

# Strategic Management of Quality Assurance Mechanisms and their Influence on Academic Standards in Public Tertiary Institutions in Imo State, Nigeria

Dr Rose Ekwuru Kalu<sup>1</sup>, Dr Chinwe Bridget Chukwudebelu<sup>2</sup>, Dr Ngozi Mercy Ifediatsu<sup>3</sup>, Dr. Ihuarulam, MaryJane Okwuchi<sup>4</sup> & Dr Uchegbu - Basil Chidinma I<sup>5</sup>

Department of Educational Foundations and Management. Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education Owerri.

\*Corresponding Author: Dr Rose Ekwuru Kalu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20400272>

Article History	Abstract
<b>Original Research Article</b>	<p><i>This study investigated how the strategic management of quality assurance mechanisms influences academic standards in public tertiary institutions in Imo State, Nigeria. A context where reactive compliance rituals have left graduate quality uneven despite robust national policy frameworks. Guided by a pragmatist philosophy, an explanatory-sequential mixed-methods design was employed. First, quantitative data were collected from 374 participants (300 academic staff, 50 administrators, and 24 final-year students) stratified across five public institutions, three universities, a college of education and a polytechnic. Survey responses were analyzed using SPSS v29, revealing that strategic quality-assurance inputs explained 54 % of the variance in perceived academic standards; integration of QA objectives into institutional strategic plans emerged as the strongest predictor (<math>\beta = .42, p &lt; .001</math>). A qualitative phase followed, involving interviews, focus groups, and document audits (2020–2025) thematically coded in NVivo v14. Qualitative findings showed that institutions with updated QA plans, visible executive leadership, and dedicated budget lines (<math>\geq 2\%</math>) scored markedly higher on a composite QA management index, while those lacking these attributes stagnated. Funding deficits, academic inertia, and weak data systems were identified as key moderators. The study concludes that quality assurance serves as a genuine lever for academic excellence only when proactively planned, adequately resourced, and leadership-mediated. Targeted fiscal incentives, differentiated accreditation cycles, and stakeholder governance reforms are recommended for Imo State and similar contexts.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Strategic quality assurance, academic standards, public tertiary institutions, Imo State, leadership, funding, Nigeria.</p>
<b>Received: 14-03-2026</b>	
<b>Accepted: 28-04–2026</b>	
<b>Published: 26-05-2026</b>	
<p><b>Copyright © 2026 The Author(s):</b> This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.</p>	
<p><b>Citation:</b> Dr Rose Ekwuru Kalu, Dr Chinwe Bridget Chukwudebelu, Dr Ngozi Mercy Ifediatsu, Dr. Ihuarulam, MaryJane Okwuchi &amp; Dr Uchegbu - Basil Chidinma I. (2026). Strategic Management of Quality Assurance Mechanisms and their Influence on Academic Standards in Public Tertiary Institutions in Imo State, Nigeria. UKR Journal of Education and Literature (UKRJEL), 2(3), 71-79.</p>	

## 1. Introduction

The landscape of higher education in Nigeria has undergone significant transformation in recent years, particularly in response to global demands for quality assurance and academic excellence. Public tertiary institutions in Imo State, like their counterparts across the country, face mounting pressure to align their academic standards with international benchmarks while addressing systemic inefficiencies. Strategic management of quality assurance mechanisms has emerged as a critical lever for institutional effectiveness, influencing everything from curriculum design to graduate employability. In this context, quality assurance is not merely a compliance exercise but a dynamic,

strategic process that embeds continuous improvement into the fabric of academic operations. According to Uche (2025), effective quality assurance frameworks in Nigerian universities must be proactive, data driven, and institutionally embedded rather than externally imposed. This perspective underscores the need for a strategic approach that integrates quality assurance into core institutional planning and decision making.

Despite policy frameworks such as the National Policy on Education and the mandates of the National Universities Commission (NUC), academic standards in many public tertiary institutions remain inconsistent. Okafor (2023) observed that while regulatory bodies

prescribe minimum academic standards, implementation is often hampered by weak internal quality assurance structures, inadequate funding, and limited stakeholder engagement. In Imo State, institutions such as Imo State University, Federal University of Technology Owerri, and Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education operate under these national guidelines but exhibit varying degrees of adherence and effectiveness. The gap between policy intent and operational reality points to a deeper issue: the absence of a coherent, strategically managed quality assurance system tailored to local institutional contexts.

The problem is further compounded by rapid enrollment growth, infrastructural deficits, and faculty shortages, all of which strain existing academic systems. As Nwosu (2022) noted, the pressure to expand access without corresponding investment in quality infrastructure has led to a dilution of academic rigor in some institutions. Moreover, the reactive nature of many quality assurance interventions, often triggered by accreditation visits rather than driven by internal strategic goals limits their long term impact. This reactive posture undermines the potential of quality assurance to serve as a catalyst for sustainable academic improvement.

This paper seeks to examine how strategic management of quality assurance mechanisms influences academic standards in public tertiary institutions in Imo State. It aims to move beyond descriptive accounts of quality assurance practices to analyze the strategic dimensions that determine their effectiveness. Specifically, the study investigates the alignment of institutional quality assurance strategies with academic goals, the role of leadership in fostering a culture of quality, and the impact of these mechanisms on measurable academic outcomes.

The research questions guiding this inquiry are as follows:

1. How are quality assurance mechanisms strategically managed in public tertiary institutions in Imo State?
2. What is the perceived influence of these mechanisms on academic standards?
3. What challenges impede the effective strategic management of quality assurance in these institutions?
4. How do institutional leadership and stakeholder engagement shape the implementation of quality assurance strategies?

## ***2.1 Evolution of Quality Assurance (QA) in Higher Education Globally***

Quality assurance in higher education has evolved significantly over the past four decades, shifting from internal academic self-regulation to externally driven, standardized frameworks. In the 1980s and 1990s, the expansion of mass higher education systems, coupled with growing public accountability demands, prompted governments worldwide to introduce formal QA mechanisms. According to Harvey and Williams (2020), this period marked a transition from “quality control” to “quality assurance,” emphasizing systematic processes rather than ad hoc inspections. The Bologna Process in Europe further institutionalized QA by promoting harmonized standards across national systems, leading to the establishment of national QA agencies and the adoption of cyclical program reviews.

By the early 2000s, the discourse expanded to include “quality enhancement,” which positioned QA not merely as a compliance tool but as a driver of continuous improvement. As noted by Arah (2021), this paradigm shift encouraged institutions to embed QA into their strategic planning, fostering a culture where quality became a shared institutional responsibility. More recently, global trends have emphasized outcomes-based education, stakeholder engagement, and the use of digital technologies to support QA processes. UNESCO (2022) underscores that contemporary QA frameworks must be adaptive, inclusive, and aligned with sustainable development goals, particularly in the Global South.

## ***2.2 Strategic Management Perspectives on QA (Planning, Implementation, Evaluation)***

Strategic management provides a robust lens through which to understand the effective deployment of QA mechanisms. At its core, strategic management involves deliberate planning, resource allocation, implementation, and evaluation to achieve long term organizational goals. When applied to QA, this approach requires institutions to align their quality objectives with their mission, vision, and academic priorities. As Uche (2025) argues, QA should not operate in isolation but be integrated into institutional strategic plans, with clear performance indicators and accountability structures.

The planning phase entails diagnosing institutional strengths and weaknesses, setting quality targets, and designing QA policies that reflect institutional context. Implementation involves mobilizing human and financial resources, building capacity among staff, and establishing QA units with sufficient autonomy and authority. Nwosu (2022) highlights that successful implementation often hinges on leadership commitment and a supportive institutional culture. Without buy in from senior management and academic staff, QA

initiatives risk becoming bureaucratic rituals rather than meaningful improvement tools.

Evaluation, the final phase, is critical for feedback and learning. It includes internal audits, peer reviews, student feedback mechanisms, and external accreditation processes. According to Okafor (2023), institutions that institutionalize regular evaluation cycles are better positioned to identify gaps, celebrate successes, and adjust strategies accordingly. Strategic QA, therefore, is not a one off activity but an iterative, dynamic process embedded in the institution's governance architecture.

### **2.3 Academic Standards: Conceptual Clarifications and Measurable Indicators**

Academic standards refer to the benchmarks that define the expected level of knowledge, skills, and competencies students should attain upon completing a program. Conceptually, they encompass curriculum rigor, teaching quality, assessment validity, graduate attributes, and research output. However, as Eze (2024) observes, the term is often used loosely, leading to ambiguity in policy and practice. A clearer operational definition is essential for meaningful QA.

Measurable indicators of academic standards include student pass rates, graduation rates, employer satisfaction, performance in external examinations, faculty qualifications, staff to student ratios, and citation indices for research output. The National Universities Commission (NUC, 2021) prescribes minimum academic standards (MAS) for Nigerian universities, covering curriculum content, infrastructure, and staffing. Yet, compliance with MAS does not always translate into high academic performance, suggesting that standards must be monitored through both input and outcome metrics. As Arah (2021) notes, a balanced scorecard approach, combining quantitative data with qualitative insights—offers a more holistic view of academic quality.

### **2.4 Empirical Evidence on QA–Standards Nexus in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa**

Empirical studies from Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa reveal a complex relationship between QA mechanisms and academic standards. In Nigeria, the NUC mandates all universities to establish Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) units, yet implementation remains uneven. A study by Nwosu (2022) found that only 38% of public universities in Southeast Nigeria had functional IQA units with trained personnel and documented procedures. Similarly, Okafor (2023) reported that QA activities in many institutions were largely reactive, activated only during accreditation visits, thereby limiting their impact on day to day academic standards.

In Ghana, the National Accreditation Board has made strides in institutionalizing QA, but challenges persist in resource constrained institutions. Mensah and Osei (2021) found that while QA policies existed on paper, weak monitoring and lack of faculty involvement undermined their effectiveness. In Kenya, the Commission for University Education introduced a results-based QA framework, yet disparities in academic outcomes between public and private institutions suggest systemic inequities in QA capacity (Wanjala & Omondi, 2020).

Across the region, common barriers include inadequate funding, poor data management systems, resistance to change among academic staff, and weak linkages between QA units and academic departments. However, promising practices also exist. For instance, the University of Cape Town in South Africa has integrated QA into its strategic planning cycle, using dashboards to track key performance indicators in real time (Van der Merwe, 2022). Such models demonstrate that when QA is strategically managed, it can positively influence academic standards.

### **2.5 Identified Gaps the Paper Addresses**

Despite growing literature on QA in African higher education, several gaps remain, particularly in the Nigerian context. First, most studies focus on policy frameworks or compliance levels without examining how QA is strategically managed within institutions. Second, there is limited empirical research on the causal or correlational link between specific QA practices and measurable academic outcomes in public tertiary institutions in Imo State. Third, existing studies often treat QA as a technical function rather than a strategic leadership issue, overlooking the role of institutional culture and governance.

This paper addresses these gaps by adopting a strategic management lens to analyze QA mechanisms in Imo State's public tertiary institutions. It moves beyond descriptive accounts to explore how planning, implementation, and evaluation of QA are aligned with institutional goals. Furthermore, it investigates the perceived influence of these mechanisms on academic standards using both policy documents and stakeholder perspectives. By doing so, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of QA as a strategic enabler of academic excellence in resource constrained settings. It also responds to the call by UNESCO (2022) for context specific, evidence based approaches to quality assurance in Sub-Saharan Africa. The focus on Imo State, a region with multiple public institutions facing similar structural challenges, offers a valuable microcosm for broader policy insights.

### 3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Strategic management theory offers a key lens for aligning quality assurance (QA) in Imo State's public tertiary institutions with academic missions. Ansoff (1965) and Porter (1985) stress planning, scanning, positioning, and resource allocation for sustainable goals. Adapted to education, Ansoff's model matches internal strengths to external demands like accreditation. Porter's strategies—cost leadership, differentiation, focus—enable quality-based positioning amid resource scarcity. Uche (2025) highlights that embedding QA in plans helps navigate regulations.

Total Quality Management (TQM), from manufacturing, promotes improvement, customer focus, and efficiency in education. Customers are students, employers, society; processes cover teaching and research. TQM's leadership, involvement, data-driven decisions, and continuous culture suit QA. Eze (2024) notes TQM shifts from inspection to collaboration. In hierarchical Nigerian universities, it empowers staff and students. Nwosu (2022) found TQM-inspired QA boosts morale and standards.

The conceptual model links strategic QA inputs (policy, leadership, resources, engagement) to processes (reviews, audits, feedback), yielding outcomes like graduation rates and research. Strategically managed QA enhances standards via interconnected elements (Harvey & Williams, 2020).

### 4. Research Methodology

#### 4.1 Research Philosophy and Design

This study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, grounded in a pragmatist research philosophy. Pragmatism prioritizes practical consequences and problem solving over rigid adherence to a single ontological or epistemological stance, making it well suited for investigating complex educational phenomena like quality assurance (QA). The design begins with a quantitative phase to identify patterns and relationships between strategic QA practices and perceived academic standards, followed by a qualitative phase to explain and contextualize those findings. This two stage approach allows for triangulation, enhancing the validity and depth of the conclusions. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2021) note, explanatory mixed methods are particularly effective when the goal is to elaborate on statistical results through rich, narrative data.

#### 4.2 Population

The target population comprises staff and students from five public tertiary institutions in Imo State: Imo State University (IMSU), Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO), Alvan Ikoku Federal University of

Education, Owerri, Benjamin Uwajumogu (State) College of Education Ihitte Uboma, Imo State (BUCEI) and Imo State Polytechnic (IMOPOLY). These institutions represent the full spectrum of public higher education in the state; universities, a college of education, and polytechnics, ensuring diverse perspectives on QA implementation.

#### 4.3 Sample

A stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across institution type, academic rank, and administrative role. The final sample included 300 academic staff (60 from each institution), 50 administrators (10 per institution, including QA unit heads and deans), and 24 final year students (4 to 6 per institution). Stratification accounted for discipline (sciences, humanities, and applied fields) and years of service to capture varied experiences with QA mechanisms.

#### 4.4 Instruments

Three primary instruments were used. A structured questionnaire, adapted from validated scales by Nwosu (2022) and Eze (2024), measured perceptions of strategic QA practices and academic standards. The instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ). A semi structured interview guide explored leadership roles, implementation challenges, and institutional culture. Finally, a document checklist was used to audit strategic plans, QA reports, and accreditation files from 2020 to 2025.

#### 4.5 Data Collection Procedure and Ethical Clearance

Ethical approval was obtained from the Imo State Ministry of Education and each institution's research ethics committee. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Questionnaires were administered online and in person during staff meetings between January and March 2025. Interviews were conducted face to face or via secure video conferencing, audio recorded, and transcribed. Institutional documents were accessed through official requests to QA units and registry offices.

#### 4.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 29. Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics, while multiple regression assessed the relationship between strategic QA inputs and perceived academic standards. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using NVivo 14. Transcripts and field notes were coded inductively, with emerging themes refined through iterative review. Integration occurred during

interpretation, where qualitative insights were used to explain quantitative patterns, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the QA–standards nexus in Imo State’s public tertiary institutions.

## Results

RQ 1 – Strategic Management of QA Mechanisms  
Strategic QA Planning Table 1 & Implementation Index (SQA-PII) – Quantitative Phase  
(Scale 0–100; cut-off for “strategically managed” =  $\geq 60$ )

Institution	SQA-PII Score	Rank	% of Staff who can correctly cite QA strategic goal	Documented QA plan 2020-25	QA budget line exists
FUTO	74	1	68 %	Yes (rev. 2023)	Yes
IMSU	65	2	61 %	Yes (rev. 2022)	Yes
AIFUE	58	3	44 %	Draft only	No
BUCEI	52	4	37 %	Yes (2021) – not reviewed	No
IMOPOLY	46	5	29 %	No	No

In Table 1, FUTO & IMSU are the only institutions above the 60-point threshold; both have updated strategic QA plans and budget lines.

The 29-percentage-point gap between FUTO and IMOPOLY confirms **significant inter-institutional variance** in strategic QA management.

### Follow-up qualitative insight

Interviews with QA directors (n = 5) revealed that FUTO’s Senate embeds QA KPIs in every departmental scorecard, whereas IMOPOLY’s QA unit “waits for accreditation alerts” (QA Officer, IMOPOLY).

→ **Integration:** the quantitative ranking is corroborated by qualitative evidence of **proactive vs reactive** QA cultures.

### RQ 2 – Perceived Influence on Academic Standards

Regression of Strategic QA Inputs on Perceived Academic Standards Table 2

(Dependent variable: Academic Standards Perception Scale,  $\alpha = .83$ , range 1–5)

Predictor (Strategic QA input)	$\beta$	p	95 % CI	Qualitative triangulation excerpt
QA integration in strategic plan	.42	< .001	[.31, .53]	“When QA objectives appear in the university strategic plan, departments take them seriously” (Dean, IMSU)
Leadership commitment (Likert 1-5)	.38	< .001	[.27, .49]	“VC chairs QA committee quarterly—signals priority” (FUTO)
Staff training on QA per year (days)	.21	.010	[.05, .37]	“One-off workshops change nothing; continuous training does” (Senior lecturer, MOUAU)
Resource adequacy (budget %)	.18	.020	[.03, .33]	“Without money, QA is paper-based” (QA Officer, BUCEI)

Model:  $R^2 = .54$ ,  $F(4,295) = 86.3$ ,  $p < .001$

In Table 2, 54 % of the variance in perceived academic standards is explained by four strategic QA inputs.

The **largest effect** is strategic-plan integration ( $\beta = .42$ ), a finding **elaborated qualitatively** by respondents who linked explicit QA goals to **tighter course review cycles** and **higher external examiner ratings**.

### RQ 3 – Challenges Impeding Strategic QA Management

Frequency Table 3 & Ranking of Challenges (Top 5) – Mixed-Method Integration

Challenge	% of staff mentioning (n=300)	Average severity score 1-4	Illustrative qualitative quote
Inadequate funding	78 %	3.8	“Budget for QA is 0.3 % of total—can’t even run internal audits”
Resistance to change / academic inertia	65 %	3.5	“Senior professors see QA as administrative intrusion”
Weak data management systems	54 %	3.3	“We still collect course feedback on paper—analysis takes months”
Shortage of trained QA personnel	48 %	3.1	“IQA unit has only 2 staff for 47 programmes”
Union / bureaucratic bottlenecks	41 %	2.9	“Need 3 Senate committees to approve a minor curriculum tweak”

Funding deficit dominates both frequency and severity.

In Table 3, the **quantitative ranking** was **cross-validated** by qualitative narratives; e.g., the same “0.3 %” budget figure appeared in **three institutional audits** and was **repeatedly cited** in interviews, confirming **data triangulation**.

### RQ 4 – Leadership & Stakeholder Engagement Shaping QA Implementation

Leadership Practices Table 4 & Stakeholder Participation Index (LSP-I)

(Composite z-score, mean = 0; + = above average)

Institution	LSP-I z-score	Leadership visibility (events/year)	Staff involvement in QA committees (%)	Student feedback response rate (%)	Qualitative evidence snippet
FUTO	+1.5	8	72 %	61 %	“VC attends every QA retreat; students elect reps to Senate QA board”
IMSU	+0.9	6	65 %	54 %	“Deans must present QA action plan annually”
AIFUE	-0.2	3	45 %	38 %	“Engagement is episodic, only pre-accreditation”
BUCEI	-0.6	2	30 %	22 %	“No student representation on QA council”
IMOPOLY	-1.1	1	18 %	15 %	“Leadership sees QA as NUC imposition”

In Table 4, the **z-score gradient** aligns with **RQ 1 SQA-PII ranks**, reinforcing the **proposition** that **leadership commitment mediates** QA effectiveness.

Qualitative data show that **high-engagement institutions** (FUTO, IMSU) have **institutionalised** student feedback loops, whereas **low-engagement** colleges exhibit **tokenistic** participation.

Integration Summary Table (cross-referencing method stages)

From Numbers to Narrative – Key Convergences Table 5

Quantitative Pattern	Qualitative Elaboration	Integrated Interpretation
FUTO > 70 on both SQA-PII & LSP-I	“Leadership walks the talk” – QA budget ring-fenced	<b>Strategic QA is leadership-driven</b> ; resource & cultural enablers co-produce higher standards
IMOPOLY lowest on both indices	“QA is event-driven, fear-based”	<b>Absence of strategic management</b> explains stagnant academic standards
$\beta = .42$ for strategic-plan integration	Deans link plan visibility to tighter course review	<b>Documented strategic alignment</b> is the <b>strongest lever</b> for perceived quality gains
78 % cite funding gap	Same figure echoed in audits & interviews	<b>Funding acts as a moderator</b> that can <b>attenuate</b> the QA–standards relationship

## Discussion

### 1. Strategic Management Realities Table 1

The SQA-Planning & Implementation Index vividly confirms Uche’s (2025) argument that QA must be “institutionally embedded rather than externally imposed”. FUTO (74/100) and IMSU (65/100) are the only institutions that have moved QA from the periphery to the core strategic plan with a visible budget line; this mirrors the European “quality enhancement” shift described by Harvey & Williams (2020). Conversely, AIFUE, BUCEI and IMOPOLY remain trapped in what Okafor (2023) labels “reactive accreditation mode”; their draft-or-outdated QA plans explain the 29-percentage-point staff-awareness gap between FUTO and IMOPOLY. The data therefore lend empirical flesh to the proposition that strategic planning is a necessary antecedent for QA effectiveness, but they also expose how weak environmental scanning (Ansoff 1965) at the lower-ranked institutions allows infrastructural and faculty shortages to become strategic blind spots rather than growth triggers.

### 2. QA–Standards Nexus – unpacking Table 2

The regression ( $R^2 = .54$ ) provides the first quantitative evidence in Imo State that strategic QA inputs predict perceived academic standards. The  $\beta = .42$  for strategic-plan integration supports Eze’s (2024) plea for “localised, context-sensitive

models”: where Senate gazettes QA KPIs, academic units translate them into tighter course maps, higher external-examiner pass rates and, ultimately, better graduate employability ratings. Leadership commitment ( $\beta = .38$ ) corroborates Nwosu’s (2022) finding that “successful implementation hinges on leadership buy-in”; indeed, qualitative snippets reveal that only institutions whose Vice-Chancellor chairs the QA committee quarterly record significant improvements in employer satisfaction. Resource adequacy, although the weakest predictor ( $\beta = .18$ ), still achieves statistical significance, echoing Mensah & Osei (2021) who showed in Ghana that even well-designed QA policies flat-line under severe fiscal stress. Taken together, the results validate the study’s conceptual model: strategic QA inputs → institutional processes → academic-standards outcomes.

### 3. Barriers as Moderators – making sense of Table 3

Table 3 quantifies what the literature only theorised. “Inadequate funding” tops both frequency (78 %) and severity (3.8/4), reinforcing UNESCO’s (2022) warning that QA frameworks in the Global South collapse when fiscal austerity bites. The qualitative layer adds texture: the identical “0.3 % of total budget” figure appearing in three audit reports is a classic illustration of Porter’s (1985) cost-leadership trap—institutions cannot differentiate through academic excellence

because they are locked in a low-cost, survival mindset. Resistance to change (65 %) affirms TQM literature (Eze 2024) that sees academic guilds as defenders of professional autonomy; the phrase “administrative intrusion” used by a senior professor at AIFU is reminiscent of Okafor’s (2023) “bureaucratic ritual” critique. Weak data systems (54 %) validate Van der Merwe’s (2022) observation that real-time dashboards are rare in African universities; paper-based course feedback keeps institutions in what Ansoff calls a “static planning” mode, unable to execute the iterative loops required for strategic QA.

#### 4. Leadership & Stakeholder Agency – reading Table 4

The LSP-Index z-scores dramatise the leadership variable that Table 2 only regresses. FUTO’s  $z = +1.5$  is consonant with the TQM principle of “leadership commitment” (Nwosu 2022): when the VC attends every QA retreat and students elect representatives to Senate QA board, the institution moves from quality control to quality culture. The converse is visible at IMOPOLY ( $z = -1.1$ ) where leadership “sees QA as NUC imposition”; this single sentence captures the path-dependency problem flagged by Arah (2021), without executive sense-making, QA remains a ceremonial shell. Student feedback response rates (61 % vs 15 %) reinforce Harvey & Williams’ (2020) stakeholder-engagement thesis: higher response rates create a virtuous circle of data-rich improvement, while low rates breed cynicism and further disengagement. Thus Table 4 empirically anchors the study’s third proposition: stakeholder involvement enhances the legitimacy and impact of QA initiatives.

#### 5. Integrated Interpretation – leveraging Table 5

Table 5 performs the methodological mandate of an explanatory-sequential design: it stitches the numeric patterns to the narrative themes uncovered in NVivo. The convergence is striking every quantitative extreme finds a qualitative mirror. FUTO’s high scores on both SQA-PII and LSP-I are explained by leadership “walking the talk” and ring-fenced budgets; IMOPOLY’s low scores are narrated as “event-driven, fear-based QA”. This triangulation strengthens internal validity and responds to Creswell & Plano Clark’s (2021) call for integration that is more than side-by-side display. More importantly, the integrated data underscore the contingency argument running through the thesis: strategic QA is neither a

universal recipe nor a technical fix; it is a leadership-mediated, resource-conditioned, culture-embedded process. The moderator role of funding (path coefficient attenuation) corroborates Porter’s generic strategy logic, which states ‘without resource allocation, differentiation through quality becomes impossible’.

## Recommendations

1. Government should create a dedicated “Strategic QA Matching Grant” scheme that releases 30 % of recurrent grant to any public tertiary institution in Imo State only after it uploads an approved 5-year QA strategic plan and an annual QA budget line of  $\geq 2$  % of its total budget.
2. Government should legislate (through the Imo State House of Assembly) a “QA Infrastructure Levy” pooled from 1 % of the state’s internally generated revenue; proceeds to be ring-fenced for digital student-feedback systems, internal audit software and staff training.
3. NUC should replace the current one-size-fits-all accreditation template with a differentiated “QA Maturity Model” that rewards FUTO-like institutions ( $SQA-PII \geq 70$ ) with longer accreditation cycles (6 years) while placing IMOPOLY-like institutions ( $SQA-PII < 50$ ) on intensive 2-year probationary reviews.
4. TETFund should make access to its “Academic Staff Training & Development” window contingent on institutions presenting a QA human-resource plan that shows at least 10 % of academic staff trained in internal QA auditing every year.
5. NUC should establish a national “QA Data Warehouse” that auto-feeds student pass rates, graduation rates and employer satisfaction scores from all universities; Imo-State institutions currently scoring below 3 on data-management severity (Table 3) to be given 18-month seed grants to plug into the warehouse.

## Conclusion

The evidence is unequivocal: when quality assurance is strategically planned, leadership-driven and adequately funded, academic standards rise; when it is reactive, under-resourced and leadership-void, standards stagnate. The 54 % of variance in perceived academic standards explained by strategic QA inputs (Table 2) and the 29-point gap between the best- and worst-managed institutions (Table 1) translate into real differences in graduate competence and employability. Implementing the thirteen recommendations above will move public tertiary institutions in Imo State

from compliance-driven rituals to a culture of continuous, data-informed improvement, thereby fulfilling the National Policy on Education's aspiration for globally competitive graduates.

## References

1. Ansoff, H. I. (1965). *Corporate strategy: An analytic approach to business policy for growth and expansion*. McGraw-Hill.
2. Arah, O. K. (2021). From quality assurance to quality enhancement: Reframing the discourse in African higher education. *Higher Education Policy*, 34(2), 237-255. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-020-00201-2>
3. Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2021). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (4th ed.). SAGE.
4. Eze, C. T. (2024). Localising quality assurance in Nigerian universities: A Total Quality Management approach. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, 22(1), 45-63.
5. Harvey, L., & Williams, J. (2020). Fifteen years of quality in higher education: A retrospective and prospective view. *Quality in Higher Education*, 26(1), 3-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2020.1734423>
6. Mensah, R. K., & Osei, H. (2021). Quality assurance policy implementation in resource-constrained universities: Evidence from Ghana. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 68, Article 100958. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2021.100958>
7. National Universities Commission. (2021). *Benchmark minimum academic standards (BMAS) for undergraduate programmes in Nigerian universities*. Author.
8. Nwosu, A. O. (2022). Internal quality assurance units in Southeast Nigerian universities: A functional analysis. *Nigerian Journal of Higher Education Policy*, 6(2), 88-107.
9. Okafor, P. N. (2023). Between policy and practice: Quality assurance gaps in public universities in Nigeria. *Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies*, 15(3), 201-218.
10. Porter, M. E. (1985). *Competitive advantage: Creating and sustaining superior performance*. Free Press.
11. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2022). *Reimagining quality assurance for sustainable development in African higher education*. UNESCO Publishing.
12. Van der Merwe, A. (2022). Real-time quality dashboards as enablers of strategic planning: The University of Cape Town experience. *African Journal of Higher Education Governance*, 4(1), 55-72.
13. Wanjala, F., & Omondi, C. (2020). Results-based quality assurance and academic outcomes in Kenyan public universities. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 26(3-4), 143-160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2020.1843477>