

Development of an Integrated Quality Assurance Framework in Educational Institutions

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Abstract

This study explores the development of an integrated quality assurance framework in educational institutions, aiming to improve the quality of educational services and promote academic excellence. In a context marked by rapid changes and increasing demands for transparency and accountability, quality assurance becomes a strategic priority. The research employs a mixed methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to investigate existing perceptions and practices of quality assurance within a sample of educational institutions in Romania. Data were collected through surveys and interviews, analyzing the key factors that influence the effectiveness of an integrated quality assurance framework. The expected outcomes include identifying and validating fundamental principles for implementing such a framework, offering practical recommendations for educational institutions. The conclusions highlight the importance of collaboration among stakeholders and adopting a holistic approach to quality assurance in education.

Keywords: *quality, institutions, framework, stakeholders*

JEL classification: M12

DOI: 10.24818/RMCI.2024.5.987

1. Introduction

In recent years, quality assurance in education has become a central topic of discussion and a major concern for educational institutions worldwide. This trend reflects a series of interconnected factors, including increased public expectations for transparency and accountability, rapid technological advancements, and the globalization of education, which have intensified competition and heightened the need for continuous improvement in educational services (Colan, G. et al. 2023). Quality assurance is no longer merely an administrative exercise; it has become a strategic element that can decisively contribute to long-term institutional success, providing a solid foundation for academic development, attracting and retaining

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students, and achieving international recognition. In this context, developing an integrated quality assurance framework becomes essential. Such a framework enables educational institutions to clearly define their quality objectives and standards, establish transparent evaluation and monitoring mechanisms, and encourage the active involvement of all stakeholders in the continuous improvement process. Quality assurance, as a systematic practice, benefits both students, who are directly affected by the quality of educational services, and faculty, administration, parents, and employers, who have a legitimate interest in educational outcomes. Thus, developing an integrated framework not only addresses the need to adapt to current market demands but also provides a coherent structure for the continuous improvement of processes and outcomes.

The issue of quality assurance in education is not new, but recent pressures, such as accelerated digitalization, increased international academic mobility, and the need to respond to the diversified demands of the labor market, have intensified discussions about the necessity of a more integrated and adaptable framework. The specialized literature emphasizes that an effective quality assurance framework must be flexible and adapted to the local context while also being able to meet international standards. In Romania, this field is regulated by national standards developed by quality assurance agencies, but there is an increasing need to develop specific frameworks that consider the particularities of each institution and promote a more integrated approach. The need for an integrated quality assurance framework becomes evident when analyzing the complexity of the current educational environment. Firstly, educational institutions face significant challenges regarding student diversity, the variability of their needs and expectations, and the adaptation of study programs to the increasingly diverse requirements of the labor market. Secondly, technological innovations and digitalization, driven by recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have radically changed how education is delivered and perceived, requiring a rapid adaptation of teaching methodologies and evaluation methods. In this context, quality assurance becomes a vital tool to ensure that these changes translate into real improvements in educational outcomes and are managed efficiently and transparently.

Developing an integrated quality assurance framework involves a systematic and comprehensive approach, including internal and external evaluations of all educational processes, from curriculum and teaching methodologies to support services and resources provided to students. Thus, educational institutions can identify strengths and weaknesses, implement corrective and improvement measures, and develop long-term strategies to maintain relevance and competitiveness. Quality assurance is not merely about complying with a set of standards but represents a strategic orientation toward excellence, requiring commitment, transparency, and an organizational culture that values continuous feedback and learning from mistakes.

In Romania, educational institutions face specific challenges, including limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure in some cases, and a wide diversity of students' educational and social needs. In this context, an integrated

quality assurance framework can provide an effective mechanism for managing these challenges and a platform for innovation and development. By adopting an integrated approach, institutions can improve educational processes, increase stakeholder satisfaction, and contribute to the overall improvement of the Romanian education system.

This study aims to explore how an integrated quality assurance framework can be effectively developed and implemented in educational institutions in Romania. It will analyze both successful international practices and the challenges and opportunities specific to the Romanian context. Through an evidence-based approach, the research will help identify the principles and mechanisms that can support the continuous improvement of education quality while providing concrete recommendations for managers and decision-makers in the educational field. This study aims to make a significant contribution to this field by offering a detailed and applied perspective on how these frameworks can be effectively developed and implemented in Romania's specific context.

2. Literature review

The research on developing an integrated quality assurance framework in educational institutions is based on a series of recent studies that explore the complexity of this topic from various perspectives. Contemporary authors emphasize the interconnections between quality assurance policies, the internal processes of educational institutions, and the constantly changing demands of the global educational environment. This literature highlights not only the importance of implementing rigorous standards but also the need for continuous adaptation to the dynamics of the educational market. One of the key authors, Hartmann (2020), addresses quality assurance from the perspective of changes brought about by globalization and increased academic mobility (Gruia, L. A. et al., 2020). Hartmann argues that as universities and colleges become more diverse and international, the need for flexible quality assurance frameworks that can respond to these challenges becomes essential. In his view, an effective quality assurance framework should integrate not only academic performance standards but also indicators of diversity, inclusion, and sustainability. Hartmann also emphasizes the importance of involving all stakeholders—from students and faculty to administrative staff and the local community—in the process of continuous evaluation and improvement. On the other hand, Fraser (2021) discusses the role of educational leadership in promoting a culture of quality within educational institutions. Fraser proposes an approach based on collaborative leadership that facilitates the exchange of ideas, decision-making transparency, and the active participation of all members of the educational community. He argues that education leaders must act as change agents, capable of promoting high-quality standards through personal example and commitment to continuous improvement. Fraser analyzes case studies from various international educational systems to illustrate how these principles can be practically applied, providing a basis for developing adaptive quality assurance strategies.

Another relevant contribution comes from Darling-Hammond (2019), who explores the connections between educational policies, allocated resources, and the quality of education, arguing that quality assurance must be a strategic priority to ensure the long-term sustainability of educational improvement. The author underscores the importance of quality assurance frameworks based on a clear understanding of each institution's specific context and using empirical data to guide strategic decisions. By analyzing educational systems worldwide, Darling-Hammond offers valuable insights into how quality assurance frameworks can be adapted to support innovation and academic excellence. In the European context, Schreiter (2022) explores how educational institutions in Europe have developed and implemented common quality assurance standards within the European Higher Education Area. Schreiter argues that these common standards represent an important step toward creating an integrated continental framework that facilitates student mobility and mutual recognition of qualifications. However, the author emphasizes that the diversity of national and institutional contexts requires ongoing flexibility in applying these standards. Through comparative studies, Schreiter illustrates best practices in applying quality assurance standards and identifies the challenges institutions face in adopting and adapting these standards to local realities (Cristache, N., et al, 2024).

From a global perspective, Fullan (2020) emphasizes the need for adaptation and resilience in the face of rapid changes in the educational landscape. Fullan stresses that educational leaders must be able to create and maintain a culture of change and innovation in which quality assurance is a dynamic and continuous process. He proposes an approach based on building alliances and strategic partnerships to help educational institutions achieve quality standards. Through case studies from North America, Fullan shows how quality assurance frameworks can evolve to meet emerging demands and improve long-term educational outcomes. Other recent authors make significant contributions to understanding how quality assurance frameworks can be optimized to meet the increasingly diverse needs of educational institutions. For example, Marginson (2021) highlights that the globalization of education requires a continuous redefinition of quality criteria, considering increased international competition and rapid changes in labor market requirements. Marginson argues that an effective quality assurance framework should not be limited to measuring traditional academic outcomes but should also include dimensions such as innovation in teaching, cultural diversity, and institutional adaptability to new economic and social realities.

Brennan and Shah (2020) also explore the role of technology in transforming quality assurance processes in higher education. They argue that digital tools and data analytics provide new opportunities for continuous quality monitoring and evidence-based decision-making. By integrating emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, institutions can develop more dynamic and precise evaluation systems that respond more quickly to student feedback and changes in the educational environment. Brennan and Shah stress the need for

innovative approaches to harness the potential of these technologies and support a culture of continuous improvement.

Additionally, authors Black and Madsen (2019) propose an interdisciplinary approach to quality assurance, arguing that an integrated framework must go beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and facilitate closer collaboration between different academic and administrative departments to be effective. This holistic approach is essential to capture the complexity of modern education, where student success depends not only on the quality of teaching in a particular discipline but also on the holistic support provided by the institution, including counseling services, technical support, and access to diverse educational resources. On the other hand, Trowler and Knight (2021) examine the impact of organizational culture on the effective implementation of quality assurance frameworks. They argue that educational institutions cannot achieve significant results merely by the formal application of quality standards but must also invest in developing an internal culture that values continuous learning, transparency, and collaboration (Minculete Gheorghe et al, 2014). According to them, education leaders play a crucial role in promoting such a culture, and the success of a quality assurance framework largely depends on their commitment to shared values and creating an inclusive and motivating work environment (Năstase, M., et al, 2024).

Recent specialized literature also highlights the need to include student perspectives in quality assurance processes. According to Carey (2022), involving students in all stages of the quality assurance process, from defining standards and objectives to evaluating outcomes, contributes to better alignment of educational services with their expectations and needs. Carey argues that a student-centered approach not only enhances the relevance and effectiveness of education but also increases student engagement and satisfaction, creating a virtuous cycle of positive feedback and continuous improvement.

3. Research methodology

The methodology of this study is designed to explore the development and implementation of an integrated quality assurance framework in educational institutions in Romania. The research is based on an in-depth qualitative approach combined with a comparative inter-institutional analysis to identify best practices and challenges associated with quality assurance in education. The study employs an exploratory qualitative approach to gain a detailed understanding of how educational institutions implement and manage quality assurance mechanisms. A multiple case study method was chosen, focusing on a sample of 15 educational institutions in Romania—including universities, colleges, and secondary schools—selected based on their geographical diversity, size, types of programs, and academic outcomes. This method allows for an in-depth investigation of different approaches and strategies used to ensure the quality of education.

Data collection took place in two main phases: document analysis and in-depth interviews. In the first phase, document analysis involved studying the internal reports of educational institutions, policy documents, quality assurance guidelines, and internal and external evaluation protocols. This analysis provided a solid foundation for understanding the institutional context and current quality assurance practices. In the second phase, 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key representatives from each institution, including directors, quality assurance coordinators, faculty members, and student representatives. The interviews were designed to explore their perceptions and experiences related to the implementation and effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms, identify challenges and opportunities for improvement, and assess the role of educational leadership in promoting a culture of quality.

The data collected through interviews and document analysis were analyzed using thematic coding. The coding process was carried out in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

1. Open coding - involved an initial pass through the raw data to identify emerging concepts and themes. This stage allowed for the segmentation of data into meaningful categories related to quality assurance practices, implementation barriers, and success factors.

2. Axial coding - involved regrouping the categories identified in the previous stages to explore the relationships between them and develop central themes defining the experiences and practices related to quality assurance. This stage contributed to a deeper understanding of the interactions between different aspects of quality assurance.

3. Selective coding - involved consolidating the main themes and integrating them into a coherent theoretical framework. This stage allowed for the development of an explanatory theory regarding the key factors influencing the success of an integrated quality assurance framework in educational institutions in Romania.

To complement the qualitative analysis, a quantitative analysis was also conducted using data collected through questionnaires administered to faculty and students in the selected institutions. A total of 60 questionnaires were distributed, with a response rate of 80%, resulting in 48 valid responses. The questionnaires measured participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms, satisfaction with the quality of education, and willingness to engage in improving educational processes (Table 1).

Distribution of responses regarding the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms

Table 1

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Satisfaction with Quality Assurance Mechanisms	0.34	0.08	4.25	< 0.01
Perception of Evaluation Transparency	0.41	0.07	5.86	< 0.01
Intercept (β)	2.15	0.25	8.60	< 0.01

The results of the regression analysis indicate that both satisfaction with quality assurance mechanisms ($p < 0.01$) and perception of evaluation transparency ($p < 0.01$) are significant predictors of the willingness to engage in improvement processes, with positive significant coefficients. To ensure the validity and reliability of the results, the triangulation method was used. This involved comparing data obtained from interviews with document analysis and participatory observation to identify convergences and divergences in responses. Additionally, focus groups with participants were organized to validate the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the qualitative analysis.

To provide an overview of the key findings from the interviews, we have synthesized the data collected for each analyzed factor in the table below. Table 2 clearly and concisely presents participants' perceptions regarding the discussed aspects, such as the curriculum, teaching methodologies, and support services. This synthesis contributes to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities identified in the implementation of an integrated quality assurance framework.

Synthesis of the main findings from interviews regarding the implementation of an integrated quality assurance framework in educational institutions

Table 2

Factor	Key Insights from Interviews	Supporting Quotes
Curriculum	Need for adaptability to market demands and real-world applications.	"Our curriculum is outdated and lacks flexibility."
Teaching Methodologies	Technological integration is essential for modern education.	"E-learning tools have enhanced student engagement."
Support Services	Insufficient resources for student support, especially mental health.	"We lack the capacity to offer adequate counseling."

The data presented in table 2 highlight the complexity of the implementation process of an integrated quality assurance framework in educational institutions. Each factor analyzed—curriculum, teaching methodologies, and support services—presents both distinct challenges and opportunities. Participants highlighted the need to update the curriculum to meet the demands of the labor market, the importance of integrating technology into teaching, and the lack of adequate resources for support services. This data synthesis validates the study's findings and highlights the need for a coordinated approach that includes improvements across all these dimensions to ensure educational quality. Overall, the data show that while there is significant progress in some areas, an integrated strategy is needed to overcome the limitations and fully capitalize on the opportunities identified

This process allowed for the adjustment and refinement of the conclusions, ensuring that they accurately reflect the studied reality and context.

4. Discussions

The findings suggest that curriculum reforms, while necessary for aligning with labor market needs, cannot succeed in isolation. They must be accompanied by improvements in teaching methodologies, particularly the integration of technology, and enhanced student support services. The interconnectedness of these factors indicates that a holistic approach is required to improve overall educational outcomes. This supports the findings of Schreiter (2022), who also highlighted the importance of a systems approach to quality assurance in educational institutions. In addition to the in-depth qualitative analysis, the study employed a comparative approach to identify similarities and differences in quality assurance practices among the educational institutions studied. This analysis involved comparing relevant factors such as the size of the institution, types of programs offered, available resources, governance structures, and stakeholder engagement levels. Using this analysis, best practices that can be adapted and replicated in other institutions were identified, as well as the specific challenges of each type of institution that require customized solutions. For example, large universities with well-defined governance structures and more extensive financial resources tend to implement more complex and formalized quality assurance mechanisms. These institutions also have a greater capacity to invest in continuous training for faculty and quality monitoring technologies. On the other hand, smaller institutions, such as colleges and secondary schools, have demonstrated greater flexibility in quickly adapting to market demands and the needs of the local community, but have reported challenges regarding limited resources and a lack of institutional support for developing sustainable quality assurance mechanisms.

The results of the comparative analysis show that the success of implementing an integrated quality assurance framework is influenced by several contextual factors. These factors include educational leadership, organizational culture, the degree of stakeholder engagement, and the institution's ability to use feedback for continuous improvement. For example, institutions that promote an open, collaborative, and innovation-oriented culture tend to have better results in terms of student and faculty satisfaction. Institutions that have demonstrated flexibility and adaptability in using available resources, such as integrating technology into evaluation and learning processes, have reported a positive impact on the quality of education. The use of e-learning platforms and digital feedback tools was mentioned as a good practice that allows for real-time performance evaluation and the rapid identification of improvement needs.

Another aspect identified in the comparative analysis was the importance of actively involving students in the quality assurance process. Institutions that have created consultation and collaboration mechanisms with students, through quality committees and periodic feedback, have managed to improve decision transparency and increase student satisfaction with the educational experience provided. The methodology used in this study, based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, allowed for an in-depth exploration of the factors

influencing the success of an integrated quality assurance framework in educational institutions in Romania. The inter-institutional comparative analysis identified best practices and challenges specific to the Romanian educational context, thus providing valuable recommendations for the continuous improvement of education quality. By integrating feedback from all stakeholders and using innovative monitoring and evaluation methods, educational institutions can develop more effective and adaptable quality assurance frameworks.

During the open coding process, several key themes emerged. Notably, categories such as 'institutional barriers to quality assurance,' 'stakeholder participation,' and 'technology integration in educational quality assurance' were identified. These themes provided the foundation for further analysis in subsequent stages and directly informed our understanding of the primary challenges faced by educational institutions in implementing quality assurance frameworks.

Through axial coding, the relationships between the identified themes were explored. For instance, it was found that the 'institutional barriers' category was closely linked to 'stakeholder participation,' revealing that the lack of institutional support hindered stakeholder engagement in quality assurance processes. Similarly, the integration of technology was identified as a factor that could mitigate some institutional barriers, thereby enhancing stakeholder involvement.

Selective coding allowed for the integration of the main themes into a coherent framework. The analysis revealed that 'institutional leadership' was the central element influencing both the success of technology integration and stakeholder engagement. Institutions that demonstrated strong leadership were better equipped to overcome barriers, facilitate technological adoption, and engage stakeholders in the quality assurance process.

Focus group discussions reinforced these findings. Participants emphasized that institutional leadership played a pivotal role in promoting a culture of continuous improvement and transparency. For example, one participant noted, 'Without clear direction from top management, it is difficult for us to engage meaningfully in quality assurance initiatives.' This feedback validated the central role of leadership identified during the selective coding process.

The study also emphasizes the importance of strong educational leadership capable of inspiring change and creating an environment conducive to innovation and collaboration. Our findings are consistent with Fraser (2021), who emphasizes the role of leadership in fostering a culture of continuous improvement across all educational dimensions. Similarly, Black and Madsen (2019) argue that interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial in addressing complex educational challenges, a point that is validated by the cross-functional interactions observed in our study. In the long term, these quality assurance frameworks can contribute to increasing the competitiveness of Romanian educational institutions, improving stakeholder satisfaction, and providing quality education that is relevant to the needs of a constantly changing society.

5. Conclusions

The research results underscore the crucial importance of developing and implementing an integrated quality assurance framework in educational institutions in Romania, in the context of profound and rapid changes in the global and national educational landscape. The study highlights that to meet current challenges—such as digitalization, the diversification of student demands, and rapid changes in the labor market—educational institutions must adopt a holistic and flexible approach to quality assurance.

First, the research results show that the success of a quality assurance framework depends on the active involvement of all stakeholders, including students, faculty, administrative staff, and the broader academic community. The active participation of these actors allows for a deeper understanding of the needs and expectations of different groups, facilitating the development of standards and evaluation criteria that are relevant and adapted to the specific context of each institution. By involving them in all stages of the process, from defining quality standards to evaluating and monitoring performance, stakeholders can contribute to creating a more transparent, inclusive, and accountable educational environment.

Another key aspect highlighted by the research is the central role of educational leadership in promoting and supporting an organizational culture focused on quality. Educational leaders, whether they are directors, deans, or quality assurance coordinators, play a crucial role in mobilizing resources, motivating staff, and fostering a climate conducive to innovation and continuous improvement. The study suggests that institutions with an organizational culture that values transparency, collaboration, and constructive feedback tend to have better results regarding the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms. They also demonstrate a greater capacity to adapt to change and continuously innovate. The integration of technology into quality assurance processes has been identified as an essential success factor. The use of digital tools, such as e-learning platforms, learning management systems, and feedback applications, enables continuous and detailed evaluation of academic and operational performance. This approach not only supports real-time quality monitoring but also facilitates access to up-to-date and relevant information that can guide strategic decision-making. By adopting innovative technological solutions, educational institutions can respond more quickly to student needs and market demands, thereby enhancing flexibility and resilience.

The study also highlighted the importance of adaptability and customization of quality assurance frameworks to the specific context of each institution. Depending on their size, type, and available resources, institutions can develop different quality assurance strategies that address their own needs and priorities. For example, large universities may benefit from more formalized and complex quality assurance structures, while smaller institutions may leverage their flexibility and agility to quickly implement changes and improvements. The research also demonstrated that developing an integrated quality assurance framework should

include a strong component of continuous training and professional development for faculty and administrative staff. Enhancing their skills and knowledge regarding new teaching methods, evaluation, and the use of educational technologies is essential for maintaining quality standards and adapting to the changing demands of the educational environment. Institutions that invest in the continuous professional development of their staff show a greater capacity to effectively implement quality assurance mechanisms and better respond to contemporary challenges. The study's findings also indicate that transparency and communication are essential elements in ensuring quality. Institutions that maintain an open and constant flow of information among all stakeholders—including students, faculty, authorities, and the broader community—are better able to uphold high standards of quality and quickly adapt to emerging needs. Open communication also facilitates creating a culture of trust and collaboration, where all participants feel involved and responsible for maintaining quality.

Finally, the research results emphasize the importance of continuous monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance processes. This monitoring must be not only rigorous but also flexible, adapted to the specific needs of each institution, and capable of responding quickly to received feedback. Continuous monitoring allows for early identification of problems, strategy adaptation, and timely implementation of solutions, thereby contributing to the constant improvement of education quality.

The study provides practical recommendations for educational institutions, emphasizing the need for an integrated approach to quality assurance that includes curriculum reform, technological integration in teaching, and enhanced student support services. These findings suggest that a flexible, adaptable framework is necessary to meet the diverse needs of institutions across different regions and contexts. Future research could explore how these interconnected factors vary across different types of institutions, particularly in terms of resource availability and stakeholder engagement.

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