

Bridging Standards and Access: A Conceptual Framework for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Nigerian Higher Education

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Abstract—This is a conceptual article which explores the relationship between quality assurance, accreditation, efficiency and equity in the management of Nigerian universities. The tension between upholding academic standards through regulatory evaluation and ensuring equitable access to higher education amidst diverse institutional and regional contexts in Nigeria is interrogated. Regulatory agencies such as the Federal Ministry of Education, the National Universities Commission, the National Board for Technical Education and the National Commission for Colleges of Education have laid down structured accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms. However, implementation challenges continue to hinder expected outcomes. Ongoing underfunding, deficits in infrastructure, inconsistencies in policy and political intervention undermine the efficiency of institutions and equity in education. The existing evaluation system of the Nigerian ministries is heavily biased towards standardization and regulatory compliance; it hardly takes account of institutional diversity and regional inequalities. To correct this imbalance, the study proposes a Differentiated Quality Assurance (DQA) Framework which connects accountability with contextually relevant equity indicators. The framework provides a route of policy for thinking through accreditation in ways that can preserve academic quality, whilst promoting fairer access and institutional inclusion in the Nigerian higher education landscape.

Index Terms—Quality assurance, accreditation, Nigerian universities, efficiency, equity, higher education governance, tertiary education policy, university evaluation, National University Commission.

1. Introduction

Nigeria's higher education system has expanded significantly over the past three decades. From a relatively limited university sector in the post-independence era, the country now hosts more than 200 universities spread across federal, state, and private ownership structures (Abdulrahman & Gabriel, 2023). This expansion reflects rising social demand for university education, population growth, and the increasing perception of tertiary education as a pathway to economic mobility and national development.

Despite this numerical growth, concerns about educational quality continue to intensify. Questions surrounding graduate employability, infrastructure quality, curriculum relevance,

staff capacity, research productivity, and institutional governance remain central to national policy discussions (Ali, 2022; Gray & Scott, 2026). Employers increasingly report skills gaps among graduates, while many universities continue to struggle with overcrowded classrooms, inadequate laboratories, weak digital infrastructure, and insufficient academic staffing (Egielewa et al., 2022; Owan et al., 2025).

At the center of this debate lies a persistent policy tension between efficiency and equity. Efficiency in higher education management emphasizes measurable outcomes, resource optimization, quality standards, and institutional performance. Equity, by contrast, prioritizes inclusion, access, regional representation, and fairness in educational opportunity. In Nigeria, these objectives often conflict. Strict accreditation requirements may preserve quality but exclude disadvantaged institutions from recognition. Expanded access may improve inclusion while simultaneously placing pressure on infrastructure and academic standards (Durak et al., 2025; Kilgore, 2023a; Zaky, 2025).

This article explores how quality assurance and accreditation systems in Nigerian universities can be reconceptualized to address both objectives simultaneously. It argues that current ministry-led evaluation mechanisms have made important contributions to standard setting, but remain overly compliance-driven and insufficiently responsive to inequalities across institutions and regions.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to develop a conceptual framework through which quality assurance in Nigerian universities can balance academic accountability with institutional diversity and social justice. It proposes a differentiated model of accreditation capable of aligning educational standards with equitable access.

The article proceeds through five broad sections. First, it reviews the conceptual foundations of efficiency and equity in university governance. Second, it examines how Nigerian ministries and regulatory agencies conduct institutional evaluations. Third, it critically analyses areas where efficiency and equity collide in practice. Fourth, it proposes a Differentiated Quality Assurance Framework. Finally, it

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outlines policy implications for university management and national education governance (Aldhobaib, 2024; Croucher, 2025; Efstratopoulou et al., 2025; Miles, 2023; Tsiligiris, 2026).

2. Literature Review

A. *Quality Assurance in Higher Education*

Quality assurance in higher education has become a defining feature of university governance worldwide. It generally refers to the policies, procedures, standards, and review mechanisms used to monitor academic performance and institutional effectiveness (Kocsis & Pusztai, 2021; Moreno et al., 2024). Globally, quality assurance systems are often linked to accreditation, public accountability, funding allocation, and institutional legitimacy.

Scholars argue that quality assurance serves both developmental and regulatory purposes. On the one hand, it encourages internal improvement and academic excellence. On the other hand, it functions as a mechanism of external control and standardization (Didou Aupetit, 2022; Kayyali, 2023a; Mwila, 2025).

B. *Quality Assurance in Nigeria*

Within Nigeria, quality assurance is primarily coordinated through the National Universities Commission, alongside the Federal Ministry of Education. These agencies regulate program approval, accreditation, institutional licensing, and compliance monitoring.

Several scholars, including Peter Okebukola, have argued that while the regulatory architecture is robust on paper, implementation remains uneven due to financial constraints and governance weaknesses (Arnold et al., 2019a; Hanh et al., 2020a; Negrea & Gartland, 2025; Nworie & Charles, 2021).

C. *Efficiency and Equity Debate*

The relationship between efficiency and equity remains a longstanding issue in education policy. Efficiency emphasizes performance, measurable outcomes, and optimal use of resources, whereas equity focuses on access, fairness, and social inclusion (Ainscow, 2020; Chima et al., 2024; Naim, 2024).

In developing higher education systems such as Nigeria's, these goals frequently overlap but may also conflict. Universities located in underserved regions may promote equity through expanded access while lacking the resources to satisfy conventional efficiency indicators.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual and analytical methodology grounded in critical policy analysis and integrative literature review. No primary empirical data were collected. Instead, the paper synthesizes scholarly literature, regulatory documents, accreditation frameworks, and policy reports relating to Nigerian higher education (Yurt, 2025; Yusoff, 2025).

Sources reviewed include publications on higher education governance, quality assurance systems, accreditation practices,

institutional accountability, and access policy. Policy documents and sector reports were analyzed thematically to identify recurring issues relating to efficiency, equity, quality regulation, and institutional differentiation (Kayyali, 2023b; Nguyen et al., 2025; Pham et al., 2025).

Through thematic synthesis, the paper identifies conceptual gaps in current quality assurance practice and develops the proposed Differentiated Quality Assurance framework as a policy-oriented analytical model (Prastiwi et al., 2025; Tsiligiris & Hill, 2021).

4. Conceptual Framework

Using the complementary yet competing dimensions of efficiency and equity, which jointly provide the theoretical framework for analysis, this article conceptualizes quality assurance and accreditation of Nigerian universities. It highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the present quality assurance system in Nigeria (Lu & Matheny, 2024). The framework is underpinned by the assumption that the efficient use of resources in higher education governance should not only protect academic standards but also facilitate equitable access to quality higher education in contexts that are diverse in institutional, geographical, and socio-economic terms. According to the paper that efficiency and equity are not mutually exclusive. And to have sustainable quality assurance, there should be a right balance for institutional excellence and educational inclusion.

In this context, efficiency refers to the ability of universities to generate quality outcomes in education through optimal utilization of available human, financial and physical resources. The extent to which institutions can translate educational inputs into measurable outputs without compromising acceptable standards of academic performance and organizational effectiveness. Some common indicators of institutional efficiency are the cost of educating the unit of graduate, student-to-staff ratios, accreditation results, graduation and program completion, research productivity, and institutional management systems efficiency. Together indicators are proof performance optimization of resources and ability of universities to fulfill their academic missions with existing resources (Kilgore, 2023b).

In contrast, equity refers to the fair hash of higher education opportunities, resources, and outcomes among various segments of society. Thus, quality assurance is more than an attempt to meet the minimum academic standard but also a social justice and educational inclusion and equal opportunity effort. Therefore, Equity would mean meaningful access to, and successful participation in the higher education of students from diverse geographical locations, social-class backgrounds, gender and disadvantaged groups. Relevant indicators for university performance include regional representation in university provision, inclusive admission practices, gender participation, access for students from disadvantaged or underserved communities and equitable distribution of higher education institutions in the geopolitical zone of Nigeria. These indicators have incorporated the quality of institution that should also be measured on the basis of their contribution

towards reducing educational inequities and facilitating national development (Abdallah et al., 2026; Roshid et al., 2025).

Using these two conceptual dimensions, we could analytically position Nigerian universities within a four-quadrant efficiency–equity matrix which provides us with a heuristic to understand their institutional variation in quality assurance outcomes. The matrix categorizes universities that have a high level of efficiency and equity, strong academic performance but limited inclusiveness, prioritization of access to education but with a high level of inactivity of resources, and lastly, those universities that experience problems of quality as well as inclusiveness. Such conceptual categorization helps in in-depth analysis of how the existing accreditation schemes may unintentionally favor some institutional profiles and penalize others. The proposed Differentiated Quality Assurance (DQA) Framework aims to put academic excellence and educational equity in balance, through a more context-sensitive and mission-responsive approach, which thus provides the theoretical foundation for the same.

The paper proposes that Nigerian universities may be analytically located within a four-quadrant efficiency–equity matrix. Figure 1 shows the Efficiency–Equity matrix for Nigerian universities.

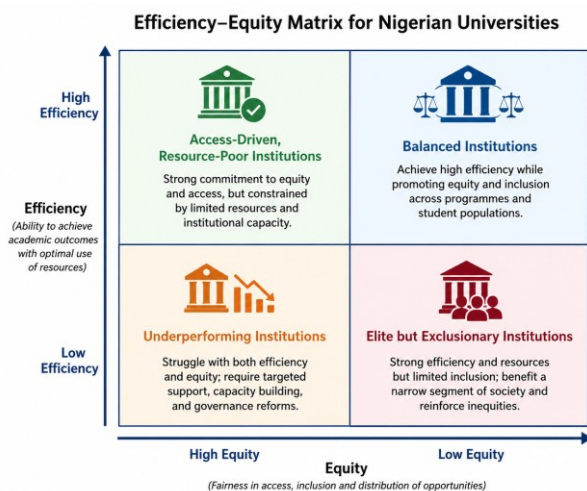


Fig. 1. Efficiency Vs. Equity grid of Nigerian universities

Figure Note: The matrix illustrates the conceptual positioning of institutions according to relative levels of efficiency and equity performance.

This framework provides a basis for evaluating how current accreditation systems reward some institutional types while disadvantaging others (Kemp & Scoffham, 2022).

5. How Nigerian Ministries Carry Out University Evaluations

Quality assurance and accreditation in Nigeria are implemented through a multi-layered regulatory structure coordinated by the Federal Ministry of Education and specialized statutory agencies. In the university sector, the primary responsibility rests with the National Universities

Commission, which oversees institutional licensing, program accreditation, resource verification, and compliance monitoring. For technical and teacher education institutions, parallel responsibilities are exercised by the National Board for Technical Education and the National Commission for Colleges of Education, respectively. Together, these agencies form the backbone of Nigeria's higher education evaluation system (Arnold et al., 2019b; Hanh et al., 2020b; Salto, 2023).

Although accreditation frameworks are formally established and procedurally structured, implementation varies considerably across institutions due to resource inequalities, governance differences, and political pressures. Understanding how evaluations are conducted is therefore essential for assessing both their effectiveness and limitations.

A. The Evaluation Cycle

In Nigerian universities, the process of quality assurance and accreditation usually starts with a self-assessment of the institution or a self-study report which is done by the university that seeks accreditation. The purpose of this document is to provide a reasoned account of the academic and the administrative performance of institution against the regulatory standards for the external evaluation. The self-study report provides detailed information on the objectives, design and implementation of the curriculum, profiles of staff and enrollees, research and physical infrastructure, governance arrangements and the level of compliance of the institution with prescribed quality assurance benchmarks set by the National Universities Commission (NUC) and others. The self-study process is more than just a formality. It encourages reflection by the institution on its strengths, operational weaknesses, and the quality of plans for continuous improvement, ahead of the accreditation exercise. In most Nigerian universities, the preparations for the accreditation begins about 12-18 months prior to the visitation due to the lengthy documentation and internal organization to prove national quality compliance (Christine DeGregory et al., 2025; Kremer, 2024).

Upon submission and initial review of the institutional self-study report, regulatory agencies carry out a verification exercise on the resource of the institution (colleges/distributed campuses) to determine whether the university has the human, physical technological and academic resources to support these programs. At this stage of the assessment, the panels conduct comprehensive on-site inspections of lecture halls, classrooms, laboratories, workshops, library collection, electronic databases, staff office, student support facilities and ICT infrastructure. The evaluators will also look into curriculum documents, program specifications, course materials and staff qualification records to verify that the self-study report is consistent with the reality of the institution. This assessment process allows accreditation teams to ascertain not only the availability of essential learning resources but also their sufficiency, functionality, upkeep, accessibility, and appropriateness for the programs in question and their regulations. By merging documentary evidence with direct observation and stakeholder engagement, the resource verification exercise assesses institutional capacity in a holistic

manner and serves as a vital basis for subsequent accreditation decision making on program quality and institution readiness. The aim is to determine whether the institution possesses the minimum academic and physical resources required to offer the program under review (Anholon et al., 2024; Salleh et al., 2020; Tonbuloglu, 2024; Tugman, 2023).

This stage is followed by program accreditation visits. External panels assess the program against the NUC's Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) or related regulatory standards. Review panels typically interview institutional leadership, academic staff, students, and support personnel while also conducting site inspections.

Institutional accreditation and program reassessment generally occur on a recurring cycle, often every five years, though interim reviews may occur earlier where concerns are identified (Reddy et al., 2023; Serban, 2026; Sheppard, 2022a, 2022b).



Fig. 2. Steps in a Nigerian ministry-led university evaluation

Figure Note: Adopted from Nigerian university accreditation procedures administered by the National Universities Commission and related regulatory agencies.

B. Key Metrics Used in Accreditation

Accreditation within the Nigerian higher education system employs a set of measurable quality indicators that evaluates the ability of the universities to meet the minimum standards for the delivery of academic programs. The aim of indicators is to present objective evidence of institutional capacity, academic quality and operational efficiency whilst ensuring universities maintain a minimal level of teaching, learning, research and support for students. The Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) established by National Universities Commission (NUC) are the primary guidelines for the accreditation of programs; but, evaluation teams use a number of additional indicators to assess readiness and aid continuous improvement.

The academic staffing profile of the institution is a vital factor in the implementation of the accreditation system. The panels consider the percentage of academic staff holding a doctorate, the rank distribution of lecturing staff, lecturer workload and the professor/student ratio to assess whether

programs are supported by an appropriately qualified and experienced academic staff. Special attention is devoted to the availability of senior academics capable of providing academic leadership, supervising postgraduate research, and maintaining scholarly productivity. Deficiencies in academic staffing have an important bearing on accreditation since the quality of teaching and research is intimately linked to staff qualifications and expertise. Therefore, in Nigeria's accreditation scheme, the academic staffing profile remains one of the strongest predictors of program quality and institutional credibility (Pohlenz, 2022; Sabagh & Moshtari, 2025).

Adequacy of facilities is another key dimension of evaluating an institution. On accreditation visits, review teams' gaps and quality of physical facilities including lecture theatres, classrooms, laboratories, workshops, library, information and communication technology infrastructure, and student workspaces and, if applicable, hostel accommodation. Furthermore, evaluators consider the functioning, upkeep, accessibility and suitability of these facilities in relation to the program. Many public universities have recurring shortages of laboratory equipment, internet connectivity, and classrooms which have become recurrent bottlenecks in getting accredited fully. These infrastructure problems are often more a result of limited funding and maintenance delays than the institution's unwillingness to comply. Yet, infrastructure is also a fundamental indicator of the quality of education. It is one of the factors that influence teaching, research and learning (Biro et al., 2023; Duarte & Vardasca, 2023; Holmes, 2020; Rienzo, 2022).

Access to current scholarly resources is essential for effective teaching, learning and research. Accordingly, library quality occupies a central position within the accreditation framework. Accreditation panels investigate library collections in terms of availability of latest textbooks, subscription to journals of international repute, reference materials specific to the discipline, electronic databases, and digital information. Due to the increasing importance of scholarship and technology and learning environments, there is also a growing stress on students to access these resources through modern library management systems and online platforms. Higher education is increasingly reliant upon the electronic information system. The quality of a library is no more limited to just the print collection but also depends upon its ability to provide a variety of digital resources and give support towards information literacy (Hull et al., 2025; Tokarz, 2024).

Accreditation exercises examine student support services and learning resources available inside an institution in addition to its staffing, infrastructure and library resources. Review panels scrutinize the effectiveness of academic advising systems, access to information and communication technologies, test management procedures, learning support services, counseling provision, and administrative response to students. The services play a major role in helping students succeed, enhancing learning outcomes, and improving overall institution effectiveness. Modern quality assurance systems place greater weight on the need for high-quality institution-wide support systems to ensure that students succeed, which is essential for

academic quality assurance in addition to curriculum and teaching quality.

Accreditation history is a major contextual indicator during institutional evaluations. The outcomes of previous accreditation give regulators useful information about an institution's past performance, commitment to quality improvement and ability to correct things noted before. Programs that have received interim accreditation, or which have not satisfied minimum standards, are subject to greater scrutiny during evaluation exercises. Review panels will look closely for evidence that earlier recommendations have been addressed. On the other hand, institutes that have a proven record of ongoing compliance and continuous improvement can be viewed as being equipped with strong internal quality assurance. The past accreditation history depicts an institution's performance but it signifies the institution's true competency. It indicates the learning of an institution. It is responsible to do accountability. Also, further commitment to quality stays depicted by the institution (Diabat & Bellibas, 2025; von Keyserlingk *et al.*, 2025).

All these accreditation measures indicate that quality assurance seems to be more than compliance to set standards in Nigerian universities. Instead, it is a multidimensional assessment of institutional capacity, education quality, governance effectiveness and readiness to provide students with an environment that would enable the attainment of quality education. Although these markers have significantly rallied accountability around Nigeria's higher education, their effectiveness hinges on continuous application as well as adequate institutional resources and improvement in quality. This is as opposed to intermittent compliance.

Table 1
Comparison of accreditation metrics across university types

Metric	Federal	State	Private
Funding Stability	High	Variable	Tuition-Dependent
Academic Staffing	High	Moderate	Moderate-High
Infrastructure	Moderate-High	Variable	High
Research Capacity	High	Moderate	Moderate
Accreditation Risk	Low	Moderate-High	Low-Moderate

6. Critical Analysis: Where Efficiency and Equity Collide

While the Nigerian accreditation system is designed to protect academic standards, its implementation reveals recurring tensions between efficiency-driven regulation and equity-centered educational access (Bougherira *et al.*, 2024; Manzer, 2025).

These tensions are not simply administrative; they reflect broader national inequalities in funding, geography, infrastructure, and institutional capacity.

A. Academic Staffing Requirements vs Regional Inequality

One of the clearest tensions lies in faculty qualification requirements. Accreditation frameworks typically reward universities with high numbers of doctoral degree holders and senior academics. While this promotes academic quality, universities located in underserved or rural areas often struggle to attract and retain highly qualified staff due to poor

infrastructure, lower salaries, and limited research funding (Kuoppakangas *et al.*, 2021; Liu & Tu, 2020).

As a result, institutions serving disadvantaged populations may fail quality reviews despite fulfilling important access and inclusion functions.

B. Infrastructure Standards vs Unequal Funding Capacity

Modern laboratories, ICT facilities, and library infrastructure are central to accreditation decisions. However, many state universities operate under severe financial constraints and depend on irregular state government funding. Federal universities generally enjoy stronger funding access, while private universities often rely on tuition-generated resources (Alexander *et al.*, 2023; Bello & Bello, 2023; Kouser *et al.*, 2022; Richmond, 2024; Tubbs & Fuesting, 2024).

This creates structural inequality in evaluation outcomes, where better-funded institutions are more likely to satisfy regulatory benchmarks regardless of broader social mission.

C. Access Expansion vs Quality Preservation

Nigeria's increasing demand for higher education has intensified enrolment pressures. Universities often admit beyond capacity in response to social demand and political expectations. While this improves access numerically, it can generate overcrowded classrooms, pressure on teaching resources, and weakened student support systems (Cinar & Coenen, 2023; Omeh *et al.*, 2025; Tsai, 2024; Young *et al.*, 2024).

Regulators therefore face a difficult balancing act: enforcing limits to protect quality may reduce access, while permitting expansion may dilute educational standards.

D. Political Influence and Regulatory Inconsistency

Another challenge is political interference in evaluation outcomes. Scholars have noted concerns that accreditation decisions may occasionally be shaped by political pressure, institutional lobbying, or regional considerations rather than by technical review alone (Castro & Lerman, 2025; Liying & Mengying, 2024; Luo, 2024; Özkan & McNair, 2025; Suiter *et al.*, 2025).

Such interventions weaken public confidence in accreditation systems and undermine the legitimacy of quality assurance governance.

7. Identified Gaps in Current Ministry-Led Evaluations

The effectiveness of Nigeria's quality assurance and accreditation system, though considerably effective and impactful as of now, experienced a lot of setbacks in terms of structure and operation. The above analysis suggests that the current ministry-ran evaluation framework primarily focuses on compliance with minimal consideration of the varied realities of Nigerian universities. Five major weaknesses stand out: political interference, inconsistent application of accreditation standards, weak post-accreditation monitoring, limited application of equity inputs, and duplication of institutions by regulators. All these challenges lessen the capability of quality assurance mechanisms to support continuous improvement of

institutions while promoting educational equity, accountability, and sustainable development.

A. Political Interference

In Nigeria's higher education sector, the issue of political interference is one of the most daunting threats to the quality assurance and accreditation processes. The most ideal accreditation decisions should develop based on objective evidence, transparency of procedures, and professional standards. Nonetheless, evaluation processes can be influenced by other political interests. Specifically, government officials, powerful stakeholders, and institutional interests may try to influence regulatory agencies. Interference may mean pressure to approve programs that have not fulfilled accreditation criteria, delaying sanctions on non-compliant institutions, or favoritism on the basis of political, regional or institutional considerations. Such practices may compromise the independence of regulatory bodies, erode public confidence in accreditation results and delegitimize quality assurance systems. In addition, when accreditation decisions appear to be politically motivated and not supported with evidence, institutions will become less committed to genuine quality improvement and more concerned with political patronage. The Ministry-led evaluation processes require rebuilding trust through enhanced regulatory autonomy, transparent decision-making, and professional independence (Gordon & Fischer, 2015; Kayyali, 2023c).

B. Inconsistent Application of Standards

Another key limitation relates to the unequal application of accreditation standards across categories of higher education institutions. While accreditation criteria are published uniformly by regulatory agencies, there is not always uniformity in their application by federal, state and private universities. Standards are interpreted and enforced differently due to variations in institutional funding, governance structures, political influence, and administrative capacity. Thus, institutions evaluated according to the same criteria may score differently even when they perform at similar academic levels. Making distinctions that are not rational leads to perceptions of inequity and diminishes confidence in accreditation systems' transparency. Moreover, they often create ambiguity for university managers, who find it difficult to grasp how compliance requirements are executed during evaluation exercises. According to international scholarship, quality assurance primarily depends on well-crafted standards, but they must also be applied consistently, impartially and transparently at institutions. By improving evaluator training, enhancing external moderation processes, and implementing standardized accreditation procedures, a significant impact will be made on consistency and institutional confidence in Nigeria's quality assurance system (Gandara & Anahideh, 2024; Gratz, 2018; Mask, 2024).

C. Weak Post-accreditation Monitoring

Accreditation practices in Nigeria currently focus heavily on external evaluations conducted at specific intervals to check the quality of the institutions, but almost nothing is done to monitor

what... Continue reading Current Context of Institutional Accreditation in Nigeria In many cases, once programs receive a full, interim or denied status then their accreditation is finished and there are few mechanisms in place to systematically check whether institutions do follow up on the recommendations made by evaluation panels after this point. This approach prompts universities to allocate resources for accreditation visits rather than integrate quality assurance into ongoing institutional planning and improvement processes. Consequently, shortcomings discovered during accreditation exercises may remain unaddressed for long periods until the next such exercises. As regards international quality assurance systems, monitoring the performance, reporting the progress, self-review and developmental support have been considered more important than periodic inspection for compliance. Through mandatory preparation of improvement plans after accreditation, periodic monitoring of progress through interim reports, follow-up visits, and a digital performance dashboard, we would put in place a system that would induce quality enhancement in institutions. Further, this would also enhance institutional accountability and a long-term effectiveness (Love et al., 2022).

D. Limited Equity Sensitivity

Another limitation of the current ministry-led evaluation model is its insufficient consideration of equity-related factors in accreditation decisions. Current frameworks mainly evaluate institutional performance using standardized indicators like staff qualifications, infrastructure adequacy, curriculum design, research productivity and learning resources. Though these indicators are very helpful in maintaining the academic quality of institutions, they seldom factor in great differences in context. Universities located in disadvantaged economic areas, conflict-affected communities, and historically under represented places often experience structural restrictions that hinder their ability to meet traditional accreditation criteria while making significant contributions to widening participation and regional development. Institutions that support first-generation students, low-income people, rural communities, and other marginalized populations may show major social impact that is not apparent in conventional assessments. If the quality assurance framework does not have regard for the contextual reality, it can reinforce inequality in education. This takes place by rewarding institutions that are already resource-rich and in turn, penalizing the university that has an important access mission. Integration of equity-sensitive indicators such as regional disadvantage, social inclusion, student diversity, community engagement, and institutional mission differentiation in accreditation systems would help in maintaining the balance among quality, justice and national development (Holian et al., 2025).

E. Duplication Across Agencies

The presence of several regulatory and professional bodies dealing with the evaluation of Nigerian higher education institutions has led to considerable duplication in quality assurance activities. Universities often go through separate

assessments by the National Universities Commission, professional accreditation councils, regulatory agencies for different disciplines, and other entities, each following a different process, using different documentation, and using different timelines. Although these overlapping responsibilities serve a legitimate quality assurance objective, they tend to place a heavy administrative and financial burden on institutions. University officials and faculty may spend hefty amounts of time preparing multiple self-study reports, organizing repeated site visits and responding to similar requests from different evaluators. Duplication of efforts drains resources from teaching, research and strategic quality improvement, which raises operating costs. The experience of many other countries suggests that integrated regulatory coordination, mutual recognition of evaluation outcomes, harmonized accreditation frameworks and shared databases of quality assurance could greatly cut down on duplication without reducing accountability. Thus, better coordination of regulatory authorities will increase efficiency, decrease institutional load, and enable universities to focus to a greater extent on sustained quality enhancement rather than recurring compliance (Clements *et al.*, 2022; Evans *et al.*, 2021).

8. Proposed Conceptual Model: Differentiated Quality Assurance (DQA) Framework

To address these limitations, this paper proposes a Differentiated Quality Assurance (DQA) Framework for Nigerian universities.

The DQA framework is built on the assumption that quality assurance should maintain academic accountability while recognizing institutional diversity and unequal operating conditions.

Rather than applying a uniform accreditation logic to all institutions, the model introduces differentiated evaluation categories (Benson *et al.*, 2024; Kayyali, 2023d).

A. Tiered Accreditation Structure

The Differentiated Quality Assurance (DQA) framework allows for the development of a tiered accreditation framework to accommodate the diverse nature of institutional missions in the Nigerian higher education system. Rather than applying a uniform set of evaluation criteria to all universities, the framework advocates mission-sensitive accreditation that aligns assessment standards with institutional objectives while maintaining accountability and academic quality.

1) Tier A – Research-Intensive Universities

Tier A universities are research-intensive ones whose primary function is to advance knowledge through high-level research, innovation and postgraduate education. The accreditation of higher learning institutions, should also incorporate more weightage on research productivity, capacity to supervise postgraduates, international publications in academic journals, competition for research grants, and state-of-the-art research infrastructure. University aspirations to compete in the global knowledge economy and significantly contribute to scientific discovery and innovation will reflect these indicators (Ali, 2025; Chan & Jiang, 2023).

2) Tier B – Teaching-Focused Universities

Tier B teaching-focused universities have a primary responsibility to provide high-quality undergraduate and professional education to students while preparing the graduates for the labor market and national development. For these institutions, the priorities for accreditation must include teaching effectiveness, which may focus on curriculum relevance, student learning outcomes, graduate employability, instruction innovation, and so forth. When measuring excellence in higher education it is important consideration of research performance must also include the ability to carry out effective teaching and produce capable graduates with the knowledge and skills necessary for today (Kayyali, 2023e; Mwila, 2025b).

3) Tier C – Access and Community-Based Universities

Tier C includes access- and community-oriented universities, whose primary mission is to increase higher education opportunities for underserved populations while also contributing directly to regional and community development. Assessment in this category ought to give greater emphasis to the contribution of institutions to the widening participation, first-in-family student enrolment, providing education opportunities to rural and in disadvantaged communities, advancement of gender equity and community involvement and local socio-economic developments. By recognizing these higher-level developmental responsibilities, the DQA framework ensures that institutions devoted to educational inclusion will be evaluated for their social mission and not judged solely through research-based evaluations (Alberto *et al.*, 2016; Laderman, 2023; Warshaw *et al.*, 2020).

By recognizing institutional differentiation while preserving high-level academic standards, the proposed tiered accreditation framework offers a more flexible and context-sensitive quality assurance mechanism. The plan transforms accreditation from a uniform base into one that relies upon mission. Such a mission might call for excellence in research (university), teaching, and/or community engagement (college or institute).

B. Equity-Weighted Scorecard

The Differentiated Quality Assurance Framework's most innovative element is the equity-weighted scorecard that values both academic quality and educational equity in equal measure for institution evaluation. The framework recommends 50% weightage to quality indicators and equity indicators to assess decision-making of the accreditation body. The dimension of Quality would evaluate 'traditional' measures of institutional performance such as qualifications and capacity of academic staff, adequacy of physical and digital infrastructure, curriculum quality, research environment and other parameters associated with academic excellence. The equity dimension would assess whether institutions are performing well in ensuring regional inclusivity; expanding access for underprivileged and underrepresented students; promoting gender equality; improving affordability; and creating demonstrable impact through community engagement and public service.

By giving equal weight to quality and equity, the proposed scorecard seeks to overcome a fundamental weakness of standard accreditation systems. These systems often privilege indicators that require heavy investments while ignoring the broader social responsibilities of higher education institutions. According to the balanced evaluation framework, universities can contribute to national development not only through the quality of their education but also by expanding access to education and minimizing inequalities. As a result, the equity-weighted scorecard provides a more nuanced and socially responsible approach to quality assurance that promotes accountability without entrenching structural inequalities among institutions (Coco, 2022; Liera et al., 2025; Sinnamon, 2024).

C. Independent Evaluation Ombudsman

The proposal of an evaluation independent ombudsman to enhance transparency, credibility, and fairness of accreditation processes in the Differentiated Quality Assurance Framework is separated from all regulatory agencies. The main function of the office would be to provide unbiased oversight of accreditation decisions by reviewing institutional appeals, investigating disputed evaluation outcomes, monitoring consistency and fairness of accreditation procedures and ensuring uniform application of regulatory standards across all categories of higher education institutions. The establishment of an independent mechanism of this nature will also enhance procedural accountability. It will give universities a chance to voice their concerns regarding evaluation processes formally. At the same time, it will enhance public assurance in the quality assurance system and its integrity.

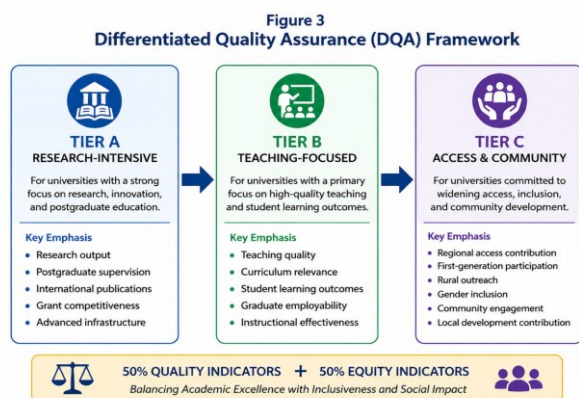


Fig. 3. Differentiated Quality Assurance (DQA) framework

Figure Note: The framework integrates differentiated accreditation pathways with balanced quality and equity indicators.

Besides this adjudicative function, the ombudsman would assist in improving performance by identifying the repeated weaknesses in the accreditation practices, making suggestions for policy reforms and encouraging greater transparency in the regulatory decision-making. Independent review mechanisms enhance institutional trust and governance, and reduce perceptions of political influence or administrative bias in quality assurance systems as international experience suggests.

In Nigeria, establishing an Independent Evaluation Ombudsman would be an important institutional safeguard. An Independent Evaluation Ombudsman would enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of accreditation. It would also support a more accountable, evidence-based higher education governance framework (Pannone et al., 2024; Xie et al., 2025).

9. Policy Recommendations

The analysis in this study shows that, to strengthen quality assurance of higher education in Nigeria, there is need for policy reforms that do not only embrace accountability but educational equality. Based on the suggested Differentiated Quality Assurance (DQA) Framework, five policy recommendations that are interrelated have been put forward to enhance the new effectiveness, transparency and inclusiveness of the ministry-led evaluation systems.

Funding choices ought to not affect accreditation implication alone. While accreditation is an important measure of institutional quality, building resource allocation on these merely accreditation status may reinforce existing inequalities favoring those institutions with superior financial and infrastructural capacities. A more balanced funding model should thus include both academic quality indicators and quantifiable equity outcomes, such as institutional contributions to widening participation, regional development, gender inclusion, and access for disadvantaged student cohorts. An approach like this will motivate the universities in their pursuit of excellence and help in the national objectives of educational inclusion and social development.

The establishment of regional accreditation hubs should also be looked at by the appropriate authorities to improve accreditation. To reduce travelling costs and administrative delays, and improve coordination between regulatory agencies and higher education institutions, Nigeria should have decentralized accreditation centers due to its large landmass and diverse institutions. Establishing regional hubs would allow us to interact more closely with universities, offer capacity-building initiatives, and strengthen continuous quality assurance instead of limiting regulatory interaction to a one-off accreditation exercise.

Thirdly, a structured pre-accreditation support program should be put in place for institutions that are still having quality assurance concerns. Accreditation should not be treated simply as an evaluation. Regulatory agencies must employ a more developmental approach by providing technical assistance, mentorship, institutional advisory service and capacity building before formal evaluation. By getting this level of support, universities could proactively address identified deficiencies, better prepare the institution and mitigate re-failure of accreditation, while developing a culture of quality enhancement.

Establishing a national quality assurance accreditation dashboard would enhance the transparency, accountability, and public confidence in the quality assurance system. The PPPP can also be a digital platform which is publicly available to provide real time information on accreditation status, key performance indicators, compliance reports, status of the

quality improvement plan, etc. Raising transparency can assist students, parents, employers, policymakers and other stakeholders in making more informed decisions while encouraging universities to maintain high standards of academic performance and institutional accountability.

Monitoring after accreditation must be strengthened through the institution of mandatory institutional improvement plans with the periodic reporting of progress. In the context of accreditation reviews, it is recommended that universities be required to submit structured implementation reports at regular intervals e.g. every six months. Regulatory agencies should conduct follow-up evaluations of institutions that receive accreditation as well as continuous monitoring of these institutions so that accreditation becomes a continuous process of institutional improvement and not merely a periodic compliance exercise. Institutions would become more answerable and would also be encouraged to continuously improve and this will improve the effectiveness of the Nigerian higher education quality assurance system in the long run (Faubert, 2019; Jang & Bailes, 2024).

Taken together, these policy recommendations strengthen the main argument of this paper that effective quality assurance should extend beyond regulatory compliance to enable institutional development, equitable education and continuing quality improvement. The introduction of the new system would help to create a more transparent, context sensitive, and mission responsive accreditation system that could enhance both academic quality as well as equitable access across Nigeria's increasingly diverse higher education landscape.

10. Implications for University Management

The proposed framework has important implications for institutional leadership across Nigeria.

Vice-Chancellors would need to balance regulatory compliance with access expansion strategies.

Registrars would require stronger institutional data systems capable of tracking both efficiency indicators and demographic equity indicators.

Academic boards would need to integrate differentiated quality principles into curriculum planning, program review, and strategic planning processes.

Institutional leaders would also be encouraged to move beyond accreditation as a compliance exercise and instead treat quality assurance as a continuous developmental process tied to institutional mission and social responsibility (Chaaban et al., 2025; Gleason & Helgevold, 2025; Islam et al., 2025; Leal et al., 2025).

11. Conclusion

The Nigerian higher education sector continues to expand in scale, complexity, and national significance. Yet expansion has not consistently translated into quality improvement or equitable opportunity. This paper has argued that quality assurance and accreditation in Nigerian universities are shaped by an enduring tension between efficiency and equity.

Current ministry-led evaluation systems have succeeded in

establishing formal standards, regulatory benchmarks, and accountability mechanisms. However, implementation remains constrained by funding inequalities, infrastructure limitations, uneven institutional capacity, and political interference.

The article contends that existing approaches lean heavily toward efficiency and compliance while giving insufficient recognition to institutional diversity and regional inequality.

To address this imbalance, the paper proposes the Differentiated Quality Assurance (DQA) Framework, which combines academic accountability with context-sensitive equity indicators. By introducing tiered accreditation pathways, equity-weighted performance measures, and independent review mechanisms, the framework offers a practical and policy-relevant model for reforming quality assurance in Nigeria.

Ultimately, without rethinking how evaluation itself is conceptualized and implemented, Nigeria risks pursuing quality without inclusion or access without meaningful quality. Sustainable reform requires both. Only through a balanced approach can Nigerian universities produce globally competitive graduates while also fulfilling their broader developmental and social justice responsibilities (NWANKWO & CHIJOKE, 2024; Ogunsola et al., 2026; Yusuf & Ibrahim, 2024).

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