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Quality Assurance in Saudi Higher Education: Transferability and Policy Implications for the Global South

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, Saudi Arabia has undertaken major reforms in higher education, positioning quality assurance (QA) as a central component of the Vision 2030 transformation agenda. These reforms aim to strengthen institutional accountability, improve educational outcomes, and enhance the international credibility of Saudi universities. This study examines how QA reforms are interpreted and implemented within institutional contexts, and explores tensions among bureaucratic compliance practices, external accreditation models, and local educational priorities. Using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, survey data were collected from 248 faculty members, administrators, and QA officers across four regions of Saudi Arabia. The quantitative findings were complemented by 40 semistructured interviews from two contrasting institutions and a systematic document analysis. The results indicate that QA is widely prioritized in strategic planning and leadership discourse, although faculty members expressed greater skepticism than administrators. Leadership commitment, technological integration, and faculty development emerged as key enabling factors, whereas resistance to change and bureaucratic compliance

pressures constrained innovation. Document analysis revealed uneven alignment with Vision 2030 benchmarks across institutions. Drawing on Lewin's change framework, the findings suggest that QA reforms often follow cyclical rather than stable patterns of institutional consolidation. The Saudi case contributes to international and comparative discussions on higher education by illustrating how national quality reforms interact with institutional culture, governance capacity, and global policy models in the Global South.

Keywords: faculty development, Global South, higher education reform, institutional culture, internationalization, policy transfer, quality assurance, Vision 2030

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INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia's higher education system has undergone a major transformation over the past few decades, notably under the framework of Vision 2030 (Albluwi, 2024; Fetais, 2024). This national development strategy positions higher education as a key driver of economic diversification, human capital development, and global competitiveness (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Within this reform agenda, Quality Assurance (QA) has emerged as both a central policy instrument and a contested institutional practice. QA reforms aim to raise academic standards, improve graduate employability, and ensure that educational outcomes align with labor market needs by embedding accreditation, performance indicators, and outcome-based assessment into everyday institutional processes (Alanazi et al., 2023; Alofi & Younes, 2019). Although these reforms have strengthened organizational accountability, their actual implementation has proven more complex than policy narratives often suggest. While some institutions may view QA as a route toward global recognition and institutional improvement, they often encounter challenges, such as resistance to change, uneven resource distribution, and the persistence of audit-oriented cultures that prioritize compliance over meaningful academic transformation (Lebeau & Alruwaili, 2022; Al Shanfari, 2017).

These developments must also be understood within the wider internationalization of higher education. Universities across the world progressively operate within global academic networks characterized by student mobility, cross-border collaboration, and international competition for reputation

and resources. In this context, QA systems play an important role in establishing institutional trustworthiness and advancing international academic cooperation. Accreditation frameworks, benchmarking systems, and external evaluation mechanisms are widely used to signal academic reliability and enable mutual recognition of degrees across national borders (Harvey & Williams, 2018). As countries seek to expand participation in international education and strengthen global research partnerships, QA frameworks increasingly influence how institutions position themselves within international higher education systems.

For Saudi Arabia, this international dimension is especially significant. Over the past two decades, the Kingdom has expanded its engagement with global higher education through scholarship programs, international research partnerships, and institutional collaborations. Large-scale initiatives have enabled thousands of Saudi students to pursue degrees abroad while also encouraging domestic universities to strengthen their academic standards and international visibility. In this context, QA reforms under Vision 2030 contribute not only to national educational development but also to the international credibility of Saudi institutions. Through aligning academic programs with recognized quality standards, universities can improve cross-border recognition of their qualifications and expand opportunities for cross-border partnerships.

Quality assurance systems are increasingly linked to patterns of international student mobility and the global recognition of academic credentials. Institutions that demonstrate transparent governance structures, accredited programs, and credible quality assurance mechanisms are more likely to gain international trust and engage in cross-border academic exchanges. Institutional quality frameworks serve as signals of academic reliability, helping other higher education institutions and students alike evaluate the credibility of degrees and the transferability of qualifications across national and international contexts. In this sense, national quality assurance reforms influence not only domestic governance but also the broader international higher education environment in which student mobility, degree recognition, and institutional partnerships operate. Consequently, examining how quality assurance reforms are implemented within Saudi universities provides insight into how institutional quality infrastructures may, in turn, influence international student flows and the global positioning of higher education systems.

Quality assurance is therefore not only a domestic policy mechanism but also part of a wider global trend. Higher education systems worldwide increasingly rely on accreditation, benchmarking, and appraisal frameworks to strengthen organizational accountability and maintain competitiveness in international academic environments (Harvey & Williams, 2018). In the Global South, however, these schemes are frequently adapted from Global North models without sufficient consideration of local cultural and institutional contexts. This often creates tensions between externally promoted quality standards and nationally embedded educational values. Saudi Arabia has widely adopted QA structures formed by international accreditation bodies such as ABET and ACBSP, alongside national regulatory institutions, including the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation and its successor, the Education and

Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC) (Darandari et al., 2009; OECD, 2024). While these frameworks have professionalized QA practices and improved institutional documentation, challenges in sustainability, equity, and contextual appropriateness remain. Faculty resistance, unequal resource distribution across areas, and limited post-accreditation follow-up continue to obstruct efforts to institutionalize QA as a genuine culture of improvement instead of a procedural compliance exercise (Omar, 2020).

The Saudi case is particularly relevant to understanding QA reform in the Global South because it illustrates both the opportunities and the tensions associated with rapid educational transformation. Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in QA infrastructure, digital systems, and institutional capacity building as part of its Vision 2030 plan to strengthen global competitiveness (Al-Taweel, 2020). At the same time, the system faces challenges common to many higher education systems in the Global South, including centralized administration structures, faculty skepticism toward externally driven reforms, unequal institutional capacities, and the difficulty of adapting standardized frameworks across diverse academic cultures (Aljendan, 2024). These conditions make Saudi Arabia a significant context for examining how QA reforms evolve within rapidly changing higher education environments that are simultaneously influenced by national policy priorities and global academic expectations.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates how QA reforms are conceptualized and implemented across Saudi higher education institutions. Early data show that faculty members and administrators broadly recognize QA as an institutional priority and an increasingly professionalized process. Challenges, such as resistance to change, regional inequalities in institutional resources, and audit-focused practices, continue to limit the sustainability of reform. Early evidence also indicates that internally driven quality initiatives may be perceived as more meaningful than externally imposed accreditation requirements, underscoring the importance of institutional ownership in sustaining long-term transformation.

Despite the rapid expansion of QA-related research worldwide, gaps remain in the literature. Methodologically, much of the current scholarship relies on descriptive or policy-oriented approaches, with few studies using explanatory mixed-methods designs that combine broad sectoral patterns with in-depth institutional experiences. Empirically, there is limited research examining how different stakeholder groups, including faculty members, administrators, and QA officers throughout various Saudi regions, perceive QA reforms, resulting in a limited understanding of institutional dynamics (Albaqami, 2019). A contextual gap also persists, as imported QA models frequently overlook sociocultural characteristics of Saudi higher education, such as gender-segregated campuses and regional inequalities in institutional resources (Albaqami, 2019). Finally, a theoretical gap remains, as institutional isomorphism and policy transfer are often excluded from change management perspectives or critical analyses of how reforms unfold in practice (Saeed & Sherwani, 2023).

To address these gaps, this study adopts a multitheoretical perspective that integrates Lewin's change management model, organizational culture theory, and

institutional isomorphism. Lewin's framework delivers a lens for examining how reforms are introduced, resisted, and potentially institutionalized within organizations. Organizational culture theory emphasizes the role of shared values and assumptions in shaping how quality initiatives are interpreted and implemented (Schein, 1999). Institutional isomorphism and policy transfer perspectives situate Saudi QA reforms inside wider global patterns of adopting externally developed governance models (Albaqami, 2019). In addition, decolonial critiques of higher education underline the requirement for context-sensitive changes that avoid reducing QA reforms to imported policy templates (Almurayh et al., 2022; Saeed & Sherwani, 2023). Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive analytical structure for understanding how QA reforms operate within Saudi higher education and how they relate to broader international trends in higher education. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia conceptualize QA reforms under Vision 2030?
- RQ2: What are the perceived enablers and barriers to the effective adoption of QA?
- RQ3: How do institutional documents reflect alignment with Vision 2030 QA frameworks?
- RQ4: To what extent are QA transformations transferable across institutions and regions?

By examining these questions, the study adds to theoretical, conceptual, and practical discussions of QA reform. Theoretically, it integrates change management, institutional isomorphism, and context-sensitive perspectives to examine QA reforms in a non-Western higher education system. In practice, the findings offer insights for decision-makers and higher education leaders seeking to strengthen institutional quality while continuing to comply with local educational priorities and international academic expectations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality assurance (QA) in the higher education literature is extensive and often contested, reflecting different perspectives on its purpose, implementation, and institutional outcomes. At its core, QA aims to ensure accountability, transparency, and adherence to educational standards. However, recent scholarship emphasizes that QA is not simply a regulatory procedure but a complex institutional process determined by cultural, political, and organizational contexts (Harvey & Williams, 2018; Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020). Rather than functioning as a neutral administrative mechanism, QA systems interact with institutional cultures, governance practices, and national policy agendas. In rapidly expanding higher education systems, particularly in the Global South, QA reforms are often embedded in broader modernization strategies aimed at strengthening institutional trustworthiness and international competitiveness. Saudi Arabia reflects these conditions because its QA reforms are closely linked

to national development policies and to global debates about the governance of higher education systems in emerging economies.

Global Quality Assurance Frameworks and Institutional Adaptation

A central theme in the literature concerns the flexibility of QA frameworks across institutional and cultural settings. International accreditation systems such as ABET, AACSB, and ACBSP have been widely adopted across the Gulf region to strengthen academic standards and align programs with global expectations (Alofi & Younes, 2019). Institutional isomorphism provides an important theoretical explanation for this pattern, suggesting that universities adopt internationally recognized governance models to gain legitimacy within global academic networks (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). While these arrangements may enhance institutional reputation and external accountability, research indicates that their implementation does not necessarily translate into improvements in everyday teaching and learning practices.

Empirical research shows that institutions often adopt external accreditation templates without fully integrating them into academic cultures or governance structures, producing a gap between formal procedural compliance and substantive institutional change (Almurayh et al., 2022). Evidence from accreditation cycles suggests that although universities frequently meet record-keeping requirements, deeper transformations in institutional culture and pedagogy tend to emerge more gradually. Studies of health profession programs in Saudi Arabia illustrate this tension, with faculty and students accepting the value of accreditation while simultaneously highlighting the administrative burden associated with compliance requirements. The results exemplify a continuing debate in the literature: whether QA reforms foster sustainable institutional learning or primarily serve as an external accountability mechanism.

Institutional Development, Internationalization, and Academic Credibility

Another important theme concerns the relationship between QA reforms, institutional development, and international engagement. Research indicates that effective QA systems can improve graduate employability, strengthen learning outcomes, and enhance international visibility for universities (Aburizaizah, 2022; Darandari et al., 2009; UNESCO, 2023). Leadership commitment and strategic-oriented planning are particularly important in determining whether quality frameworks become embedded within institutional governance structures (Shah & Sid Nair, 2014). Once integrated into broader institutional strategies, QA initiatives can support organizational learning and continuous academic improvement.

Quality assurance systems are also closely connected to the internationalization of higher education and the dynamics of international student mobility. Institutions that demonstrate transparent governance, accredited programs, and credible quality-monitoring mechanisms are more likely to gain international recognition and attract cross-border partnerships (Xu, 2023; Nguyen

& Sharma, 2024). For internationally mobile students, institutional quality frameworks function as signals of academic credibility and degree recognition, shaping decisions about study destinations and institutional trust. In this context, QA reforms influence not only domestic institutional governance but also the broader international higher education environment in which student mobility and academic collaboration occur.

At the same time, scholars caution that the pursuit of international recognition may produce what Harvey and Williams (2018) describe as “QA theater,” where institutions emphasize documentation and formal procedures, while substantive academic improvement remains limited. In such situations, QA processes risk becoming ritualized administrative practices that satisfy external auditors but fail to cultivate genuine cultures of quality in teaching and research (Almurayh et al., 2022). The Saudi experience shows both dimensions of this debate, showing how QA reforms can simultaneously promote institutional development while generating compliance-oriented practices.

Quality assurance systems also interact with the academic environments in which international students study. Research on international student adjustment stresses the importance of organizational reliability, supportive academic structures, and transparent governance in forming students’ academic and sociocultural adjustment within host institutions. Universities that maintain credible quality assurance systems and clearly articulated academic standards provide learning environments that support both academic integration and cross-cultural engagement among varied student populations. In this sense, institutional quality frameworks influence not only administrative governance but also the broader academic environments in which international students adjust and engage with global higher education systems.

Cultural Context, Cross-Cultural Learning Environments, and Institutional Resistance

The cultural dimensions of QA reforms have received increasing attention in recent scholarship. Many QA frameworks developed in Western contexts emphasize standardized assessment, assessable outcomes, and individual accountability. These principles may conflict with collaborative traditions and collective decision-making structures characteristic of Arab Islamic educational cultures (Albaqami, 2019). Consequently, faculty members may interpret QA initiatives as bureaucratic requirements rather than opportunities for academic improvement.

These cultural processes are also relevant to cross-cultural learning environments within increasingly internationalized universities. Institutions that host varied student populations must balance standardized quality frameworks alongside pedagogical practices that support culturally diverse learning contexts. Research on global higher education indicates that institutional policies, governance structures, and academic cultures shape how universities respond to culturally diverse classrooms and international academic communities. In this respect, QA frameworks influence not only administrative processes but also

broader institutional environments that affect teaching practices, intercultural learning, and academic integration within internationalized universities.

Research further indicates that such perceptions may lead to resistance or to superficial compliance with accreditation processes (Aburizaizah, 2022). Extensive record-keeping requirements may also lead to administrative fatigue among QA personnel and faculty, thereby diminishing long-term engagement with quality initiatives (Almurayh et al., 2022). These findings show the significance of culturally responsive QA strategies that align international standards with locally meaningful educational practices.

Policy Transfer and Localization of Quality Assurance

Closely related to cultural adaptation is the issue of policy transfer. Studies on policy borrowing show that governance models developed in the Global North may yield uneven outcomes when transferred to Global South contexts due to insufficient adaptation (Albaqami, 2015). In Saudi Arabia, international accreditation bodies enhance institutional credibility. However, they may not always align with local educational priorities, such as Islamic educational traditions, Arabic language instruction, or regional labor market needs (Almurayh et al., 2022).

Consequently, scholars argue that effective QA systems require contextualization rather than simple replication of external standards. Local adaptation permits institutions to maintain international credibility while preserving national educational values and priorities (Omar, 2020). This perspective highlights the importance of institutional agency in shaping global governance models across varied higher education environments.

Digital Transformation and the Sustainability of QA

Recent literature also examines the function of digital technologies in QA processes. Saudi universities increasingly rely on electronic dashboards, digital portfolios, and learning management systems to monitor academic performance and collect institutional data (Aburizaizah, 2022; Omar, 2020). These technologies improve disclosure and support systematic monitoring of institutional performance.

However, digitalization alone does not guarantee improvements in the quality of schooling. Digital reporting systems may reinforce compliance pressures rather than encourage pedagogical innovation (Alofi & Younes, 2019). Differences within digital infrastructure across areas may also intensify inequalities within higher education systems (Kayal & Khalife, 2025). As a result, scholars emphasize that technological solutions must be accompanied by institutional capacity-building and professional engagement to sustain meaningful quality improvement.

Taken together, the literature indicates that QA reforms operate at the intersection of global governance models, institutional cultures, and national development agendas. Although international accreditation frameworks

contribute to institutional legitimacy and global academic integration, their effectiveness depends on their interpretation and implementation within specific institutional contexts. Existing research shows persistent tensions between compliance-oriented accountability systems and the goal of enabling sustainable institutional improvement.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Several linked themes emerge across the literature. The transfer of global QA frameworks frequently produces uneven outcomes when institutions adopt international standards without sufficient adaptation to local contexts. Institutional capacity, leadership engagement, and professional participation strongly influence the implementation and sustainability of quality initiatives. QA reforms intersect with processes of internationalization, including cross-border collaboration, international student mobility, and the global recognition of academic credentials. Finally, cultural and organizational factors shape how faculty and administrators interpret quality reforms, often influencing whether QA becomes a mechanism for institutional learning or remains primarily a compliance-oriented practice.

Despite the expanding body of research on quality assurance in higher education, existing studies often focus either on national policy systems or on institutional case studies, with limited integration of sector-wide evidence and institutional-level experiences. Moreover, little research examines how internal stakeholders with differing roles interpret QA reforms inside rapidly transforming higher education systems, such as Saudi Arabia. Dealing with these gaps requires methods that combine quantitative and qualitative evidence to examine how quality reforms are conceptualized, implemented, and adapted across institutional contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Building on the conceptual and empirical issues identified in the preceding literature review, this study considers how quality assurance reforms are interpreted and implemented within Saudi higher education institutions. To examine both sector-wide patterns and institutional-level experiences, the research uses a mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative survey evidence with qualitative discussions and document analysis. The following sections describe the research design, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and analytical approaches used in the study.

Research Design

This study used a mixed-method sequential explanatory design guided by a critical realist framework. A realist perspective was adopted to examine the interaction between structural conditions and stakeholder perceptions within institutional contexts. Critical realism recognizes that social phenomena operate

through underlying institutional structures and mechanisms that may not be directly observable but can be studied empirically. This perspective permits researchers to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine both measurable patterns and the institutional processes that underpin them.

Within this design, the quantitative phase was used to identify general patterns in perceptions of QA reforms across Saudi higher education institutions. In contrast, the qualitative phase provided contextual explanations for those patterns. Survey data revealed trends in stakeholders' perceptions of QA implementation. In contrast, interviews and analysis of institutional documents enabled a more in-depth examination of how organizational structures, leadership practices, and institutional cultures influence quality reform processes.

The sequential explanatory structure involved two stages. Quantitative survey data were collected and examined to identify general trends in perceptions of QA reforms. Then, qualitative case studies were conducted at selected institutions to interpret patterns and explore institutional experiences in greater depth. Integrating numerical, narrative, and documentary evidence enabled a more thorough comprehension of how QA reforms operate throughout different institutional contexts.

Research Questions

The methodological design of this study was guided by the research questions. These questions focus on how Saudi higher education institutions conceptualize and implement Quality Assurance reforms under Vision 2030, the enabling and constraining factors shaping their adoption, the extent to which institutional policies align with national QA frameworks, and the transferability of QA practices across institutional contexts and regions. Within the mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, the quantitative survey phase was used to identify general patterns in stakeholders' perceptions of QA reforms. In contrast, the qualitative phase examined institutional experiences and documentary evidence to provide a contextual explanation of the observed trends.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of faculty members, administrators, and quality assurance officers working in Saudi higher education institutions. A layered sampling strategy was used to capture variation across institutional roles and geographic regions. Survey data were collected from participants working in institutions across four major regions of Saudi Arabia. From an intended sample of 300 participants, 248 valid responses were obtained, yielding a response rate of 83%. A post hoc power analysis confirmed that this sample size exceeded the minimum required to detect moderate effect sizes in chi-square tests, with statistical power above .80. Participants were required to be full-time faculty members or administrators with direct involvement in quality assurance activities. Adjunct or temporary staff without QA responsibilities were excluded from the study.

For the qualitative phase, two institutions were selected to represent contrasting organizational contexts. One institution was a well-established public university with strong administrative resources, while the other was a newer institution in applied sciences with more limited institutional capacity. Forty participants were recruited for semistructured interviews and included QA administrators, senior faculty members, and mid-level academic staff.

Research Setting

The research was conducted within Saudi Arabia's higher education system as a direct result of Vision 2030. Saudi universities have progressively adopted quality assurance frameworks in alignment with national accreditation systems and international quality standards. Examining QA practices in this context is particularly relevant because institutions are simultaneously responding to national policy aims and global expectations for academic quality and accountability.

Instruments and Tools

Three types of instruments were used to collect data: a structured survey instrument, a semistructured interview protocol, and a document analysis framework. The survey instrument consisted of 45 Likert-scale items measuring perceptions of institutional QA practices. Key dimensions included institutional prioritization of QA, professionalization of quality processes, leadership support, technological incorporation, stakeholder engagement, resistance to change, and compliance orientation. The survey was reviewed by experts in higher education governance and piloted with fifteen faculty members to guarantee clarity and relevance. Reliability testing produced a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .89, signifying strong internal consistency.

The qualitative phase used a semistructured interview protocol investigating themes such as leadership and governance, faculty engagement, institutional culture, compliance pressures, and future directions for QA reform. Institutional documents were also analyzed using a structured coding framework. Documents included QA policies, strategic plans, accreditation reports, faculty development records, and annual institutional review reports.

Data Collection Procedures

Survey data were collected online over six weeks in spring 2024. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous to reduce response bias and encourage candid reporting. Following completion of the survey phase, qualitative data collection took place during the summer of 2024. Semistructured interviews were conducted with participants from the two case-study institutions. Interviews lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent and then transcribed verbatim. Institutional documents

related to quality assurance policies and accreditation processes were also obtained for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize overall patterns in perceptions of QA reforms. Chi-square tests were used to examine differences across respondent roles, institutional types, and geographic regions. Fisher's exact tests were applied when expected cell counts were small.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Coding was guided by both inductive themes emerging from the data and by theoretical concepts drawn from Lewin's change management framework, particularly the stages of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing.

Integration of the quantitative and qualitative strands followed a connective strategy. Survey results informed the development of interview questions, and qualitative findings were used to explain patterns identified in the quantitative phase. Triangulation across survey responses, interviews, and institutional documents strengthened the validity of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the host institution. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by removing identifying information from survey responses and interview transcripts. Institutional names are not disclosed to minimize potential reputational risks. All research data were securely stored and available exclusively to the research team.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Multiple strategies were used to ensure methodological strictness. Quantitative reliability was confirmed through internal consistency testing of the survey instrument. Qualitative credibility was strengthened through member checking, in which interview participants reviewed transcripts to validate accuracy. Triangulation across survey data, interviews, and institutional documents enhanced the study's overall validity and solidity.

Methodological Limitations

Although the response rate was high, the possibility of response bias cannot be completely excluded. In addition, the qualitative component relied on two case-study institutions, which may limit the generalizability of the institutional experiences. However, the use of mixed methods and multiple data sources helped mitigate these drawbacks by providing a broader, more context-rich understanding of QA reforms across Saudi higher education institutions.

The findings are presented in accordance with the four research questions. Quantitative survey results are reported first, followed by qualitative evidence derived from interviews and institutional documents. Narrative summaries are used where appropriate to present descriptive findings lacking interpretation.

RESULTS

Following the methodological procedures described above, this section presents the empirical findings derived from survey data, interviews, and institutional documents. The analysis combines quantitative patterns with qualitative and documentary evidence to illustrate how quality assurance (QA) reforms are understood and implemented across Saudi higher education institutions. The findings are organized according to the four research questions guiding the study.

Table 1 presents the distribution of responses across the main survey dimensions.

Table 1. Perceptions of Quality Assurance Reform (N = 248)

Dimension	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Institutional prioritization	5	7	16	42	30
Professionalization of QA	6	10	18	40	26
Leadership commitment	4	9	19	38	30
Technological integration	7	8	15	40	30
Stakeholder engagement	8	11	20	36	25
Resistance to change (reverse-coded)	10	18	22	30	20
Compliance orientation (reverse coded)	9	15	21	34	21

RQ1. How do higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia conceptualize QA reforms under Vision 2030?

Survey responses indicate that QA is widely perceived as an institutional priority across Saudi higher education institutions. Respondents most frequently identified institutional prioritization, leadership commitment, professionalization

of QA processes, and technological integration as key components shaping QA implementation.

Across the survey sample, most respondents reported agreement that QA reforms are incorporated into institutional planning processes. Leadership commitment and technological integration also received relatively high agreement, indicating that administrative leadership and digital monitoring systems play a key role in institutional QA practices.

Differences between respondent roles were examined using chi-square tests. Administrators reported slightly more positive perceptions of QA reforms than faculty members. However, the association between respondent role and QA perception was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 248) = 2.35, p = .13$. Regional comparisons also showed no statistically significant differences in perceptions across the four regions represented in the survey dataset, $\chi^2(3, N = 248) = 4.27, p = .23$. Figure 1 summarizes the overall distribution of agreement levels across the key dimensions measured in the survey.

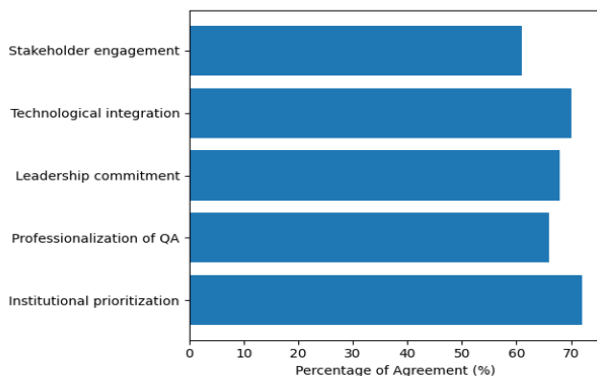


Figure 1. Distribution of agreement levels across key QA reform dimensions

The bar chart shows the percentage of agreement across institutional prioritization, leadership commitment, technological integration, stakeholder engagement, and professionalization.

Interview narratives that provide additional context for these patterns are described below. Participants described QA as an increasingly visible component of institutional governance and planning processes.

One administrator noted that “quality assurance processes are now integrated into most strategic planning and reporting mechanisms within the university” (Interview P07).

A faculty participant similarly stated that “while QA has become part of institutional policy, many teaching staff still associate it primarily with accreditation documentation requirements” (Interview P14).

Taken together, the survey responses and interview narratives indicate that QA reforms are widely recognized within institutional governance structures. However, stakeholders differ in their experiences of these reforms in everyday academic practice.

RQ2. What are the perceived enablers and barriers to the effective adoption of QA?

The survey results identified several factors that respondents associated with the implementation of QA reforms. Leadership support and technological integration were the most frequently reported enabling conditions. Faculty resistance, bureaucratic compliance requirements, and limited institutional resources were the most commonly reported barriers. Figure 2 summarizes the enabling and constraining factors identified by survey respondents.

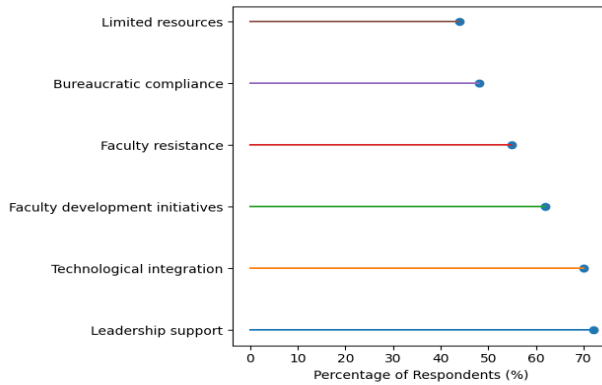


Figure 2. Reported enabling and barrier factors influencing QA implementation

The horizontal bar chart shows the percentage of respondents who agree that leadership support, technological integration, faculty development initiatives, faculty resistance, bureaucratic compliance, and limited resources influence QA implementations.

Interview responses further illustrate these enabling and constraining conditions. Participants described leadership initiatives, training workshops, and faculty development activities associated with QA implementation. Several respondents emphasized that visible leadership support increased faculty engagement with quality initiatives.

One participant explained that “when senior leadership actively supports QA initiatives, faculty members are more willing to participate in training and quality improvement activities” (Interview P11).

At the same time, interview participants highlighted challenges related to documentation and accreditation procedures.

A faculty member noted that “the reporting and documentation requirements for accreditation sometimes increase workload without always improving teaching practices” (Interview P19).

Participants also cited reporting deadlines and accreditation cycles as administrative pressures that affect faculty participation in QA processes.

The qualitative evidence, therefore, reflects patterns observed in the survey data, indicating that leadership engagement and technological infrastructure facilitate QA implementation, while administrative workload and compliance requirements pose practical constraints.

RQ3. How do institutional documents reflect alignment with Vision 2030 QA frameworks?

Institutional documents were analyzed to identify evidence of QA implementation within formal policy and planning processes. The documents examined included strategic development plans, QA policy frameworks, accreditation reports, faculty development records, and annual institutional review reports.

The document analysis identified differences in the integration of Vision 2030 quality benchmarks across the two case study institutions. Documents from Institution A included explicit references to national quality indicators and institutional performance benchmarks within strategic planning frameworks. Accreditation reports from this institution also referred to monitoring procedures and faculty development activities related to QA implementation.

Documents from Institution B included references to accreditation procedures and compliance requirements associated with national QA frameworks. Strategic planning documents referenced QA processes, although the documentation emphasized regulatory compliance and accreditation reporting requirements. Institutional reports addressed accreditation cycles and documentation procedures for quality monitoring.

Interview responses also reflected these institutional differences. Participants from Institution A described QA as closely linked to strategic planning and internal monitoring processes. In contrast, respondents from Institution B cited accreditation documentation and reporting procedures more frequently.

As one participant observed, “quality assurance activities are often organized around accreditation cycles rather than continuous institutional monitoring” (Interview P22).

The combination of documentary evidence and interview narratives, therefore, indicates variation in how institutions incorporate national QA frameworks into their internal governance and planning processes.

RQ4. To what extent are QA transformations transferable across institutions and regions?

Survey data, interview findings, and document analysis were compared to examine patterns of QA implementation across institutional contexts.

Table 2 presents a descriptive comparison of QA practices across the two case study institutions.

Table 2. Cross-Institutional Comparison of QA Implementation

Dimension	Institution A	Institution B
Leadership orientation	Strategic and visible leadership involvement	Administrative and procedural orientation
Faculty engagement	Moderate participation in QA activities	More limited participation
Technological integration	Digital monitoring systems are used systematically	Digital monitoring systems are emerging
QA policy alignment	Strategic planning aligned with institutional mission	QA policies focused on accreditation compliance
Accreditation practices	Continuous monitoring and follow-up processes	Documentation-oriented accreditation cycle

Survey responses also indicate variation in the perceived influence of several QA drivers. Leadership commitment and technological integration were most frequently reported to have a strong influence, followed by accreditation pressure and faculty development initiatives. Institutional culture showed mixed levels of perceived influence across respondents.

Interview narratives further indicate that institutional context influences how QA reforms are implemented. Participants emphasized that leadership practices and institutional resources shape the sustainability of quality initiatives.

One respondent noted that “institutions with stronger administrative support and digital systems are better able to sustain QA processes beyond accreditation cycles” (Interview P27).

Across the survey results, interview narratives, and institutional documents, several consistent patterns emerge. Quality assurance reforms are widely recognized as institutional priorities across Saudi higher education institutions. Leadership engagement and technological integration are frequently cited as enabling factors in the implementation of quality initiatives, while administrative workload, documentation requirements, and uneven institutional resources are reported as constraints. Documentary evidence further indicates variation in how institutions incorporate national quality frameworks into internal governance and planning processes. These empirical patterns provide the basis for the interpretation presented in the following discussion section.

DISCUSSION

The findings provide insight into how Saudi higher education institutions interpret and implement quality assurance reforms within the wider transformation agenda of Vision 2030. Through integrating survey data, interview narratives, and institutional documents, the discussion interprets the findings in relation to the four research questions. It situates them within wider debates on higher education reform, organizational change, and global quality governance. The analysis also considers implications regarding international and comparative higher education systems, chiefly within the Global South.

Conceptualization of QA Reforms under Vision 2030 (RQ1)

The findings indicate that QA has become widely recognized as an institutional priority within Saudi higher education. Survey responses show a broad consensus that QA has been integrated into institutional strategic planning, leadership discourse, and governance structures. These results suggest that the national reform agenda has successfully embedded quality language and performance expectations within institutional policy systems.

However, qualitative evidence reveals differences in how stakeholders interpret these reforms. Administrators frequently described QA as a mechanism for strengthening organizational accountability and strategic planning, whereas faculty members more often stressed the administrative burden of accreditation documentation. This points to a gap between formal policy adoption and everyday institutional practice.

These patterns correspond with corporate change models that emphasize the gradual institutionalization of reform initiatives. Lewin's change framework indicates that reforms move from policy introduction toward consolidation within institutional routines. The findings show that while QA reforms have progressed through the initial stages of adoption, their consolidation into stable institutional practices remains uneven. In some cases, QA processes appear to be activated primarily during accreditation cycles rather than functioning as continuous institutional practices.

Similar dynamics have been reported in international higher education systems undergoing rapid reform, where policy directives may gain formal acceptance but face challenges during implementation.

Enablers and Barriers to QA Adoption (RQ2)

The study underscores the roles of leadership engagement and institutional participation in shaping QA reform outcomes. Survey results show that leadership commitment and technological incorporation function as key enabling factors. Institutions where senior administrators visibly supported QA initiatives and invested in digital monitoring systems reported stronger adoption of quality practices.

At the same time, faculty resistance and bureaucratic compliance pressures emerged as recurring challenges. Interview participants frequently identified documentation procedures, reporting requirements, and accreditation timelines as sources of administrative burden. These data suggest that resistance to QA reforms reflects structural conditions within institutions rather than simple opposition to change.

International research on higher education governance similarly emphasizes that successful reform depends on both institutional participation and policy design. The organizational change literature regularly highlights the importance of engaging academic staff as partners in reform processes. In the Saudi context, the findings show that QA initiatives become increasingly sustainable when faculty development programs and shared governance mechanisms accompany policy directives.

Alignment of Institutional Documents with National Frameworks (RQ3)

Document analysis revealed variation in the extent to which institutional practices align with the national QA frameworks associated with Vision 2030. Institution A demonstrated stronger integration of QA principles within strategic planning, accreditation reporting, and faculty development programs. Institutional documents from this university included references to national quality standards and internal monitoring processes.

In contrast, Institution B's documentation reflected a more procedural orientation toward accreditation compliance. Although institutional policies referenced QA procedures, fewer documents indicated systematic follow-up and continuous monitoring of institutional performance indicators.

These differences emphasize the importance of institutional capacity in translating national policy schemes into operational practices. While national QA agencies establish regulatory criteria, the effectiveness of these schemes depends on local governance structures, administrative capacity, and organizational culture.

International studies of higher education reform similarly indicate that the adoption of quality frameworks varies across institutions, depending on leadership stability, institutional maturity, and resource availability.

Transferability of QA Transformations (RQ4)

A comparative study across institutions indicates that the transferability of QA reforms is conditional rather than automatic. Survey responses reveal broad recognition of QA principles across the higher education system, suggesting that national reforms have successfully established a shared discourse of quality.

However, interview and document data demonstrate that institutional context strongly shapes how these reforms are operationalized. Institution A illustrates how leadership engagement, professional development initiatives, and technological infrastructure may support deeper integration of QA practices.

Institution B's experience demonstrates the challenges that newer or resource-constrained institutions may face when translating policy expectations into routine institutional processes.

These findings add to international discussions on policy transfer in higher education. Many countries in the Global South have adopted QA frameworks inspired by international models to strengthen academic credibility and participation in global higher education networks. The present study suggests that the effectiveness of such reforms depends on institutional governance capacity, faculty engagement, and access to resources.

Institutional quality frameworks also influence how universities are viewed within international education systems. Research on international students' decision-making shows that accreditation status, institutional reputation, and academic credibility influence students' selection of study destinations (Xu, 2023; Nguyen & Sharma, 2024). In this sense, national QA reforms may indirectly affect patterns of international student mobility by strengthening the global recognition of institutional qualifications.

Synthesis and Implications

Overall, the data suggest that QA reforms in Saudi higher education have achieved widespread formal recognition but vary in institutional integration. Leadership engagement and faculty participation emerge as central factors influencing the depth of reform implementation, while institutional capacity continues to shape the translation of national policies into practice.

The study additionally contributes to international research on higher education by showing how domestic quality reforms interact with wider global governance trends. As universities increasingly participate in international academic networks, QA frameworks play an important role in strengthening institutional trustworthiness, supporting cross-border collaboration, and enhancing the recognition of academic programs.

From a policy perspective, the findings indicate that institutional capacity-building, faculty development programs, and sustained leadership engagement should complement national QA initiatives. For higher education systems across the Global South, Saudi Arabia's experience demonstrates both the capabilities and limitations of centralized QA reforms. While national frameworks might accelerate modernization and strengthen organizational accountability, their enduring effectiveness depends on encouraging institutional ownership and cultivating sustainable quality cultures within universities.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the implementation of quality assurance reforms in Saudi higher education within the wider policy framework of Vision 2030. Using a mixed methods design that integrated survey data, institutional case studies, and document analysis, the research examined how national quality policies are

interpreted and enacted within institutional contexts. The results show that QA has become a strategic priority across Saudi universities, with many institutions integrating quality principles into strategic planning and governance structures. However, differences in stakeholder perceptions remain, particularly between administrative and academic perspectives, demonstrating the ongoing challenge of translating national policy directives into deeply embedded institutional practices.

The study also identifies several factors shaping the effectiveness of QA reforms. Leadership commitment, faculty development initiatives, and supportive institutional cultures facilitate the adoption of quality practices, whereas administrative workload, limited resources, and uneven faculty engagement constrain deeper institutional integration. Differences across institutions additionally demonstrate that the implementation of QA reforms is influenced by organizational capacity and governance maturity. These results indicate that national reform frameworks alone cannot guarantee institutional transformation; rather, sustainable quality improvement depends on the interaction between policy directives, institutional leadership, and professional participation.

This research adds to international and comparative higher education scholarship by showing how national quality reforms are translated into institutional practices within a rapidly transforming system. The findings also have wider implications for the internationalization of higher education, as credible QA frameworks strengthen institutional legitimacy and support global academic partnerships. Subsequent studies should examine the lasting sustainability of QA reforms through longitudinal and cross-national studies. For policymakers and institutional leaders, the results show the need to complement national frameworks alongside capacity-building, faculty engagement, and shared governance strategies to nurture sustainable quality cultures in higher education.

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