of QA in Nigeria and Finland

Dimension	Nigeria	Finland
Lead QA body	National Universities Commission (NUC)	Finnish Education Evaluation (FFINEEC)
Focus	Input-based standards, resource adequacy, and minimum academic standards	Process and outcomes, learning enhancement, and institutional profiling.
Core Paradigm	Compliance-oriented, with centralised control and accountability for public funding.	Enhancement-led; Trust, institutional autonomy, and continuous
Key Mechanisms	Internal Quality Assurance units, programme accreditation, and resource verification.	Institutional self-evaluation, enhancement-led evaluation, and audit.
Key challenges	inadequate funding, overcrowding, and tension standardisation and innovation.	Maintaining excellence in a changing global environment, and between equitable outcomes.

Table I presents a comparison of higher education's quality assurance approaches in both Nigeria and Finland. While the system is centrally managed by the NUC, with a compliance-oriented model and input-based standards, it is decentralised and administered by FINEEC, enhancement-driven, with an emphasis

on Continuous improvement, process evaluation, and institutional autonomy. This difference presupposes that every nation's quality assurance model reflects its cultural context and the developmental stage of its ecosystem. Also, while the practice in Nigeria still struggles to manage the challenge of inadequate resources and accountability, the Finnish model is working to sustain its already established excellence because the system has sufficient resources.

Similarly, it means that direct policy transfer might not be possible; every system must follow due process, from simple to complex and from ensuring basic compliance to strategically achieving internal quality culture and must be context adaptive.

3.1.1 The Nigerian Quality Assurance System

The Nigerian QA system is led by the National Universities Commission (NUC). The body has established standards that its higher education institutions operate with. The NUC, founded in 1962, is saddled with the responsibility of addressing issues including institutional quality, limited resources, and a lack of standardised admission cum curricula. Its approach is mainly input-centred, emphasising compliance with the standards over autonomous innovation. The commission's efforts have revealed the country's multifaceted challenges in managing systemic deficits across the higher education sector.

A key feature of the country's QA policies is the adoption of the Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) framework. This framework specifies curricular and workload requirements. Staff-student ratios and minimum infrastructure requirements for each programme offered at any university in the country. This is done to shield innocent students from substandard education in situations where demand for post-secondary education exceeds available resources. This arrangement is similar to what other lower- and middle-income countries, such as Viet Nam, practice internationally, reducing universities to compliance entities focused more on accreditation than on critical pedagogical transformation (Hanh et al., 2020).

2.1.2.1 Governance and Focus

Universities' compliance with the minimum academic standard is the commission's primary responsibility. It ensures uniformity in what universities do. Its other areas of coverage include licensure, institutional monitoring, and periodic programme accreditation to ascertain the extent of universities' compliance with the minimum standard (National Universities Commission (NUC), 2025). The accreditation committees usually consider course content, lecturers' qualifications, teaching facilities, and access to technology. This initiative is worthy of maintaining stability during times of turbulence and expansion. However, the primary inhibitor of the commission's effective functioning remained the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), which often accuses the NUC of usurping universities' powers and eroding their autonomy (Wordu & Nwanguma, 2023).

2.1.2.2 Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)

The need to actualise internal quality in universities in Nigeria necessitated the introduction of uniform mechanisms embedded in the MAS. The commission stipulates that the country's quality assurance framework requires every higher institution to establish an internal quality assurance unit for regular self-assessment of its academic programmes, personnel, and facilities (Mbah, 2022; Olatoun et al., 2025).

However, in reality, higher education institution leaders often perceive the unit as subsidiary to NUC external accreditation requirements. The perception reinforces a compliance rather than a mere developmental model of quality assurance. Unfortunately, Ekpoh and Asuquo (2020) noted that most IQAs do not usually function effectively due to limited resources and constrained staff capacity.

2.1.3 The Finnish Quality Assurance System

Finland's quality assurance system is often a global reference point. This is because of its emphasis on trust, institutional autonomy, and enhancement-oriented processes. The system is influenced by the Bologna Process's focus on transparency, learning, and social integration (Haapakorpi, 2011). Its approach aligns with the national philosophy of education, which prioritises collaboration, professionalism, and continuous improvement over rigid compliance with standardised measures.

2.1.3.1 Governance and Focus

One unique characteristic of Finland's QA system is its institutional autonomy, anchored in trust and professionalism. Every higher education institution has the freedom to plan for quality, with the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) offering support that fosters self-reflection and improvement within universities rather than enforcing predetermined benchmarks (OECD, 2024). Its system

is a blend of collegial and managerial approaches that emphasises enhancement rather than just accountability (Lomas, 2009).

The body usually conducts thematic evaluations and audits, asking critical, reflective questions about the strategies that universities are adopting to improve their services. One advantage of this approach is that it allows universities to align their internal quality assurance processes with their unique missions, strategies, and contexts. However, it must integrate the nation's quality body's audit criteria into individual university self-assessment processes. This decentralised strategy promotes mutual accountability and regular dialogue between a higher education institution and the quality assurance body in Finland (Zayachuk & Dziamko, 2023). Finnish QA is sharply different from the compliance model in Asia, Africa, and North America. It believes that institutional autonomy and professional trust will not only drive innovation but also make 21st-century competencies easily adaptable across various higher education institutions.

3.1.2.2 Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)

Internal quality assurance is a mechanism used in Finnish higher education institutions through their academic and operational frameworks (Zaskaleta, 2020). Relevant stakeholders, including students, personnel, and the community, are engaged in genuine improvement. Universities employ student feedback loops, curriculum reviews, and staff development programmes, among other means, to ensure the process is participative and progressive. For instance, universities in Finland exemplify this IQA through curriculum development that involves stakeholders to gather input and address both local and global needs. Similarly, the University of Helsinki established a professional learning centre to upskill faculty members. They make their teaching more innovative to address 21st-century student needs (University of Helsinki, 2025). This implies that the country believes in institutional maturity and decentralisation of quality assurance.

RQ2: *What challenges do quality assurance systems in Nigeria and Finland face in adapting to 21st-century competency demands?*

Results addressing Research Question 2 highlight context-specific challenges that limit the adequate assurance of 21st-century competencies in both systems.

3.2 a) Challenges in Addressing 21st Century Competencies in Nigeria

The prescriptive nature of the Nigerian QA system has yielded measurable improvements in standardising foundational academic components. However, it has struggled to address the dynamic and diverse needs of 21st-century education. The acquisition of professional competencies requires flexible and adaptive curricula, which the rigid MAS policy of the Nigerian quality assurance system fails to accommodate. Higher education institutions, therefore, find it challenging to keep up with rapid change. This is helping many of its graduates compete favourably in the labour market, which demands fields such as artificial intelligence, data science, and renewable energy technologies, among others. In fact, the introduction of the Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) in 2022 by the NUC, which was supposed to be a remarkable feat in modernising accreditation criteria, has yet to yield results (Nwankwo & Mkpa, 2023).

Furthermore, the global reality of educational innovation underlines the essence of transdisciplinary learning, which is typically achieved through university-driven policy experimentation rather than strict adherence to government-mandated frameworks. Compared with countries like Malaysia, which has introduced greater institutional identification of quality improvement projects as part of its QA, Nigeria's higher education ecosystem remains overly centralised, leaving universities less equipped to pioneer reforms or tailor student-centred advancements (Hanh et al., 2020).

Also, higher education still faces infrastructure challenges in catering to the growing number of youth seeking tertiary education (Igbape et al., 2014). To successfully administer and manage education for quality, 21st-century school leaders need information and technology infrastructure. Asiyai (2022) argues that higher education institutions in Nigeria still need to improve their physical facilities, curricula, and innovative teaching practices. These challenges have caused more harm than good to the higher education system in Nigeria, leading, according to Sowunmi et al. (2016), to low international patronage.

3.2 b) Challenges in addressing 21st Century Competencies in Finland

Despite various quality assurance mechanisms institutionalised by FINEEC to enhance higher education, the country still faces systemic challenges in effectively integrating 21st-century competencies

and ensuring equitable outcomes across institutions. For insurance, the increasing relevance of global metrics and university rankings, such as the QS and Times Higher Education rankings, can challenge Finland's evaluation results due to its lack of conventional quantitative rubrics. In recent years, the world has shifted toward quantitative rankings based on metrics such as research output and international collaboration. However, this parameter is often overlooked in the Finnish quality-enhancement driven approach. This requires urgent attention from the country's policymakers. Another challenge with this system is the excessive workload (Niu et al., 2021), all in the name of enhancing quality in higher education institutions across the country.

RQ3: *How can a Contextually Adaptive Quality Assurance (CAQA) framework support the assurance of complex learning outcomes in Nigeria and Finland?*

3.3 CAQA Framework

Drawing on the comparative findings across the two cases, the study proposes a Contextually Adaptive Quality Assurance (CAQA) framework. In this study, our framework considers quality as a developing capability that relies on foundational stability, pedagogical transformation, evidence-driven improvement, and broad-based collaboration, rather than treating Quality assurance as a uniform set of tools or standards. It is proposed that QA should pass through four stages built on four pillars.

Table II: The Contextually Adaptive Quality Assurance (CAQA) Framework

Pillar	Core Question	Foundational Context (Nigeria)	Advanced Context (Finland)
Foundational Integrity	Are the essential resources and baseline standards in place?	Focus on infrastructure, qualified staff, curriculum coherence, and financial stability.	Maintained as a baseline, but not the primary focus of QA activities.
Competency-Oriented Process	How does the educational process develop 21st-century Competencies?	Pilot authentic assessment in specific programmes; build faculty capacity in active learning.	Full integration of complex, real-world assessments; curriculum-wide pedagogical innovation.
Data-Informed Enhancement	How is evidence used for improvement?	Robust data systems on graduation rates, employment, and student satisfaction.	Advanced learning analytics; qualitative studies on student learning journeys; tracer studies
Ecosystem Collaboration	Who is involved in defining and assuring quality?	Strengthen internal QA units; engage professional bodies.	Deep stakeholder engagement with employers; cross-border peer learning.

Pillar 1: Foundational integrity: At the core of any QA initiative lies foundational integrity, which ensures the essential conditions for teaching and learning excellence. This includes physical infrastructure, sustainable funding, adequate staffing, and coherent curricula. It will therefore be impractical to achieve the 21st-century competencies if the foundational components are absent. For instance, in a resource-constrained continent like Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, addressing these structural deficiencies is not negotiable.

Pillar 2: *Competency-Oriented Processes:* The second stage of the framework emphasises a paradigm shift towards competency-focused pedagogy, aligning quality assurance standards with the educational needs of the 21st century. A rigid, content-dominated curriculum cannot accommodate critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and other 21st-century competencies. In early-stage systems, tertiary institutions should conduct pilot programmes to train faculty in student-centred pedagogies and competency-based assessments, to test their feasibility. Simulation, targeted portfolio evaluations, and group projects have proven effective in these skills in low-resource contexts.

Moreover, the Finnish system is advanced and has fully integrated competency-based education. Aarrevaara et al. (2021) reflected on Finland's cross-disciplinary, competency-focused curricular renewal efforts to understand their world relevance.

Pillar 3: Data-informed Enhancement: Evidence-based decision-making forms the crux of the third pillar. Modern QA models emphasise a continuum of data sophistication, from basic metrics in foundational systems to robust, multimodal analytics in mature systems. Early-stage efforts may rely on graduation rates, employment statistics, and program enrolment rates as proxies for institutional performance.

However, advanced systems benefit from cutting-edge methodologies, such as real-time learning analytics and longitudinal studies. These tools enable institutions to uncover trends in student engagement, address equity gaps, and fine-tune curriculum delivery. For instance, Gašević et al. (2022) highlighted the power of multimodal evidence to drive

equity-focused reforms in higher education systems, showcasing the importance of tailoring pedagogical solutions based on detailed, data-informed insights.

Pillar 4: Ecosystem Collaboration: The final pillar acknowledges the increasingly participatory nature of global QA ecosystems. Collaborative QA frameworks shift from top-down models to processes co-created by diverse stakeholders. These include internal institutional units, faculty and students, employers, professional bodies, civic society, and international QA networks.

Early-stage systems typically focus on building internal QA capacity and establishing legitimacy through accreditation and alignment with professional bodies. Advanced systems, by contrast, benefit from broad-based networks to foster innovation, align academic programs with labour market demands, and enhance societal relevance. For instance, recent studies (Kontkanen et al., 2021) in Nordic nations, emphasis is placed on the importance of transnational partnerships and benchmarking consortia in fostering innovation capacity and societal alignment within QA frameworks.

3. Discussion

The study was designed to explore how Nigeria and Finland's higher education systems, shaped by different histories, governance models and resource environments, conceptualise and operate quality assurance in an era defined by 21st-century competencies. Comparative analysis reveals apparent convergence and differences, which will lead to a broader global debate on the future of quality assurance, particularly on the tension between compliance and improvement and between standardisation and contextual flexibility.

The National University Commission's (NUC) Minimum Academic Standards (MAS) and related mandates have helped stabilise basic quality during the rapid expansion phase. However, the system's clear orientation limits educational innovation and makes many internal quality assurance (IQA) units more compliance-oriented than improvement-oriented. Numerous empirical and policy analyses support this dual effect. Studies of universities in Nigeria document the stability of centralised standards, while highlighting the excessive use of central control to undermine institutional autonomy and to discourage curriculum innovation (Wordu & Nwanguma, 2023). The recent reports and responses of stakeholders (such as academic unions) also characterise some NUC programme guidelines as imposed rather than co-created. This dynamic drives perceptions of a decline in university autonomy and hampers the momentum of internal reform (Ojo, 2023). At the same time, Nigeria's IQA evaluations indicate effective internal practices, and IQA units (Ekpoh & Asuquo, 2020; Olatoun et al., 2025) drive improvements when they receive resources and management support. This suggests that compliance orientation is not deterministic: the achieving capacity-building IQA unit can move towards improvement. Consequently, the literature supports the study's claim that Nigeria needs a step-by-step approach that ensures fundamental integrity and deliberately strengthens IQA capacity to perform development functions, in line with the first and second sections of CAQA.

The Finnish Quality Assessment System, managed by FINEEC, has institutional autonomy, formal evaluation, and stakeholder participation, which enable the systemic integration of competency-based teaching but create tensions in the face of global measurement systems and workload pressures. OECD and national reviews described Finland's external evaluations as explicitly enhanced and based on trust, which they viewed as promoting a quality culture that prioritised self-reflection and professional responsibility over regulatory checklists (OECD, 2024). The research following the Finnish adaptation of the Bologna QA period confirms that decentralised and improved methods support institutional innovation and the integration of stakeholders' feedback (Haapakorpi, 2011). However, evaluations and policy comments warn that systems in need of improvement are subject to legitimacy constraints in a global environment dominated by rankings and quantitative metrics, and Finnish institutions sometimes struggle to reconcile qualitative national QA objectives with the incentive structure of international rankings. This observation directly supports our findings on cross-pressure from global metricised rankings (European Association for Quality Certification in Higher Education (ENQA),2017). The Finnish case supports CAQA's advanced context strategies (data sophistication, global benchmarks), but warns that the upgrade system must proactively manage workloads and coordinate external comparative signals without affecting autonomy.

Both systems face challenges, though for different reasons, in fully ensuring the development of complex, transferable skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and digital literacy. Nigeria’s difficulties mainly stem from infrastructure and governance issues, while Finland’s challenges revolve around aligning qualitative educational practices with

global standards and managing faculty workload. Research on skills and learning in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) consistently points to infrastructure shortcomings, limited professional development for teachers and faculty, and systemic capacity limitations as key obstacles to expanding competency-based education, findings that reflect the situation in Nigeria described here. The World Bank and recent regional studies argue that education systems lacking essential resources will find it hard to deliver adaptive, digitally integrated learning experiences necessary for 21st-century skills. In contrast, studies of well-resourced systems like Finland highlight that although curricula and teaching methods may already support these competencies, the main challenges lie in assessment, international benchmarking, and balancing faculty workload, findings that align with our analysis. Peer reviews of FINEEC specifically note these balancing challenges (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2017). These consistent findings support CAQA's phased strategy: foundational problems must be addressed before competency-based reforms can be effectively expanded, and advanced systems need to integrate qualitative improvements with reliable, data-driven indicators.

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) units within Nigerian universities are frequently perceived primarily as mechanisms for compliance aimed at fulfilling external accreditation requirements, rather than as drivers of ongoing institutional improvement. Nonetheless, in contexts where adequate resources and institutional commitment are present, IQA units have demonstrated the capacity to act as agents of developmental change. Empirical investigations, including surveys and case studies, reveal a heterogeneous performance record for IQA units in Nigeria; many suffer from insufficient staffing, limited funding, and a lack of strategic authority, which results in a predominant focus on generating documentation to meet accreditation cycles rather than fostering continuous quality enhancement (Ekpoh & Asuquo, 2020). Conversely, more recent practice-oriented reports and pilot studies indicate that when universities allocate appropriate resources and integrate IQA functions into governance structures, such as establishing permanent representation on university senates and linking IQA activities to academic promotion and staff development, these units effectively serve as catalysts for curriculum review, pedagogical innovation, and stakeholder engagement. This evidence substantiates the Centre for Academic Quality Assurance (CAQA) 's assertion that targeted capacity-building initiatives can reorient IQA functions toward quality enhancement (Olatoun et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings support a policy recommendation to reinforce IQA resourcing, embed IQA within decision-making processes, and redefine external accreditation frameworks to emphasise support for internal quality enhancement rather than solely enforcing compliance.

The proposed Contextually Adaptive Quality Assurance (CAQA) Framework, comprising Foundational Integrity, Competency-Oriented Processes, Data-Informed Enhancement, and Ecosystem Collaboration, aligns with established themes within the quality assurance (QA) literature while addressing identified gaps across diverse contexts. Comparative QA research underscores the importance of multi-stage capacity building, the localisation of standards to specific contexts, and a gradual transition from input-based to outcome-based evaluation metrics, all of which are integral components of the CAQA framework (Alzafari & Ursin, 2019; Amaral & Rosa, 2010; Bauer & Knill, 2014). Concurrently, policy analyses emphasise the necessity of robust data systems and active stakeholder engagement to ensure competency assurance, thereby reinforcing the third and fourth pillars of CAQA (Haapakorpi, 2011).

Moreover, the literature warns against the application of uniform frameworks, noting that the success of phased approaches depends on factors such as political commitment, financial resources, and institutional leadership. Consequently, the potential efficacy of CAQA hinges on its explicit operationalisation through the development of clear indicators, the establishment of pilot implementations, and comprehensive resourcing strategies to facilitate its transition from a theoretical model to practical reform. This caveat aligns with findings from reform initiatives in Nigeria and evaluative studies conducted in Finland.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that Nigeria and Finland adopt fundamentally different approaches to quality assurance, shaped by their distinct historical contexts, levels of institutional development, and resource environments. Nigeria's approach is primarily grounded in compliance and input regulation, aimed at maintaining minimum standards within a system characterised by rapid expansion and limited resources. In contrast, Finland employs an enhancement-driven, trust-based model indicative of a more advanced system, where institutional autonomy and ongoing improvement are central to quality

assurance. While both countries acknowledge the increasing significance of 21st-century competencies, their ability to integrate these skills depends on their foundational preparedness, governance frameworks, and institutional cultures. The proposed CAQA Framework encapsulates these distinctions and provides a phased strategy for systems striving to balance foundational stability with competency-focused transformation. As global expectations evolve toward more complex learning outcomes and societal impact, the capacity of quality assurance systems to adapt flexibly, rather than adhere to uniform standards, will be critical to their sustained relevance.

4.1 Implication for Quality Assurance Research and Practice

The findings underscore the need for quality assurance reforms tailored to the educational system's developmental stage. In emerging systems such as Nigeria, priority should be given to establishing fundamental conditions, including adequate funding, sufficient staffing, and the development of internal quality assurance capacities, before implementing more advanced competency-based reforms. Conversely, in well-established systems like Finland, efforts should focus on increasing the utilisation of evidence and addressing workload challenges to maintain cultures of continuous improvement. In both contexts, internal quality assurance processes must transition from mere compliance mechanisms to developmental instruments that facilitate curriculum innovation and authentic assessment of learning. Furthermore, the imperative to assess 21st-century competencies requires adopting evaluation methodologies that capture complex, real-world learning experiences rather than relying solely on narrow content-based benchmarks.

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