

Assessment Quality Assurance and the Regulation of Academic Discourse: Insights from Regional Education Governance in Namibia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines assessment quality assurance as a governance regime in higher education, with particular attention to how it operates within the Namibian context. Moving beyond procedural and technical understandings of quality assurance, the study investigates how official policy, regulatory, and institutional texts construct assessment quality assurance as a mechanism for governing institutional conduct, regulating academic practice, and shaping the conditions under which academic legitimacy is produced. The study is grounded in an interpretive qualitative design and draws on qualitative document analysis and critical discourse analysis, guided by Foucauldian governmentality as the main theoretical lens. The analysis focused on the language, assumptions, and regulatory logics embedded in assessment-related texts. Five interrelated themes emerged from the findings: assessment quality assurance as a technology of governance; standardisation and the normalisation of academic practice; regulation of academic discourse through evaluative language; knowledge legitimation and academic validity; and tensions within the quality assurance regime. The article argues that assessment quality assurance is not a neutral administrative exercise, but a multidimensional regulatory formation that shapes how institutions organise assessment, how academics and students perform within evaluative systems, and how valid knowledge is recognised in higher education. The study contributes to current scholarship by showing that assessment quality assurance has institutional, discursive, and epistemic effects. It concludes that quality assurance should be understood as both necessary and contestable, requiring approaches that protect academic standards while remaining sensitive to autonomy, diversity, and the broader educational purpose of higher education.

Keywords: Assessment quality assurance, higher education, governmentality, academic legitimacy, discourse, Namibia

INTRODUCTION

Across Africa, quality assurance has become a central feature of higher education governance rather than a purely administrative exercise. This shift is linked to expanding enrolments, increasing public demand for accountability, and regional efforts to improve the comparability, credibility, and recognition of qualifications. At continental level, the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance position quality assurance as a flexible but common framework for internal and external review, while also emphasising comparability, evidence, and institutional responsibility for quality enhancement (HAQAA3, 2025). At regional level, SADC has continued to prioritise implementation of the SADC Qualifications Framework and the development of a Regional Quality Assurance Framework, signalling that quality assurance is now deeply tied to mobility, trust, and coordination across education systems (SADC, 2024). In this policy climate, quality assurance is not simply about maintaining standards; it increasingly functions as a governance mechanism through which higher education systems define legitimacy, regulate institutional conduct, and shape what is publicly recognised as credible academic practice (Obeng-Kyereh, 2026).

Within this governance architecture, assessment occupies a particularly strategic position because it is one of the main sites where standards are interpreted, achievement is classified, and academic credibility is defended. Recent work on assessment moderation shows that moderation is not merely a technical exercise for checking

marks. It is also a socially mediated practice through which institutions negotiate consistency, accountability, shared standards, and professional judgment (Alsharefeen et al., 2025; Prichard et al., 2025). This is important because it means that assessment quality assurance does more than confirm procedural correctness. It influences who has authority to judge, how standards are interpreted, and which evaluative norms become institutionalised. In that sense, assessment quality assurance extends beyond quality control and enters the domain of governance.

That governance function becomes clearer when assessment is considered in relation to academic discourse. Academic discourse includes the accepted forms of argument, evidence, reasoning, explanation, and scholarly representation through which knowledge is produced and judged in higher education. Recent research has shown that the language of assessment itself can create uncertainty for students, affecting how they understand tasks, standards, and feedback (West et al., 2025). This suggests that assessment does not simply measure learning after it has taken place; it also shapes the forms of expression and performance that are rewarded as academically valid. Once quality assurance enters this space through accreditation criteria, moderation procedures, audit expectations, and published standards, it begins to regulate not only the quality of assessment but also the discursive boundaries of academic legitimacy. What counts as a strong argument, acceptable evidence, valid performance, or credible scholarly expression is therefore influenced, at least in part, by assessment quality assurance arrangements.

Namibia provides a particularly useful context for examining this issue. The Namibia Qualifications Authority oversees a national qualifications framework intended to register legal and relevant qualifications and to quality assure formal learning pathways through accreditation criteria applied to institutions and organisations offering education and training services (Namibia Qualifications Authority [NQA], n.d.-a, n.d.-b). In addition, accreditation by the NQA is explicitly linked not only to the ability of providers to deliver courses, but also to their capacity to assess learner performance to acceptable standards (NQA, n.d.-c). These provisions show that assessment sits at the heart of quality regulation in Namibia. At the same time, the country's quality assurance environment reflects broader governance complexity. Recent work points to overlapping external quality assurance functions in Namibia, particularly around programme approval and related quality processes, with implications for institutional workload, role clarity, and compliance behaviour (Willemse, 2023). This suggests that quality assurance in Namibia is not merely a neutral support mechanism. It is part of a regulatory environment that shapes how institutions organise assessment, interpret standards, prepare documentation, and demonstrate legitimacy.

Despite these developments, an important scholarly problem remains insufficiently addressed. Much of the recent literature on quality assurance in African higher education focuses on accreditation, institutional effectiveness, student outcomes, compliance pressures, and quality culture. Recent reviews show that while quality assurance frameworks in African universities continue to expand, implementation often remains uneven and overly compliance-driven, especially under conditions of resource constraint and administrative pressure (Obeng-Kyereh, 2026). Other studies indicate that institutional quality assurance reforms can be negotiated, adapted, or resisted depending on how stakeholders interpret accountability demands and organisational priorities (Lamaro, 2025). Although this work is valuable, it tends to treat assessment quality assurance mainly as an administrative, managerial, or technical process. Far less attention has been paid to how assessment quality assurance regulates academic discourse itself.

This is the core problem that gives rise to the present study. As assessment quality assurance expands within national and regional governance systems, it increasingly shapes the forms of reasoning, evidence, communication, and scholarly performance that institutions recognise as legitimate. Yet this discursive dimension remains underexplored, particularly in African contexts where quality assurance systems are being strengthened simultaneously by national reforms, continental benchmarks, and regional harmonisation agendas. The magnitude of the problem lies in its systemic reach. Where quality assurance becomes more influential in accreditation, qualifications design, moderation, and institutional review, it does not remain at the administrative margins of university life. It enters the core of academic practice and begins to influence how knowledge is framed, how achievement is demonstrated, and how scholarly legitimacy is conferred.

If this issue is not critically examined, several risks follow. Assessment quality assurance may continue to be implemented as a narrow compliance exercise, encouraging institutions to prioritise auditability and procedural

conformity over deeper questions of epistemic inclusion, pedagogical flexibility, and academic creativity. In such circumstances, lecturers and students may find themselves responding to discursive expectations that privilege some forms of knowledge and expression while marginalising others. Over time, this can narrow the space for inclusive scholarship and weaken the capacity of higher education systems to balance accountability with contextual relevance, institutional autonomy, and intellectual plurality (Walter, 2026; West et al., 2025). In a region where harmonisation and comparability are increasingly valued, the danger is that regulatory coherence may gradually overshadow the diversity of academic voices and knowledge traditions that higher education ought to sustain.

It is for this reason that this study is necessary. There is a clear need to move beyond the conventional view of assessment quality assurance as a purely technical or bureaucratic process and to examine it instead as a governance mechanism that also regulates academic discourse. Namibia offers an important interpretive case because it sits at the intersection of national regulatory control and wider regional quality assurance developments in Southern Africa. By analysing assessment quality assurance through this lens, the study seeks to deepen understanding of how standards are not only protected but also socially and institutionally constructed, how academic legitimacy is shaped, and how regional education governance influences the discursive order of higher education. The article therefore argues that assessment quality assurance should be understood not only as a means of assuring fairness, consistency, and public confidence, but also as a regulatory instrument that shapes what counts as valid knowledge, credible academic expression, and acceptable scholarly performance within higher education.

Specific Research Questions

1. To examine assessment quality assurance as a governance mechanism in higher education in Namibia.
2. To assess how assessment quality assurance regulates academic discourse in higher education.

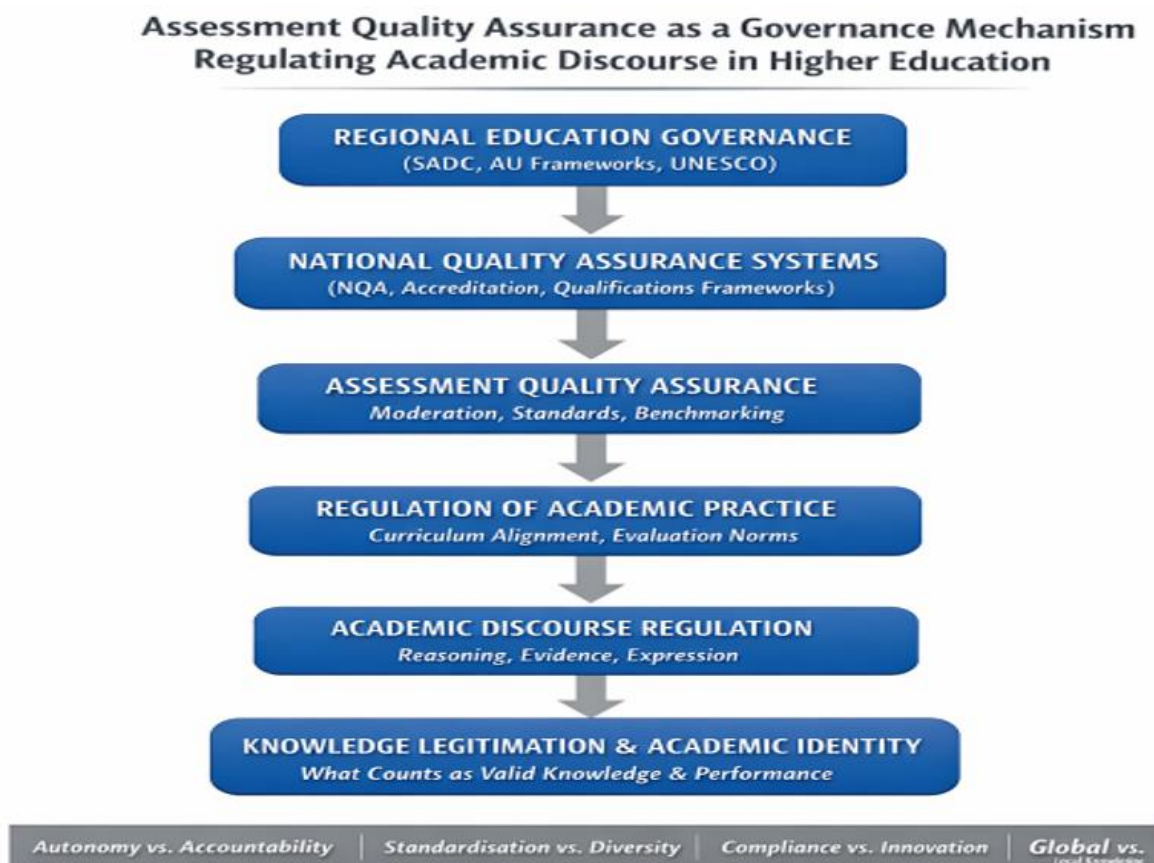
Research Questions

1. How does assessment quality assurance function as a governance mechanism in higher education in Namibia?
2. How does assessment quality assurance regulate academic discourse in higher education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed above suggests that assessment quality assurance should not be understood only as a technical mechanism for checking standards, fairness, and consistency. Increasingly, it operates within a wider architecture of higher education governance shaped by regional harmonisation agendas, national regulatory systems, and institutional accountability demands. In Southern Africa, recent quality assurance initiatives have explicitly linked quality processes to comparability, digital transformation, and alignment with regional, continental, and global good practice, indicating that quality assurance now functions as part of a broader governance project rather than a narrowly administrative one (UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa, n.d.). At the same time, regional qualifications and quality assurance arrangements within SADC continue to emphasise verification, trust, comparability, and governance coordination across member states, reinforcing the regulatory significance of assessment and qualifications systems (SADC Secretariat, 2022). To capture these interconnections, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of assessment quality assurance as a governance mechanism regulating academic discourse in higher education.

Figure 1: Assessment Quality Assurance as a Governance Mechanism Regulating Academic Discourse in Higher Education



As shown in Figure 1, assessment quality assurance can be conceptualised as a layered governance process that moves from regional policy architectures to the regulation of knowledge and scholarly performance within institutions. At the top of the model, regional education governance represents the macro-policy environment within which higher education systems are increasingly expected to demonstrate comparability, credibility, and alignment. In Southern Africa, UNESCO’s recent regional initiative on higher education quality assurance has directly framed quality assurance as a strategic mechanism for strengthening internal and external standards and aligning institutions with wider regional and global expectations (UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa, n.d.). Similarly, the SADC Qualifications Framework positions quality assurance and verification as core objectives of regional coordination, showing that governance at this level is closely connected to trust, mobility, and recognition of qualifications across borders (SADC Secretariat, 2022).

The second layer, national quality assurance systems, reflects how regional aspirations are translated into regulatory structures within member states. In Namibia, the National Qualifications Framework is designed as a national register of legal and relevant qualifications and is governed through rules and requirements intended to secure coherence, legitimacy, and comparability in education and training (Namibia Qualifications Authority [NQA], n.d.-a). In addition, the accreditation function of the NQA evaluates whether institutions and organisations have the capacity to offer courses and assess learners in ways that satisfy required standards, showing that assessment is embedded at the centre of quality regulation rather than treated as a peripheral matter (NQA, n.d.-b). This gives assessment quality assurance a formal regulatory role within the national governance architecture.

At the centre of the model is assessment quality assurance, which functions as the operational site where governance is enacted in practice. Contemporary research on moderation shows that processes such as standard setting, moderation, and benchmarking are not merely technical checks but are socially negotiated practices through which institutions seek consistency, defensibility, and shared interpretations of standards (Prichard et al., 2025). Recent discourse-based work on moderation similarly demonstrates that moderation practices are shaped by institutional values, staff interpretations, and competing understandings of quality, which means that

they also participate in constructing the norms through which academic judgement is exercised (Alsharefeen et al., 2025). This is why assessment quality assurance is best understood not simply as a procedural requirement, but as a mechanism that structures evaluative authority and institutionalises particular judgments about academic quality.

The model further shows that these processes extend into the regulation of academic practice. Once quality assurance standards are embedded in moderation procedures, accreditation expectations, and institutional review systems, they begin to shape curriculum alignment, teaching priorities, and evaluation norms. Recent studies of quality assurance in African higher education indicate that quality mechanisms increasingly influence institutional effectiveness, staff practice, and academic standards, even where implementation remains uneven or constrained by capacity challenges (Daka et al., 2025; Obeng-Kyereh, 2026). This suggests that quality assurance does not remain in policy documents or quality offices; it enters the everyday pedagogical and administrative life of institutions.

A deeper implication of this process is captured in the next layer of the figure: academic discourse regulation. Academic discourse refers to the accepted forms of reasoning, evidence, argumentation, and scholarly expression through which knowledge is judged within higher education. Recent evidence shows that the language of assessment can itself shape how students interpret criteria, understand expectations, and engage with feedback, indicating that assessment is not simply a neutral measure of learning but part of the discursive environment through which academic legitimacy is produced (West et al., 2025). When quality assurance codifies standards for what counts as acceptable performance, it also contributes to defining what counts as acceptable academic expression. In this sense, assessment quality assurance regulates discourse by normalising some forms of reasoning and representation while potentially marginalising others.

The final layer of the model, knowledge legitimation and academic identity, highlights the cumulative effect of these governance processes. Through the regulation of assessment and discourse, quality assurance influences what is recognised as valid knowledge and what is accepted as credible academic performance. This resonates with recent discourse-analytical work showing that the very meaning of quality in higher education is constructed through competing institutional and policy discourses rather than existing as a neutral category outside power relations (Walter, 2026). The model therefore suggests that quality assurance contributes not only to accountability and standard maintenance, but also to the social construction of academic legitimacy itself.

The cross-cutting tensions shown at the base of the figure are equally significant. Current literature repeatedly points to unresolved tensions between accountability and autonomy, compliance and improvement, and standardisation and contextual responsiveness in higher education quality assurance systems (Obeng-Kyereh, 2026; UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa, n.d.). In regional contexts such as Southern Africa, where harmonisation is increasingly valued, these tensions may become even more pronounced because the drive for comparability can unintentionally narrow the space for epistemic diversity and locally grounded academic practice. Figure 1 therefore synthesises the reviewed literature by showing that assessment quality assurance is not merely a technical support function. It is a multi-level governance mechanism that links regional policy priorities, national regulation, institutional practice, academic discourse, and the legitimation of knowledge within higher education.

Theoretical Framework: Foucauldian Governmentality

This study is anchored in Foucauldian governmentality because the concept offers a powerful lens for understanding how assessment quality assurance operates as a regulatory mechanism within higher education. Rather than treating quality assurance as a neutral administrative activity, governmentality makes it possible to see how power works through standards, procedures, classifications, audits, and evaluative routines that shape institutional conduct. In this sense, assessment quality assurance is not only concerned with maintaining fairness, consistency, and credibility. It also forms part of a broader governing rationality through which higher education institutions are steered, monitored, and normalised. This theoretical position is especially relevant to the present study because the article is concerned with the relationship between assessment quality assurance, education governance, and the regulation of academic discourse in Namibia (Romanowski & Nasser, 2022).

Foucault's idea of governmentality draws attention to the subtle ways in which power is exercised through the management of conduct rather than through direct coercion alone. Institutions are governed not simply by force, but through rules, expectations, forms of visibility, and systems of self-regulation that encourage actors to align themselves with accepted norms. When this perspective is applied to higher education, quality assurance can be understood as one of the technologies through which governing occurs. Accreditation requirements, institutional audits, reporting templates, moderation procedures, and assessment standards all contribute to making academic work visible, measurable, and open to comparison. In this way, quality assurance does not merely evaluate universities from the outside. It creates the conditions under which institutions begin to regulate themselves in anticipation of external judgment. Recent work using governmentality in higher education has shown that regulatory systems such as accreditation can govern institutions "from a distance" by shaping behaviour through expectations of compliance, performance, and accountability rather than through direct intervention alone (Romanowski & Nasser, 2022). Similar evidence from South Africa shows that performance management systems in universities operate as governmental technologies by encouraging academics to internalise institutional norms and align themselves with measurable expectations (Ramhurry & Ramhurry, 2024).

Viewed through this lens, assessment quality assurance becomes more than a technical instrument for checking academic standards. It becomes a mechanism through which institutional practice is disciplined and coordinated. Moderation, benchmarking, validation, and audit processes appear on the surface to be procedural devices for ensuring fairness and consistency, yet they also shape what institutions must prioritise, how lecturers design assessment, how student performance is interpreted, and how evidence of quality is assembled. Recent studies continue to show that quality assurance systems strongly influence institutional performance, academic standards, and organisational behaviour, even where their effectiveness varies across contexts (Daka et al., 2025; Serrano et al., 2025). The significance of this for the present study is that assessment quality assurance should not be reduced to operational technique. It is better understood as a governing apparatus that structures academic judgement and embeds institutions within wider regimes of accountability.

Governmentality is equally useful for explaining how quality assurance reaches beyond institutional administration into the regulation of academic discourse. If discourse is understood as the set of accepted ways of reasoning, evidencing, arguing, and presenting knowledge within the academy, then assessment quality assurance plays a central role in shaping its boundaries. Assessment criteria, moderation expectations, standards frameworks, and audit requirements all contribute to defining what counts as a valid academic response, what counts as sufficient evidence, and what forms of performance are recognised as credible. The regulatory force of quality assurance therefore lies not only in its oversight of institutional systems, but also in its production of norms about legitimate scholarly conduct. Recent Foucauldian analyses of quality in higher education reinforce this point by showing that "quality" is not a fixed or neutral category. It is discursively constructed through regimes of meaning that organise what can be said, measured, valued, and rewarded within educational institutions (Walter, 2026). This insight is central to the present article because it supports the argument that assessment quality assurance participates in the regulation of academic discourse by normalising particular forms of knowledge and expression.

The value of governmentality for this study also lies in its capacity to connect multiple levels of governance. The article is not concerned only with what happens inside classrooms or institutions. It also examines how national and regional quality assurance architectures shape the conditions under which academic practice takes place. In Southern Africa, higher education quality assurance is increasingly linked to regional agendas of harmonisation, comparability, recognition, and mobility. These developments create a policy environment in which institutions are encouraged to align themselves with broader expectations of transparency, equivalence, and trustworthiness. Governmentality helps explain how such macro-level agendas become effective at institutional level. They do so by being translated into national frameworks, accreditation criteria, institutional procedures, and everyday assessment practices that make compliance appear both necessary and rational. As a result, the governance of higher education is enacted not only through legislation and policy, but also through routine academic procedures that gradually normalise particular standards and behaviours.

At the same time, a governmentality perspective allows the study to remain critical. It makes visible the fact that quality assurance is often presented as self-evidently beneficial, even though its expansion can generate over-management, intensified documentation, and narrowing definitions of academic value. Harvey's recent

reflection on three decades of quality in higher education argues that quality assurance has in many contexts taken on a life of its own, increasingly detached from academic expectations and associated with over-management of the sector (Harvey, 2024). From a governmentality perspective, this is not accidental. It reflects the way governing rationalities can become embedded in institutional routines until compliance itself begins to appear as the primary marker of quality. This is precisely why the present study is interested in assessment quality assurance as a regulatory formation. It seeks to show that such systems may simultaneously protect standards and constrain academic life by defining in advance the forms of discourse, performance, and legitimacy that institutions are expected to produce.

Guided by Foucauldian governmentality, this article therefore interprets assessment quality assurance in Namibia as a technology of governance that links regional policy priorities, national regulatory frameworks, and institutional practices of assessment. The framework makes it possible to analyse how quality assurance works through visibility, comparison, standardisation, and self-regulation, and how these processes shape not only institutional accountability but also the discursive conditions under which knowledge is recognised as valid. In this way, governmentality provides the conceptual foundation for the article's central claim: that assessment quality assurance is not merely a mechanism for maintaining standards, but also a governing device that regulates academic discourse within higher education (Romanowski & Nasser, 2022).

Research Gap

Although the literature on quality assurance in higher education has expanded considerably, much of it continues to focus on technical effectiveness, institutional accountability, accreditation, performance management, and quality culture. Existing studies have shown that quality assurance systems shape institutional performance, influence academic standards, and increasingly function as regulatory instruments within higher education systems (Daka et al., 2025; Serrano et al., 2025). Other work has drawn attention to the discursive construction of quality and the ways in which quality regimes normalise particular meanings, practices, and institutional expectations (Walter, 2026). Similarly, scholarship informed by governmentality has demonstrated that accreditation and performance systems operate as technologies of governance that steer institutions and academic actors through compliance, surveillance, and self-regulation (Ramhurry & Ramhurry, 2024; Romanowski & Nasser, 2022). Taken together, these studies make an important contribution by showing that quality assurance is neither neutral nor merely procedural.

However, an important gap remains insufficiently addressed. The existing literature has not adequately examined assessment quality assurance as a specific governance mechanism through which academic discourse is regulated. Much of the scholarship treats assessment as part of the broader quality assurance environment, but gives limited analytical attention to how assessment-related processes such as moderation, standard setting, benchmarking, validation, and audit expectations shape what counts as legitimate knowledge, credible academic performance, and acceptable scholarly expression. In other words, while quality assurance has been widely studied as a system of regulation, its role in governing the discursive conditions of academic life remains underdeveloped in the literature.

This gap is even more evident in African higher education research, where scholarship has often concentrated on institutional quality systems, policy reform, harmonisation, and implementation challenges rather than on the discursive effects of assessment regulation itself. As a result, insufficient attention has been paid to the ways in which assessment quality assurance may normalise particular forms of reasoning, evidence, communication, and academic legitimacy within universities. This is a significant omission because assessment is one of the most direct points at which governance enters the everyday life of higher education. Through assessment rules and quality mechanisms, institutions do not merely judge learning outcomes; they also shape the terms on which knowledge is performed, recognised, and validated.

The gap is particularly important in the context of Namibia, where assessment quality assurance is embedded within broader national and regional governance arrangements. Yet despite the country's relevance as a site of regulatory coordination and quality assurance development, there is limited scholarship that explicitly analyses how assessment quality assurance functions as a discourse-regulating technology within higher education. This

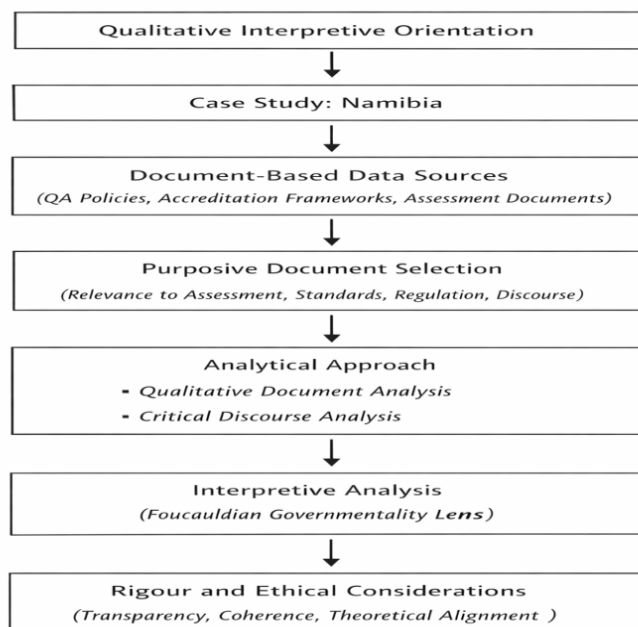
means that the relationship between governance, assessment, and academic discourse remains undertheorised and underexplored.

It is this gap that the present study addresses. Guided by Foucauldian governmentality, the study examines assessment quality assurance not simply as a mechanism for maintaining standards, but as a technology of governance that regulates academic discourse within higher education in Namibia. In doing so, it seeks to extend current quality assurance scholarship beyond questions of compliance and institutional performance toward a more critical understanding of how academic legitimacy is produced and regulated. The next section outlines the methodological approach adopted to examine this problem.

METHODOLOGY

To address the study objectives, this article adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology centred on Namibia as an analytical case. This approach is appropriate because the study is concerned less with measuring the frequency of quality assurance practices than with examining how assessment quality assurance is constructed, operationalised, and normalised as a governance mechanism, and how its regulatory language shapes academic discourse within higher education. The methodological logic of the study is summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Methodological Framework of the Study



As illustrated in Figure 2, the methodological approach adopted in this study follows a logically structured progression from interpretive orientation to discourse-based analysis. The study is grounded in a qualitative interpretive paradigm, which is appropriate for examining how policy and regulatory systems construct meaning, shape institutional behaviour, and define academic legitimacy. Qualitative approaches are particularly suited to studies that seek to understand governance processes, institutional practices, and discursive formations rather than measure variables quantitatively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The use of Namibia as a case study reflects the need to analyse assessment quality assurance within a bounded yet analytically relevant context. Case study research allows for in-depth exploration of complex phenomena situated within real-life institutional and policy environments, making it especially suitable for governance-oriented research (Yin, 2018). In this study, Namibia is not treated as an isolated case but as a site through which broader regional and governance dynamics can be examined.

As shown in the figure, the study relies primarily on document-based data sources. This choice is methodologically justified because governance systems are most clearly articulated through policy texts,

regulatory frameworks, accreditation criteria, and institutional guidelines. Document analysis provides access to the formal language through which standards, accountability, and legitimacy are constructed (Bowen, 2009). In the context of this study, these documents are particularly important because they contain the discursive rules that shape assessment practices and define acceptable academic performance.

The purposive selection of documents, also indicated in the figure, ensures that the analysis remains focused on texts that are directly relevant to assessment, quality assurance, and regulation. Qualitative research prioritises analytical relevance rather than representativeness, making purposive sampling appropriate for identifying documents that reveal underlying governance logics (Patton, 2015).

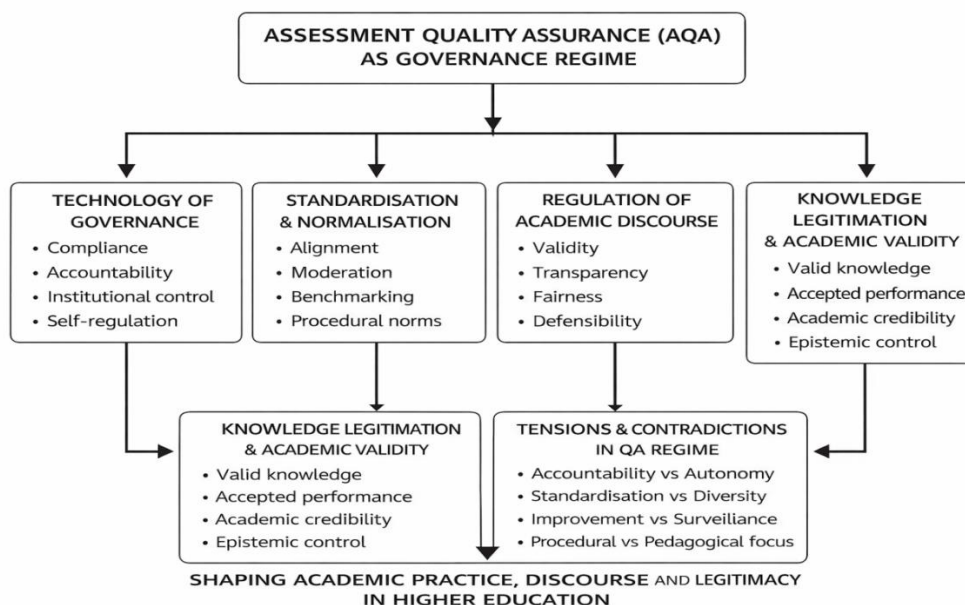
The analytical stage combines qualitative document analysis with critical discourse analysis. Document analysis enables the identification of regulatory themes, categories, and institutional priorities, while discourse analysis allows for examination of how language constructs meaning, normalises standards, and shapes academic expectations. This dual approach aligns with Foucauldian perspectives on governmentality, which emphasise the role of discourse, classification, and visibility in governing institutions and populations (Foucault, 1991; Rose et al., 2006).

Finally, the figure highlights rigour and ethical considerations as integral components of the methodology. In qualitative document-based research, rigour is achieved through transparency, analytical coherence, and alignment between theory, data, and method. Ethical responsibility lies in accurate representation and careful interpretation of texts, particularly when analysing policy and institutional documents (Bowen, 2009).

Figure 2 demonstrates that the methodology is not a collection of isolated techniques but an integrated analytical framework designed to examine how assessment quality assurance functions as a governance mechanism and regulates academic discourse within higher education.

Presentation of Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented thematically in line with the qualitative interpretive design adopted for the research. Since the analysis was based on policy, regulatory, and institutional texts, the findings are not reported as numerical outcomes or discrete empirical variables. Rather, they are presented as interpretive themes generated through qualitative document analysis and critical discourse analysis. Guided by Foucauldian governmentality, the analysis examined how assessment quality assurance is represented in official texts, how it operates as a governance mechanism, and how it shapes academic practice, discourse, and legitimacy within higher education



As illustrated in the thematic diagram, the findings suggest that assessment quality assurance functions as a central governance regime within higher education. From this central organising logic, five interrelated themes

emerged. These themes are not isolated categories, but connected dimensions of the same regulatory formation. Together, they show how assessment quality assurance extends beyond technical procedures and becomes a mechanism through which institutional conduct is guided, academic norms are standardised, discourse is regulated, knowledge is legitimised, and tensions within the system are produced and managed.

Objective 1: Assessment quality assurance as a governance mechanism in higher education in Namibia

Theme 1: Assessment Quality Assurance as a Technology of Governance

The first theme presents assessment quality assurance as a technology of governance. The reviewed texts consistently emphasise standards, compliance, accountability, credibility, comparability, and institutional responsibility. These recurring ideas show that assessment quality assurance is framed not simply as an administrative support system, but as a structured mechanism through which higher education institutions are expected to organise and regulate their assessment practices. The findings reveal that institutions are required to make their assessment systems visible, defensible, and open to scrutiny. In this way, quality assurance functions as a governing apparatus that directs institutional conduct through formalised expectations and regulatory procedures.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this suggests that assessment quality assurance operates through subtle forms of control that encourage institutions to align themselves with established norms of quality. Rather than relying on direct coercion, governance is exercised through standards, frameworks, documentation requirements, and procedures that shape how institutions think about responsibility and compliance. The significance of this finding is that assessment quality assurance emerges as one of the main ways through which governance enters the operational life of higher education.

Theme 2: Standardisation and the Normalisation of Academic Practice

The second theme shows that assessment quality assurance contributes to the standardisation and normalisation of academic practice. The analysed texts repeatedly privilege consistency, moderation, alignment, benchmarking, and approved procedures. While these features are presented as necessary for fairness and comparability, they also create norms about what counts as proper academic practice in assessment design, implementation, and evaluation.

This means that quality assurance does more than promote order in assessment systems. It shapes the everyday routines of academic work. Lecturers and departments are increasingly expected to align their assessment practices with recognised standards and defensible procedures. As a result, academic practice becomes organised around the need to demonstrate procedural legitimacy as much as educational effectiveness. Standardisation therefore works as a normalising force, guiding institutions and academic actors toward patterned forms of behaviour that are institutionally recognisable and regulatorily acceptable.

Taken together, the first two themes show that assessment quality assurance functions as a governance mechanism through which higher education institutions are regulated, academic routines are standardised, and institutional conduct is normalised. However, the findings further suggest that the effects of quality assurance do not end at the level of institutional organisation and procedural compliance. Once embedded in standards, moderation practices, evaluative criteria, and approved procedures, quality assurance begins to shape the communicative and epistemic conditions of academic life. It is at this point that the analysis moves from the first objective to the second. The discussion that follows therefore examines how assessment quality assurance regulates academic discourse through evaluative language, the construction of academic legitimacy, and the delimitation of valid knowledge and acceptable scholarly performance.

Objective 2: Assessment quality assurance and the regulation of academic discourse in higher education

Theme 3: Regulation of Academic Discourse through Evaluative Language

Turning to the second objective, the third theme highlights the role of assessment quality assurance in the regulation of academic discourse. The reviewed texts repeatedly employ evaluative terms such as validity,

transparency, fairness, appropriateness, evidence, clarity, consistency, and defensibility. The findings suggest that this language performs more than a descriptive function. It does not simply explain what sound assessment should look like. Rather, it defines the terms through which academic work becomes intelligible, acceptable, and institutionally recognisable.

From an interpretive standpoint, this means that assessment quality assurance contributes to the construction of discursive norms within higher education. Assessment criteria, moderation guidelines, and institutional standards shape how arguments are expected to be framed, how evidence should be organised, and how competence ought to be demonstrated. In this sense, quality assurance regulates discourse by setting the linguistic and evaluative boundaries within which academic performance is judged.

This finding is important because it shows that the regulation of discourse is not separate from the regulation of assessment. The two are intertwined. Once quality assurance frameworks codify what counts as clarity, coherence, relevance, and sufficient evidence, they also shape how students and lecturers come to understand legitimate academic communication. The effect is that academic discourse becomes increasingly structured by evaluative language that appears technical and neutral, yet carries strong normative force. Through this process, assessment quality assurance governs not only what is assessed, but also the discursive form in which knowledge must be presented in order to be accepted.

Theme 4: Knowledge Legitimation and Academic Validity

The fourth theme demonstrates that assessment quality assurance contributes to knowledge legitimation and the construction of academic validity. The analysed texts establish criteria for what counts as valid assessment, credible evidence, acceptable performance, and defensible academic judgement. The findings indicate that quality assurance does not merely regulate procedures. It also influences what kinds of knowledge are institutionally recognised and rewarded.

This theme extends the discussion from discourse to legitimacy. If assessment quality assurance defines what is valid, credible, and acceptable, then it also shapes the standards through which knowledge itself becomes legitimate within higher education. The issue is therefore not only whether assessment is administered fairly, but also which forms of reasoning, evidence, and academic performance are most readily recognised as worthy of validation. In this way, quality assurance participates in the construction of academic legitimacy by determining the terms under which knowledge claims are evaluated and approved.

The importance of this finding lies in its epistemic implications. By defining what is considered a valid demonstration of competence, assessment quality assurance shapes academic credibility itself. It helps determine not only how knowledge is assessed, but also what forms of knowledge are most readily legitimised within the higher education system. This suggests that the discursive power of quality assurance lies partly in its capacity to make particular standards of knowing appear natural, objective, and universally applicable, even though they are produced within specific regulatory frameworks.

Theme 5: Tensions and Contradictions within the Quality Assurance Regime

The fifth theme captures the tensions and contradictions embedded within the assessment quality assurance regime. Although the policy and regulatory texts consistently present quality assurance as necessary for fairness, accountability, and improvement, the findings show that its operation is not without strain. One tension lies between accountability and academic autonomy, as institutions are expected to comply with externally recognisable standards while still exercising professional judgement. Another tension exists between standardisation and diversity, since the pursuit of comparability may narrow space for contextual flexibility and alternative forms of academic expression. A further tension emerges between improvement and surveillance, as systems designed to enhance quality also depend heavily on documentation, visibility, traceability, and review.

This theme is especially important for the second objective because it shows that the regulation of academic discourse is neither smooth nor uncontested. The same frameworks that seek to ensure fairness and consistency may also constrain the range of acceptable scholarly expression. When assessment quality assurance privileges

fixed standards of evidence, coherence, and defensibility, it may unintentionally limit room for epistemic plurality, contextual nuance, and alternative forms of academic voice. This does not mean that quality assurance is inherently restrictive. It means that its discursive effects are complex and must be understood critically.

From a Foucauldian perspective, these tensions are not accidental. They reflect the dual character of governance itself. Quality assurance enables institutions to demonstrate credibility and order, yet it also subjects them to forms of regulation that may narrow academic flexibility. The findings therefore show that assessment quality assurance operates simultaneously as a mechanism of support and as a technology of control. Its role in regulating academic discourse is thus marked by both productive and constraining effects.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study suggest that assessment quality assurance in higher education in Namibia should not be understood merely as a technical or administrative mechanism for checking standards. Rather, the analysis indicates that it operates as a broader governance regime that shapes institutional conduct, structures academic practice, regulates evaluative discourse, and participates in the legitimation of knowledge. This interpretation aligns with recent scholarship showing that contemporary quality assurance systems increasingly function through accountability frameworks, governance rationalities, and layered regulatory structures rather than through simple post hoc evaluation alone (García-Juanatey et al., 2024; Harvey, 2024; Serrano et al., 2025).

Assessment quality assurance as a governance mechanism

A central insight from this study is that assessment quality assurance functions as a mechanism of governance. The repeated emphasis in the analysed texts on standards, compliance, comparability, credibility, and institutional responsibility suggests that quality assurance is being constructed as a way of steering institutional behaviour. This means that quality assurance is not simply concerned with whether assessment is done properly. It also establishes how institutions are expected to organise themselves, how they should demonstrate accountability, and how they become visible to external oversight. This interpretation is consistent with recent work showing that quality assurance in higher education has become embedded within broader systems of multi-level governance, where institutions are increasingly coordinated through policy frameworks, regulatory expectations, and internal monitoring processes (García-Juanatey et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2025).

From a Foucauldian perspective, this finding is significant because it shows how power operates through procedures, norms, and self-regulating practices rather than through direct command alone. Institutions come to internalise expectations of quality and organise themselves in anticipation of review, audit, and accreditation. In this sense, the study supports Harvey's (2024) argument that quality assurance has, over time, developed into a system that can extend beyond academic expectations and contribute to the over-management of higher education. It also resonates with Serrano et al. (2025), who show that the effectiveness of quality assurance systems is closely tied to institutional arrangements, leadership, and organisational conditions, suggesting that quality assurance is deeply bound up with how institutions are governed.

The contribution of this finding is that it reframes assessment quality assurance as part of the governing architecture of higher education rather than as a neutral technical support function. In practical terms, this means that assessment becomes one of the key sites through which regulatory power enters the daily life of the university. That is especially important in Southern African contexts, where recent UNESCO-supported quality assurance initiatives have explicitly linked quality assurance to trust, institutional credibility, harmonisation, and continuous improvement across the region (UNESCO, 2025).

Standardisation and the normalisation of academic practice

The findings also reveal that assessment quality assurance promotes standardisation, but its deeper effect lies in the normalisation of academic practice. The emphasis on alignment, moderation, benchmarking, consistency, and approved procedures suggests that quality assurance does more than provide technical guidance. It progressively defines what counts as proper academic conduct in the design, implementation, and evaluation of assessment. Recent studies support this interpretation by showing that quality assurance systems often work

through the standardisation of processes, the clarification of responsibilities, and the tightening of institutional coordination (Mukhatayev et al., 2024; Serrano et al., 2026).

The deeper meaning here is that standardisation produces normalisation. Once particular procedures are repeatedly framed as the markers of fairness, validity, and good practice, they gradually become taken-for-granted norms. Academic actors are then encouraged to align their work with these expectations, not only to improve assessment quality, but also to ensure institutional defensibility. In this way, quality assurance becomes woven into the ordinary routines of academic life. Harvey (2024) warns that this type of development can push quality assurance toward over-management, while Mukhatayev et al. (2024) likewise show that internal quality assurance systems rely heavily on structured procedures, stakeholder alignment, and institutional coordination. Together, these studies help explain why the findings of the present study point not merely to procedural order, but to the reshaping of professional academic conduct itself.

The significance of this finding is twofold. On one hand, standardisation can strengthen consistency, fairness, and transparency, which remain essential to credible higher education systems. On the other hand, if procedural conformity becomes too dominant, academic work may become oriented more toward compliance than toward reflective pedagogical judgement. The present study therefore adds to current scholarship by showing that standardisation in assessment quality assurance should be interpreted not only as a managerial necessity, but also as a disciplinary process that shapes what lecturers and institutions come to regard as normal academic practice.

Regulation of academic discourse through evaluative language

Another important finding is that assessment quality assurance regulates academic discourse through evaluative language. The repeated use of terms such as validity, fairness, transparency, evidence, clarity, appropriateness, and defensibility suggests that quality assurance frameworks do not merely describe good assessment practice. They also construct the discursive terms through which academic performance is made intelligible and judged. Recent research on assessment moderation in higher education supports this reading by showing that moderation itself is shaped by identifiable discourses and values that influence how faculty members understand and enact assessment practices (Alsharefeen et al., 2025).

This finding is significant because it shifts attention from structure to meaning. Higher education is fundamentally discursive: students demonstrate knowledge through writing, speaking, argumentation, and evidence, while lecturers exercise academic judgement through feedback, moderation, and evaluation. If quality assurance frameworks define what counts as a valid argument, sufficient evidence, or acceptable performance, then they are also shaping the communicative conditions under which academic knowledge is recognised. In this respect, the findings support a more critical understanding of quality assurance as a discursive regime rather than merely a procedural one. This interpretation also aligns with current debates that call for greater scrutiny of how quality frameworks shape inclusion, recognition, and participation in higher education (Khoo et al., 2024; Alsharefeen et al., 2025).

The study contributes to knowledge here by showing that evaluative language in quality assurance is never neutral. It carries institutional authority and helps regulate whose forms of expression, justification, and performance are rendered legitimate. That does not mean the language of quality should be discarded. It means it should be treated critically, because it shapes academic practice not only by telling actors what to do, but also by defining how they must speak, argue, and demonstrate competence in order to be recognised.

Knowledge legitimation and academic validity

The findings further show that assessment quality assurance participates in the legitimation of knowledge and the construction of academic validity. This is one of the most important analytical contributions of the study because it moves the discussion beyond procedural control to epistemic regulation. By specifying what counts as valid assessment, appropriate evidence, defensible judgement, and acceptable academic achievement, quality assurance frameworks also shape what forms of knowledge are most readily recognised within higher education institutions. Recent scholarship supports the view that conceptions of quality are not fixed or self-evident, but

are contested, value-laden, and closely tied to wider questions of standards, culture, and epistemology (Harvey, 2024).

This interpretation also gains support from more recent discussions linking quality to equality, inclusion, and epistemic recognition. Khoo et al. (2024) argue that quality in higher education should be understood in relation to exclusion and inequality rather than as a purely technical matter. Similarly, current work on epistemic diversity and decoloniality in higher education has continued to stress that institutional processes often privilege dominant forms of knowledge while marginalising others, especially when legitimacy is tied too closely to narrow standards of acceptable performance (Jackson-Cole et al., 2025). These perspectives help illuminate the present finding that quality assurance may not only protect standards, but also quietly participate in ordering academic value.

The implication is that academic validity is not simply discovered through assessment. It is institutionally produced through evaluative frameworks that reward some forms of reasoning, evidence, and expression more readily than others. The present study therefore contributes to current debates by showing that assessment quality assurance is implicated in the politics of knowledge in higher education. It influences not only how knowledge is measured, but also what kinds of knowledge become institutionally visible, defensible, and legitimate.

Tensions and contradictions within the quality assurance regime

A further interpretive insight from the study is that assessment quality assurance operates through tensions that are not accidental, but structural to the regime itself. The findings show persistent tensions between accountability and autonomy, standardisation and diversity, and improvement and surveillance. Recent scholarship strongly supports the view that these tensions are central to current higher education governance. For example, recent studies on autonomy and accountability show that institutions are increasingly expected to satisfy public accountability demands while also preserving academic freedom, institutional discretion, and professional judgement (Moodley, 2025; Painsi et al., 2025).

The tension between accountability and autonomy is especially important in the present study. Quality assurance frameworks can enhance trust and credibility, but they may also narrow the space for local discretion if compliance becomes overly prescriptive. Moodley (2025) explicitly analyses how academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public accountability intersect in contemporary higher education governance, while Painsi et al. (2025) show that institutional autonomy remains strongly connected to how effectively higher education institutions fulfil their missions. Read together, these studies support the present finding that quality assurance must always negotiate a delicate balance between legitimate oversight and meaningful academic independence.

The tension between standardisation and diversity is equally significant. Standardisation may promote comparability and fairness, yet higher education institutions work across different disciplines, contexts, student populations, and knowledge traditions. This means that tightly regulated assessment systems may unintentionally flatten important contextual differences. Contemporary literature that links quality to equality similarly warns against conceptions of quality that ignore diversity, vulnerability, and exclusion within higher education systems (Khoo et al., 2024). The present study extends this argument by showing that such tensions are visible even within the language and logic of assessment quality assurance itself.

The tension between improvement and surveillance is perhaps the most revealing from a governmentality perspective. Quality assurance is often presented in developmental terms, emphasising enhancement and continuous improvement. Yet, in practice, it depends heavily on traceability, documentation, visibility, and review. Recent work in quality assurance continues to show that internal and external systems rely on monitoring arrangements, evidence structures, and performance-oriented procedures to demonstrate effectiveness (Mukhatayev et al., 2024; Serrano et al., 2025). This suggests that improvement and surveillance are not opposites. They are intertwined within contemporary quality assurance systems. The present study therefore contributes a more nuanced reading by showing that assessment quality assurance is simultaneously enabling and constraining.

Contribution to knowledge and implications

Taken together, the findings contribute to knowledge by showing that assessment quality assurance in higher education in Namibia is best understood as a multidimensional governance regime with institutional, discursive, and epistemic effects. It shapes how universities organise assessment, how lecturers perform academic work, how evaluative language regulates discourse, and how legitimacy is conferred on knowledge claims. This extends current literature, which often treats quality assurance primarily as a technical or organisational matter, by demonstrating that it also functions as a system of power that structures academic meaning and institutional order (Harvey, 2024; García-Juanatey et al., 2024).

The study also has practical implications. For policy, it suggests that quality assurance frameworks should be designed with greater sensitivity to their regulatory and epistemic effects, not only their administrative efficiency. For institutions, it implies the need to balance rigour with flexibility so that quality assurance supports academic integrity without reducing academic work to procedural defensibility. For scholarship, it opens room for further research into how students, lecturers, and quality assurance practitioners experience these dynamics in practice, especially in African and Southern African higher education settings where questions of harmonisation, equity, credibility, and contextual relevance remain especially important (UNESCO, 2025; Khoo et al., 2024).

The discussion shows that assessment quality assurance should be treated as a serious intellectual, institutional, and policy issue. It does not merely monitor what higher education institutions do after assessment has taken place. Rather, it shapes the conditions under which academic work is organised, judged, and legitimised. In this sense, assessment quality assurance is central to the production of academic order and legitimacy in higher education, and its future value will depend on whether it can remain rigorous while also being context-sensitive, educationally meaningful, and attentive to autonomy, diversity, and inclusion (Harvey, 2024; Moodley, 2025; UNESCO, 2025).

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