

Quality Assurance in Uganda's Education System: Institutional Architecture, Implementation Failures, and a Framework for Transformative Reform

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ABSTRACT

Uganda has developed a dense institutional architecture for quality assurance (QA) in education, including the Directorate of Education Standards, the National Council for Higher Education, the Uganda National Examinations Board, and the National Curriculum Development Centre, yet system-level learning outcomes remain persistently weak. This paper tackles three core questions: how “quality” is conceptualized and operationalized within this QA framework relative to a meaningful notion of educational quality; how key QA institutions function in practice compared to their formal mandates; and which structural and political-economy dynamics sustain the gap between policy ambition and classroom reality, and what kind of reform framework could narrow that gap. Conceptually, the paper defines quality as both “fitness for purpose” and transformative, and distinguishes prospective, improvement-oriented QA from retrospective, compliance-oriented quality control. Empirically, it relies on a desk-based synthesis of legislation, policy documents, official statistics, oversight reports, and peer-reviewed scholarship on Uganda and comparable Sub-Saharan African systems. The analysis shows that QA practice remains dominated by examination performance and checklist-based inspections, a narrow operationalization that sits uneasily with the system’s own equity and human-capital objectives. QA institutions are hampered by chronic underfunding, understaffing, mandate overload, fragmented accountability, and a deeply embedded compliance culture that prevents them from fulfilling their statutory roles. These weaknesses are reinforced by rapid system expansion, fiscal stress, decentralization without clear lines of accountability, donor-dependent reform cycles, and entrenched patronage, all of which undercut sustained quality improvement. In response, the paper proposes a sequenced eight-pillar reform framework, specified with indicative resource requirements and monitorable success indicators, that reorients QA from control to improvement, prioritizes sustainable financing and capacity, strengthens data and community accountability, and aligns teacher policy, curriculum, and assessment with a transformative conception of quality. A structured transferability assessment clarifies what the comparative cases of Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, and Nigeria can and cannot offer Uganda given its specific political-economy constraints.

Keywords: Quality assurance, Education reform, Institutional architecture, Political economy, Learning outcomes

INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance in education is the systematic process of maintaining and improving agreed standards across institutions, using mechanisms, processes, and procedures to ensure that required standards are not merely articulated but genuinely achieved (Harvey & Green, 1993). In Uganda, the quality assurance debate is longstanding and deeply contested. Since independence, successive governments have struggled to reconcile the imperative of expanding access with the equally pressing need for genuine improvements in educational

quality (Penny, Ward, Read, & Bines, 2008). As of 2026, this tension remains unresolved, with clear human costs: lost learning, diminished opportunity, and constrained national development.

This paper addresses three core questions: (i) how quality in education is conceptualised and operationalised within Uganda's institutional framework, and how does this operationalisation compare to what quality meaningfully requires? (ii) How do existing quality assurance institutions function in practice, and where do their operations fall short of their mandates? and (iii) which structural and political-economic factors sustain the gap between policy ambition and classroom reality, and what kind of reform framework could credibly narrow that gap?

The analysis draws on a desk review of Ugandan government policy documents and national development plans, reports by agencies including the World Bank and UNICEF, data from oversight bodies, and peer-reviewed literature on Uganda and comparable Sub-Saharan African systems. The paper does not generate new primary data; rather, it synthesises, critically interrogates, and reframes existing evidence through an integrated institutional and political-economy lens.

What justifies this approach? Existing scholarship on Uganda's education system is rich but fragmented. Kasozi (2003, 2016) has examined higher education governance and the growth of the university sector; Ssentamu (2018) has evaluated NCHE's monitoring and evaluation practices; Bakkabulindi (2024) has called for mandate rationalisation; Neema-Abooki (2022) has placed Uganda's experience within a broader regional quality assurance discourse; and Penny et al. (2008) have diagnosed structural drivers of the implementation gap. Each of these contributions is valuable, yet none integrates all three analytical dimensions, institutional mapping, structural failure, and political economy, into a unified framework and then derives a sequenced reform pathway from that integrated diagnosis. This paper does precisely that. Its contribution is not to discover new facts about Uganda's education system but to reframe and connect existing evidence in a way that reveals the system's dynamics more clearly and points more directly toward actionable reform.

Uganda has constructed extensive regulatory scaffolding for quality assurance. The 1992 Government White Paper on Education laid the philosophical foundation, while the Education Act (2008) and the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (2001) provided the core legal framework. The DES was established in 2001, followed by the NCHE, alongside the earlier and continuing roles of UNEB and NCDC. Yet learning outcomes remain far below acceptable thresholds (World Bank, 2021). National data document low literacy levels in primary grades (MoES, 2023), limited primary completion (Human Rights Watch, 2024), high teacher absenteeism with large associated fiscal losses (World Bank, 2021), and substantial resource leakage through corruption in the sector (Inspectorate of Government, 2021).

The central argument of this paper is that Uganda's quality assurance crisis is not rooted in institutional absence. The institutions exist; what is missing is sustained political commitment, adequate and well-targeted financing, robust implementation capacity, and a cultural shift from narrow compliance-checking to continuous improvement. The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 clarifies the conceptual foundations of quality and quality assurance, sets out the analytical framework, and explains the methodology; Section 3 maps the institutional landscape; Section 4 diagnoses structural and systemic failures; Section 5 analyses the political economy; Section 6 examines teachers, curriculum, and assessment; Section 7 draws comparative lessons; Section 8 proposes a reform framework; and Section 9 concludes.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS, ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK, AND METHOD

Defining Quality in Education

Quality in education is multidimensional and contested. Harvey and Green (1993) identified five distinct conceptions: quality as exceptional performance, as perfection or consistency, as fitness for purpose, as value for money, and as transformation. For this paper, quality is treated as both *fitness for purpose* and *transformative*: education should equip learners with skills relevant to Uganda's labour market and

development priorities, while also developing critical thinking, civic awareness, and personal agency for meaningful participation in a changing society.

By this dual standard, Uganda's system is failing in measurable ways. The country's dominant, exam-centred operationalisation of quality, anchored in PLE, UCE, and UACE results, is too narrow. It measures the outputs of a distorted system and labels them "quality", rewarding test performance rather than genuine competency. On the fitness-for-purpose dimension, graduate competencies are misaligned with labour market demand. On the transformative dimension, very low functional literacy in early primary grades signals a basic failure of human development that examination pass rates obscure rather than reveal. The analysis that follows adopts the fitness-for-purpose and transformative conception as its evaluative benchmark throughout.

Equity is integral to this definition, not an afterthought. A system that produces acceptable average outcomes while systematically failing girls, rural learners, low-income households, and refugee children is not meeting a transformative standard of quality by any honest measure. As the analysis of structural failures (Section 4) and political economy (Section 5) will show, QA failures in Uganda are most severe precisely where the transformative potential of education is most needed.

Quality Assurance versus Quality Control

A second distinction fundamental to this paper is between quality assurance (QA) and quality control (QC). Quality control is retrospective: it tests whether outputs meet standards after the fact. Quality assurance is prospective: it focuses on building the processes and systems that prevent failure and promote continuous improvement (Harvey & Green, 1993). Although Uganda's formal framework and the statutory mandate of the DES encompass QA, practice remains overwhelmingly control-oriented; inspections document non-compliance but rarely provide the sustained support and capacity-building needed for genuine improvement.

This distinction is not merely theoretical. It has direct operational implications for how inspectors are trained, how their performance is measured, what a school visit looks like, and how data generated through inspection is used. Inspection systems that visit, record, and depart without follow-up are performing quality control. Those who visit, diagnose, support, return, and measure change are performing quality assurance. This paper adopts the latter, continuous, developmental, and improvement-oriented as both the normative standard for assessing current practice and the guiding direction for the reform framework in Section 8.

Quality Assurance in the African Context

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, quality assurance has become more prominent, driven by rapid higher-education expansion, growth of private institutions, and SDG 4 commitments on inclusive, equitable quality education (UNESCO, 2009). Regional bodies including the African Union (through CESA 2016–2025) and the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) have promoted cross-border harmonisation of standards, and Uganda is a signatory to these frameworks. In practice, however, a wide gap persists between continental commitments and classroom realities. Neema-Abooki (2022) documents that quality assurance across eastern and southern Africa remains largely compliance-oriented; audits and inspections emphasise rule-checking rather than improvement support. Uganda reflects this regional pattern rather than defying it, and the reform framework proposed in Section 8 is designed explicitly to break from it.

Methodological Approach and Analytical Scope

This paper uses a desk-based analytical synthesis (Harvey & Green, 1993; Penny et al., 2008; Ssentamu, 2018; Bakkabulindi, 2024). Sources include Ugandan policy and legal documents, national and sector plans, statistical reports from education and statistics agencies, publications by international organisations, oversight-body reports, and peer-reviewed studies on Uganda and comparable Sub-Saharan African systems. Where multiple estimates exist for the same indicator, the most recent credible, nationally representative, or peer-reviewed figure is used and explicitly dated. Where a key claim rests on a single study, this is acknowledged, and the evidence is characterised as indicative rather than definitive. Where estimates diverge, for instance, on

teacher absenteeism rates or literacy levels, the range is noted, and the most methodologically transparent source is privileged.

Source Identification and Selection. Sources were identified through a structured, non-systematic desk-review protocol appropriate to an analytical synthesis rather than a registered systematic review. Four source categories were searched: (i) Ugandan legislation and government policy documents, located through the Ministry of Education and Sports, National Planning Authority, and Government of Uganda official repositories; (ii) national statistical and assessment reports, principally MoES/UNEB NAPE reports and Uganda Bureau of Statistics data; (iii) reports by international organisations and independent oversight bodies, including the World Bank, UNICEF, Human Rights Watch, and the Inspectorate of Government; and (iv) peer-reviewed academic literature on Uganda and comparable Sub-Saharan African education systems, identified through targeted Google Scholar searches and by tracing the reference lists of key anchor sources, notably Penny et al. (2008), Ssentamu (2018), and Bakkabulindi (2024). The review draws primarily on material published between 2008, the year of the Education Act, and 2026, with earlier foundational instruments (the 1992 White Paper, the 1995 Constitution) included where they establish the legal and philosophical basis for later analysis. Documents were included where they addressed Uganda's quality assurance institutions, implementation outcomes, financing, or a directly comparable regional QA reform; general education-sector material lacking a QA-relevant institutional, financing, or outcomes dimension was excluded. In total, the paper cites 41 sources spanning legislation, policy and planning documents, statistical and assessment reports, oversight-body reports, and peer-reviewed articles. This structured but non-systematic approach is a narrower methodological claim than a formal systematic review, and that distinction is treated as part of the paper's acknowledged scope rather than elided.

This approach has several acknowledged limitations. It cannot provide new field-level data on how inspection and quality assurance operate in specific districts or how learners and teachers experience these processes in practice. It relies partly on official statistics that may understate problems in resource-constrained settings. The scholarly literature specifically on Uganda's QA institutions remains thinner than the volume of policy activity would warrant, and some elements of the reform framework are therefore necessarily forward-looking rather than fully tested in the Ugandan context. These constraints define the boundaries of the paper's argument and point to a future empirical research agenda: district-level and school-level studies of inspection practice, evaluations of emerging initiatives such as the PEAS Inspect and Improve programme, and longitudinal assessments of how reforms in financing, teacher policy, and governance reshape the daily experience of teaching and learning. This is a deliberate scope decision rather than an oversight: the paper's contribution is analytical synthesis and reform design, not primary measurement, and the reform framework in Section 8 is presented accordingly, with resource requirements and success indicators (Table 3) framed as a monitoring starting point for future empirical validation rather than as findings from fieldwork that was not conducted.

THE INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN UGANDA

Uganda's quality assurance landscape is multi-layered, involving national bodies, decentralised district structures, professional regulatory councils, and school-level governance. Table 1 provides a structured overview of the main institutions, their mandates, and documented challenges before the sub-sections examine each in turn.

Table 1. Uganda's Quality Assurance Institutions: Mandates and Documented Challenges

Institution	Level	Core Mandate	Key Documented Challenges
Ministry of Education & Sports (MoES)	All levels	Policy formulation, resource allocation, sector coordination	Fragmented directorates; political interference in staffing and budgetary decisions
Directorate of	Pre-primary to	Setting standards; school	Chronic underfunding; insufficient

Education Standards (DES)	secondary	inspection; self-evaluation frameworks	inspectors for 20,000+ schools across 146 districts; episodic rather than systematic visits
National Council for Higher Education (NCHE)	Higher education	Accreditation, licensing, programme review, qualifications equating, advisory to the government	Bloated mandate; understaffing; institutional defiance; legal confrontations (Bakkabulindi, 2024); limited use of student-learning outcome metrics
Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB)	Primary to A-Level	National examinations (PLE, UCE, UACE) and assessment standards	Excessive reliance on high-stakes exams distorts teaching toward test preparation; limited diagnostic assessment integration
National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC)	Primary and secondary	Curriculum development, reform, and competency-based education rollout	Curriculum-labour market mismatch; reform pace outstrips teacher preparation
BTJET Authority	Technical & vocational	Quality oversight of TVET institutions and apprenticeship programmes	Transitioning from examination-based to performance-based assessment
District Inspectors of Schools (DIS)	District level	Local school inspections, teacher supervision	Geographic overstretch; political capture; urban-rural staffing mismatches; single inspector may oversee hundreds of schools
School Management Committees (SMCs)	School level	Community oversight, financial accountability	Insufficient authority; susceptible to political influence; capacity gaps; limited real power over staffing or resources

Sources: Compiled from MoES (2012a, 2018), NCHE (2014, 2023), Kasozi (2016), Bakkabulindi (2024), Ssentamu (2018), Government of Uganda legislative instruments.

Ministry of Education and Sports and its Directorates

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) is constitutionally mandated to guide, regulate, and promote quality education for all Ugandans. It operates principally through three directorates: the Directorate of Education Standards (DES), the Directorate of Basic and Secondary Education (DBSE), and the Directorate of Higher, Technical, and Vocational Education and Training (DHTVET). As the apex body for policy, resource allocation, and coordination, the MoES ultimately bears primary responsibility when educational quality fails (Government of Uganda, 2008). In practice, fragmented directorates, political interference in staffing decisions, and inadequate intra-ministerial communication have created coordination failures that weaken the ministry's capacity to translate national policy into consistent classroom-level outcomes.

Directorate of Education Standards (DES)

Created in 2001, the DES operates across all sub-sectors below higher education: pre-primary and early childhood development, primary and secondary schools, technical and vocational institutions, and primary and secondary teacher training colleges (MoES, 2012a). Its core mandate is to inspect, monitor, and evaluate

educational institutions to ensure compliance with set education standards and quality. The DES does not cover universities and other higher learning institutions, which fall under the NCHE.

In practice, DES field operations reveal the gap between mandate and capacity more starkly than any other institution. A concrete illustration from DES inspection manuals and evaluation reports makes this visible: an inspector conducting a school visit under the current framework is required to assess physical infrastructure, check documentation of teacher attendance, and record pupil enrolment figures, a compliance checklist that can be completed in a half-day visit and generates a record of "inspection" without any engagement with the quality of a single lesson. The MoES's own *How We Inspect* guide (2012a) and *How Can We Improve Our School* guide (2012b) articulate a more developmental vision, but the resource constraints that make sustained follow-up impossible mean that this vision remains largely aspirational. The gap between the guides' language and field reality is itself a QA failure, it signals an institution that knows what it should be doing but cannot operationally deliver it.

National Council for Higher Education (NCHE)

The NCHE, established under the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act of 2001, is Uganda's statutory body responsible for regulating, accrediting, and assuring the quality of universities and other tertiary institutions. Its formal mandate encompasses setting and enforcing minimum standards for governance, academic staff, infrastructure, and curricula through periodic inspections, institutional audits, and programme reviews (NCHE, 2014). Beyond regulation, the Council coordinates the orderly growth of the higher education sector, promotes curriculum relevance by aligning programmes with labour-market demands and national development priorities, recognises and equates qualifications to support student mobility and regional integration, and advises government on higher education policy and legislative reform.

Over more than two decades, the NCHE has played a central role in transforming Uganda's higher education from a small elite system into a more massified and regulated sector. However, this expansion has brought its own quality paradoxes. The NCHE's quality indicators have historically focused on quantitative, infrastructure-heavy, yes-or-no measures, whether an institution has adequate physical space, whether academic staff holds the required credentials, whether governance structures are formally in place, with limited weight given to teaching quality, research productivity, graduate employment outcomes, or student learning and satisfaction (Ssentamu, 2018). In a higher education system that grew from a handful of institutions in 2001 to over 200 universities and tertiary institutions by the early 2020s, this indicator set has produced a landscape where institutions can pass audits while delivering poor education.

Bakkabulindi (2024) provides the most current and comprehensive assessment of the NCHE's structural challenges: a mandate that has expanded far beyond what staffing and financial resources can support; institutional defiance from private universities that contest regulatory decisions through the courts rather than complying; and legal confrontations that have tied up regulatory authority in litigation, eroding enforcement legitimacy. The NCHE's publication of *The Uganda Higher Education Review* and its contributions to the regional quality assurance discourse through IUCEA represent genuine institutional strengths, but they cannot substitute for the enforcement capacity the Council lacks. The path forward, rationalising the NCHE's mandate, strengthening its staffing, and shifting its quality indicators toward holistic outcomes, is taken up in Pillar 8 of the reform framework.

UNEB, NCDC, and Related Bodies

The Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) administers high-stakes national examinations (PLE, UCE, UACE) and thus powerfully shapes how quality is understood and pursued across the system, reinforcing an examination-centred view of performance that, as Section 2.1 argued, is too narrow to capture fitness for purpose or transformative outcomes. The National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) designs and revises curricula, including competency-based reforms, but implementation has consistently outpaced teacher preparation and labour-market alignment.

Other actors, the BTVET Authority, professional regulatory councils, District Inspectors of Schools, and School Management Committees, occupy specific quality assurance niches. Overall, however, overlapping mandates, fragmented resources, and blurred accountability create an institutional landscape that is rich in organisations but systemically incoherent. No single body bears unambiguous responsibility for the quality of learning in a Ugandan classroom, which is precisely why accountability can diffuse across institutional boundaries without any one institution being meaningfully held to account. This incoherence is the enabling condition for the implementation failures examined in Section 4.

Structural and Systemic Failures in Quality Assurance

The Implementation Gap

Uganda's quality assurance crisis lies not in the absence of policy, but in the chronic failure to implement it. The country maintains a comprehensive regulatory framework, the 1995 Constitution, the 1992 Education White Paper, the Education Act of 2008, and the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act of 2001, yet educational outcomes consistently fall short of stated targets. By a fitness-for-purpose standard, a system in which barely half of children reach basic literacy proficiency by Primary 3, 53.9 per cent in the 2023 NAPE assessment, only marginally improved from 49.9 per cent in 2018, is failing its core promise (MoES, 2023). By a transformative standard, the completion crisis detailed in Section 4.7 shows the system is failing to build the human capital its development requires.

Penny et al. (2008) identified four structural drivers of this implementation gap: weak institutional capacity, chronic underfunding, poor national-to-district communication, and the uncritical adoption of international reform models without local adaptation. Their finding that policy ambition has repeatedly outpaced institutional capacity remains accurate nearly two decades later. The gap is, however, neither uniform nor inevitable. Schools operating within structured support frameworks, such as the Integrated Instructional System (IIS) pilot, record measurable progress where support structures are in place, while others cite infrastructure and connectivity constraints as binding barriers. The implementation gap in Uganda therefore tracks precisely the uneven distribution of resources, capacity, and political attention across the system: it is structural, not random.

Underfunding of Quality Assurance Institutions

Financial constraint is among the most crippling structural barriers to effective quality assurance. Although Uganda's education budget has increased in nominal terms, it has not kept pace with a rapidly growing school-age population (UNICEF, 2024). The World Bank (2023) projects that Uganda will need an additional US\$89 million per year at the primary level and US\$50 million at the secondary level merely to maintain current standards, and US\$1.1 billion by 2040 to genuinely improve quality. The DES, tasked with inspecting over 20,000 schools across 146 districts, operates with a fraction of the required funding; field inspectors frequently lack transport, per diem allocations, and basic reporting tools (MoES, 2012a). The NCHE faces similar chronic underfunding that compromises the frequency and rigour of institutional audits (Bakkabulindi, 2024).

Underfunding also interacts with decentralisation and political capture to make district-level quality assurance particularly fragile. Where an inspector cannot physically reach a school, because the fuel budget is exhausted or the motorcycle is unserviceable, no QA framework, however elegantly designed, can function. The connection between funding and quality is not abstract; it is operationally determinative.

Understaffing and Capacity Deficits

The human resource crisis mirrors the financial one. As Section 3.3 detailed, the NCHE is asked to regulate a sector of over 200 institutions with a staff complement that would strain to regulate a fraction of that number effectively. At the district level, a single District Inspector of Schools may nominally supervise hundreds of schools across vast geographical areas, making inspections infrequent, perfunctory, and episodic rather than systematic and developmental (MoES, 2012a).

This has a critical implication for reform: an understaffed institution will rationally default to quality control rather than QA, because that is what limited capacity permits. The compliance culture documented in Section 4.6 is therefore partly a rational adaptation to scarcity, not simply a cultural failing, which is why capacity and culture must be addressed together.

Teacher Absenteeism and the Frontline Quality Crisis

Teacher absenteeism is the point at which QA failures become most directly visible and most costly for learners. The World Bank's 22nd Uganda Economic Update (2021) found that 23.3 per cent of public school teachers were absent during the survey period and 52.3 per cent were not teaching during scheduled instructional time, amounting to approximately UGX 1.5 trillion in lost instructional value annually. A Senior Inspector of Schools at PEAS Uganda, writing in January 2026, noted that absenteeism is a symptom of weak supervision, inadequate support, and poor working conditions, not merely a disciplinary problem (Sserunjogi, 2026). This diagnosis is important: inspection systems that record absence without addressing its structural causes, delayed salary payment, rural isolation, overcrowded classrooms, limited housing, are managing the symptom rather than treating the condition.

By both fitness-for-purpose and transformative quality standards, teacher absenteeism is a QA failure of the first order. A child who attends school and finds no teacher has been denied the education that quality requires. That current inspection mechanisms have been unable to prevent this failure, despite years of documentation, is evidence that the inspection model itself requires fundamental reform, not incremental adjustment.

Corruption and Ghost Accounts

Corruption corrodes quality assurance from within by depleting institutional resources and producing phantom accountability structures that compliance-oriented inspection is least equipped to detect. The Inspectorate of Government (2021) estimated that eliminating corruption in Uganda's education sector could yield annual savings of nearly UGX 1.8 trillion, equivalent to 51 per cent of government education spending in 2019. Ghost teachers are particularly damaging: payroll funds channelled to non-existent or permanently absent teachers deplete resources for real learners while inflating apparent teacher headcounts, allowing institutions to appear compliant on paper while classrooms remain unstaffed.

Mavanhuma (2024) documents that weak monitoring and auditing systems enable considerable financial leakage at multiple levels of the system, leakage that formal QA mechanisms have been structurally unable to prevent. This is not coincidental. Compliance-oriented inspection was designed to verify that standards are met, not to perform forensic financial scrutiny. Addressing corruption in education therefore requires a dedicated anti-corruption mechanism within the QA framework, not merely a stricter application of existing compliance tools.

The Compliance-Over-Improvement Culture

Perhaps the deepest structural problem in Uganda's QA system is cultural. Quality assurance has been practised primarily as compliance-checking, focusing on minimum physical standards such as land ownership, buildings, and teacher-pupil ratios on paper, rather than on pedagogical quality or student learning outcomes (MoES, 2012a). This is the same pattern Ssentamu (2018) documented in the NCHE's own indicators, discussed in Section 3.3, and Bakkabulindi (2024) confirms it has persisted across two decades of regulatory activity.

The institutional consequence is a perverse equilibrium: organisations invest in visible markers of quality, buildings, administrative paperwork, formal staff credentials, rather than in academic excellence. They pass inspections while delivering poor education, because the inspection is measuring the wrong things. As Section 2.2 argued, this represents quality control masquerading as quality assurance. To disrupt this equilibrium, the reform framework in Section 8 proposes a fundamental redesign of what inspectors look for, how they engage with schools, and how their own performance is evaluated.

Rural-Urban and Gender Disparities

Quality assurance failures do not fall uniformly; they land hardest on rural learners, girls, low-income households, and refugee children. Human Rights Watch (2024) documents that while Universal Primary Education, introduced in 1997, dramatically expanded access, raising primary enrolment to approximately 10.8 million by 2019, only 40 per cent of children complete primary school and just 16 per cent complete upper secondary, with primary dropout at approximately 45 per cent and secondary at 30 per cent. These are not peripheral statistics; they are the sharpest expression of QA failure. Equity is not a separate policy objective that happens to intersect with quality assurance, it is constitutive of the transformative quality standard adopted in Section 2.1. A system that reliably loses its most vulnerable learners has failed its most important quality test.

The Political Economy of Educational Quality

Decentralisation and Accountability Deficits

Uganda's decentralisation agenda, formalised through the Local Governments Act of 1997, transferred significant education management responsibilities to district governments. In theory, decentralisation should bring accountability closer to communities and improve local responsiveness. In practice, it has created ambiguity in accountability chains, national QA bodies and district education offices are frequently uncertain about their respective mandates, and in many districts has enabled local political capture of educational resources.

The political economy of teacher deployment illustrates the problem with particular clarity. Deployment decisions are formally subject to national criteria but in practice are vulnerable to political interference, with teachers exploiting urban preferences and political connections to avoid rural postings (Mavanhuma, 2024). The result is chronic teacher shortages in rural schools, precisely where learners' needs are greatest and inspection reach is thinnest. Reforming quality assurance without addressing this political economy dimension, specifically, the incentive structures that make patronage rational for those who control deployments, will produce only partial and temporary improvements.

Understanding who wins and who loses from serious QA reform is essential for assessing its feasibility. Politicians who benefit from discretionary control over teacher placements face real costs from transparent, merit-based deployment systems. District officials whose authority depends on controlling local resource flows face real costs from centrally monitored payroll systems. Private higher education providers who have built business models on passing compliance inspections face real costs from holistic quality indicators that weight graduate outcomes. Teacher unions face complex trade-offs: transparency in performance monitoring can threaten members' job security, but improved working conditions and professional recognition are genuine gains. Donor organisations that have invested in parallel project structures face reputational costs from channelling support through government systems. Designing reforms that navigate these veto points, building coalitions among those who stand to gain, mitigating losses for those who stand to lose, is as important as technical design. The reform framework in Section 8 is structured with this political economy reality explicitly in view.

The Expansion-Quality Trade-off

Uganda's rapid expansion since the introduction of UPE in 1997 created structural pressure on quality that QA institutions inherited rather than caused. Schools were built without adequate teachers, teachers were deployed without adequate training, and training institutions were established without adequate oversight. By the early 2020s, the primary system that QA bodies were asked to regulate had been structurally over-extended for a quarter of a century. The 2023 wave of fee increases of over 10 per cent reflects the system's inability to sustainably finance quality provision for a rapidly growing school-age population. QA bodies inherited a system already structurally stretched before their mandates could meaningfully take effect. An important analytical point follows: much of what looks like QA institutional failure is in fact the accumulation of

decisions made upstream of QA, in financing, staffing, and infrastructure policy, that QA mechanisms alone cannot reverse.

Donor Dependency and Reform Volatility

Uganda's education reforms have been heavily donor-dependent, introducing fragmentation and volatility into quality assurance efforts. The QIPS-BRMS programme, largely UNICEF-funded across 73 districts, and the World Bank-supported IIS pilot represent genuine investments in inspection and instructional capacity. Yet project-based initiatives have repeatedly been unable to achieve the systemic, government-owned transformation that lasting quality improvement requires. When donor cycles end, reforms built on parallel project structures tend to contract or disappear entirely.

International frameworks, SDG 4, CESA 2016–2025, set ambitious targets that may not translate smoothly into Uganda's particular socioeconomic and institutional context. The result is a quality assurance discourse populated with internationally fashionable terminology, competency-based education, learning outcomes frameworks, education for sustainable development, that has not been matched by the institutional transformation needed to realise these concepts in Ugandan classrooms. This donor dependency is itself a political economy problem. It allows national actors to satisfy international obligations symbolically, through policy documents and ministerial statements, while avoiding the harder political work of domestic resource mobilisation, payroll reform, and accountability enforcement.

Teachers, Curriculum, and Assessment in The Quality Debate

Teacher Quality as the Linchpin

International evidence is unambiguous: teacher quality is the single most important school-level factor determining student learning outcomes (Hanushek, 2011; Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2014). Uganda's NDP III (Government of Uganda, 2020) explicitly identifies teaching quality as a critical determinant of learning outcomes, and the National Teacher Policy (2018), the Continuous Professional Development Framework (2017), and the Quality Assurance Framework for Initial Teacher Education (2019) represent important policy advances. However, policy has consistently outpaced implementation.

Teacher training faces compounding challenges: Primary Teacher Colleges operate under severe resource constraints with persistent curriculum-practice gaps; continuous professional development is episodic and insufficiently embedded in school culture; and teacher motivation is undermined by low and delayed remuneration, inadequate housing in rural postings, classroom sizes regularly exceeding 70 learners, and limited career progression pathways. Applying the analytical framework from Section 2: by the fitness-for-purpose standard, a teacher who is present but demoralised, under-trained, and managing 70 learners is not delivering the curriculum that quality requires. By the transformative standard, a teacher who is absent cannot transform anything.

These are not peripheral welfare issues. They are the structural conditions that determine whether quality assurance can function at all. Any reform framework that inspects teachers without addressing the conditions that produce poor teaching is, by the definition established in Section 2.2, performing quality control rather than quality assurance.

Curriculum Quality and Relevance

Curriculum quality is a foundational dimension of educational quality that inspection systems rarely adequately assess, a blind spot that follows directly from the compliance orientation critiqued in Section 4.6. The NCHE's *Education Review* (2021) identified a missing link between universities, industries, communities, and government ministries in Uganda, noting that research agendas are insufficiently shared and that graduates' competencies consistently fail to align with development priorities. By the fitness-for-purpose standard, this

represents a comprehensive QA failure: the institution delivering the education and the economy meant to absorb its graduates are operating in separate systems with no institutional feedback loop between them.

This curriculum-labour market misalignment is one that neither DES inspections nor NCHE audits consistently detect or sanction, which is itself evidence of the limits of compliance-oriented QA. It can verify that a curriculum exists and is formally approved, but not that the curriculum produces the outcomes quality requires. The NCDC's competency-based reforms represent a genuine effort to bridge this gap, but as noted in Section 3.4, reform pace has consistently outstripped teacher preparation, reducing the reforms' practical impact.

Assessment Systems and the Examination Culture

Uganda's assessment system, centred on UNEB's high-stakes national examinations, has profoundly shaped the culture of schooling in ways that are self-defeating for genuine quality assurance. Schools are evaluated, formally and informally, on examination pass rates rather than on depth of learning or breadth of competency. Teaching becomes teaching to the test. Quality assurance systems that use examination performance as their primary quality signal are measuring the output of distorted incentives rather than genuine learning, and by doing so, they reinforce the very distortions they should be correcting.

The National Assessment of Progress in Education (NAPE) system, which assesses literacy and numeracy at Primary 3 and Primary 6, represents a meaningful step toward formative, system-level assessment. NAPE data from 2018 and 2023 have provided important evidence of the depth of the learning crisis. However, NAPE findings have not been systematically integrated into school improvement planning or inspector training. This integration gap, between what NAPE knows and what inspectors and school leaders do with that knowledge, is itself a QA failure. Uganda generates some of the right data, but has not built the institutional routines that translate data into improved practice.

Comparative Perspectives: Lessons From The Region and Beyond

Four comparators are examined in this section. Kenya and Rwanda are selected for their recent, substantive QA reforms and their geographical and developmental proximity to Uganda. South Africa and Nigeria illustrate the risks of institutional proliferation without coherence, a cautionary pattern directly relevant to Uganda's trajectory. In each case, the organising question is not simply what the country did, but what Uganda can realistically borrow given its specific institutional, political-economy, and resource context, and what it cannot. The discussion in each sub-section is also explicitly linked to the QA versus QC distinction established in Section 2.2, making the comparative analysis an extension of the paper's conceptual framework rather than a standalone review.

Kenya: From Inspection to Instructional Leadership

Kenya's transition to a Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) has been accompanied by a deliberate reorientation of Quality Assurance and Standards Officers (QASOs) from traditional inspectors into instructional leaders who mentor teachers, collect real-time data, and provide professional support. Kenya's Ministry of Education has deliberately repositioned QASOs from compliance inspectors toward instructional coaches who mentor teachers and collect real-time data on CBC delivery — a shift that is explicitly grounded in the reorientation from supervision to collaboration documented in Kenya's CBC implementation literature (Ministry of Education Kenya, 2021). This transformation is directly relevant to this paper's analytical framework: Kenya has moved from QC toward QA in precisely the sense Section 2.2 defines, from retrospective compliance-checking toward prospective, developmental institutional support.

For Uganda, the central transferable lesson is operational: inspection personnel can and should be retrained as development professionals, and QA reform can proceed even within a large, resource-constrained system if the reorientation is deliberate and sustained. The PEAS Uganda Inspect and Improve (I&I) programme demonstrates that a domestic equivalent already exists and produces measurable results. What Uganda cannot simply copy is the level of central investment Kenya has directed toward the CBC transition, but the

instructional leadership model is both scalable and affordable as a directional reform and requires institutional will more than large additional resources.

Rwanda: State Capacity and Political Commitment

Rwanda rebuilt its education system with unusual state capacity and political commitment following 1994. Centralised accountability systems, regular school assessment cycles, strong community engagement, and tight alignment between curriculum, training, and inspection have produced measurable improvement in learning outcomes. Booth and Golooba-Mutebi (2012) characterise Rwanda as a developmental state in which the ruling elite maintains a long-term commitment to public goods provision, a combination of centralised political will and community-level implementation that is notably absent in Uganda's more fragmented political economy.

Uganda's democratic pluralism makes Rwanda's highly centralised model a poor direct template. But the underlying lesson translates: political commitment to QA, not merely a policy statement, but resource allocation, enforcement follow-through, and institutional coherence, is a prerequisite for reform, not an optional feature. In Uganda, political commitment has been repeatedly stated and insufficiently operationalised. This is, as the political economy analysis in Section 5 argued, partly a structural problem: when the institutions that are supposed to enforce quality do not have the resources, staff, or statutory authority to do so, political commitment expressed in documents does not reach classrooms. The reform framework in Section 8 is designed, in part, to create the structural incentives, financing mechanisms, accountability reporting, community pressure that can sustain commitment beyond individual ministerial terms.

South Africa and Nigeria: The Limits of Institutional Proliferation

South Africa's experience with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the proliferation of quality assurance bodies following the post-apartheid transition demonstrates that agencies require not only strong legal mandates but robust enforcement capacity and genuine stakeholder buy-in to be effective. Without enforcement, institutional proliferation produces an accountability landscape in which responsibility diffuses, and no single body can be held accountable for system outcomes, a pattern that maps directly onto Uganda's current institutional architecture.

Nigeria's TVET quality assurance system has been slowly shifting from examination-oriented toward performance-based assessment, but the transition has been slow, contested, and incomplete, partly because institutional proliferation created entrenched interests resistant to change. The parallel with Uganda is direct. The path forward in both countries is institutional rationalisation and coordination, not further proliferation. The reform framework in Section 8 is designed with this lesson explicitly in mind.

Transferability Synthesis: What Uganda Can and Cannot Borrow

The preceding cases point toward a single conclusion if left as parallel narratives: each comparator offers one transferable mechanism, and in every case that mechanism is bounded by a specific precondition that does not automatically hold in Uganda. Making this explicit, rather than leaving the reader to infer it, is necessary for the comparison to do genuine analytical work rather than merely illustrate. Table 2a sets out this transferability logic directly: for each comparator, what element is transferable, what binding constraint in Uganda limits direct transfer, and what adaptation the reform framework in Section 8 makes as a result.

Table 2a. Transferability of Comparative Lessons to Uganda

Comparator	Transferable Element	Binding Constraint in Uganda	Adaptation in the Reform Framework
Kenya	Retraining inspectors as instructional coaches;	Kenya's transition was backed by central CBC investment that	Pillar 1 scales the lower-cost, domestically piloted PEAS

	redefining inspector performance metrics	Uganda's fiscal position cannot replicate at the same scale	I&I model rather than a Kenya-scale CBC investment
Rwanda	Sustained political commitment translated into resourcing, enforcement follow-through, and institutional coherence	Rwanda's centralised, single-party political economy is not replicable in Uganda's more pluralistic and contested political system	Pillars 5 and 7 substitute community and audit-based accountability mechanisms for the centralised enforcement Uganda's political economy cannot supply
South Africa	Cautionary lesson: legal mandate alone does not produce accountability without enforcement capacity	Uganda already shows the same proliferation pattern (MoES, DES, NCHE, UNEB, NCDC, BTJET), so the constraint is structural similarity rather than difference	Pillars 3 and 8 prioritise rationalising existing mandates over creating new bodies, the opposite of the SAQA-era pattern
Nigeria	Gradual shift from examination-based to performance-based TVET assessment	Nigeria's own transition remains slow and contested, so this is a lesson in the difficulty of the shift rather than a proven, fast solution	Pillar 3 sets a multi-year, phased timeline for BTJET and NCHE reform rather than assuming a rapid transition is achievable

Note: This synthesis reflects the author's analytical judgement about transferability based on the sources discussed in Sections 7.1–7.3; it is not itself based on new fieldwork or a formal comparative case-study methodology, a limitation consistent with the desk-based scope stated in Section 2.4.

Toward Meaningful Reform: An Eight-Pillar Quality Assurance Framework

This section proposes a structured reform framework derived directly from the diagnostic analysis above and anchored in the conceptual distinction established in Section 2: quality as fitness for purpose and transformative; QA as prospective, improvement-oriented, and developmental. Each pillar addresses a specific identified failure. Each is supported by a brief evidence anchor indicating either that a comparable intervention has produced results in a relevant context or that the problem it addresses is sufficiently well documented to warrant the recommendation even in the absence of a perfect comparator.

The framework is deliberately sequenced. Pillars 1, 3, 5, and 7 are achievable within a one-to-three-year window with existing institutional capacity and moderate additional resources. Pillars 2, 4, 6, and 8 require sustained investment over a three-to-five-year horizon and depend on financing commitments and, in some cases, legislative reform. Durable change requires early wins to build political will and institutional momentum; the sequencing reflects that logic.

It must be stated plainly that this framework presupposes a level of political commitment that has historically been absent in Uganda's QA practice. Structural incentives alone cannot substitute for political will; they can, however, make it harder to walk away from reform mid-cycle by creating accountability mechanisms, public reporting requirements, and community pressures that outlast individual political appointments. Pillars 1, 3, and 5 in particular constitute a "minimum critical package": interventions that could be pursued even under tight fiscal constraints and without major legislative change, and that would begin to shift the culture and capacity of the system toward genuine quality assurance.

Theory of Change and Key Assumptions. The theory of change underpinning the framework is that Uganda's QA failure is simultaneously a problem of incentives, capacity, and culture, and that each of these must be addressed for reform to take hold. Incentives are addressed through anti-corruption enforcement (Pillar 7), community accountability (Pillar 5), and transparent public reporting (Pillar 8). Capacity is addressed

through financing (Pillar 2), staffing rationalisation (Pillar 3), and teacher welfare (Pillar 6). Culture is addressed through the paradigm shift in inspection (Pillar 1), technology and data use (Pillar 4), and holistic higher education oversight (Pillar 8). The pillars are interdependent: financing (Pillar 2) enables capacity (Pillar 3); capacity enables the paradigm shift (Pillar 1); the paradigm shift determines whether community engagement (Pillar 5) and technology (Pillar 4) produce improvement or merely compliance in a new format. The key risks to the theory of change are that political commitment proves insufficient, that fiscal space does not materialise, or that donor support continues to flow through parallel rather than government-owned structures. Mitigation strategies are built into the framework where possible and are identified explicitly in Pillar 2.

Table 2. Eight-Pillar Quality Assurance Reform Framework for Uganda

S/n	Pillar	Core Action	Timeline	Key Mechanism
1	Paradigm Shift	Redesign inspection as developmental support, not a punitive audit	1–2 years	Scale PEAS I&I nationally; retrain all inspectors as instructional coaches
2	Sustainable Financing	Phased increase toward AU 20% benchmark; ring-fence QA budget lines	3–5 years	Annual phased increases; dedicated QA sub-allocations protected from reallocation
3	Institutional Capacity	Rationalise NCHE mandate; expand DES inspector cadre benchmarked to school numbers	2–3 years	Competitive specialist recruitment; early childhood, TVET, SEN inspection tracks
4	Technology & Data	Embed TELA and IIS with infrastructure investment; build integrated EMIS	2–4 years	Education technology fund; telecom partnerships; data-to-action protocols
5	Community Engagement	Empower SMCs with real authority; introduce School Report Cards and public data portals	1–3 years	SMC capacity grants; community feedback mechanisms; civil society partnerships
6	Teacher Welfare	Rural incentive supplements, timely pay, manageable class sizes, embedded CPD	2–5 years	Differentiated salary supplements; teacher housing fund; CPD credit system
7	Anti-Corruption	Biometric payroll verification; ghost teacher audits; community financial reporting	1–2 years	Link to annual IGG education audit; payroll-to-attendance cross-check
8	Higher Ed Oversight	Holistic NCHE indicators; enforceable sanctions; transparent public audit reports	2–4 years	Legislative amendments to strengthen NCHE sanction powers; public registry of audits

Note: Timelines indicate realistic horizons under sustained political commitment. Pillars 1, 3, and 5 constitute a minimum critical package achievable under current fiscal constraints.

Table 2 establishes what each pillar does and when. Table 3 completes the operational picture by specifying, for each pillar, the order of magnitude of resources it requires and the indicators against which implementation progress could be monitored. These resource categories are the author's own analytical estimates, derived from

the diagnostic evidence presented in Sections 3–6 and the costings cited in Pillar 2, rather than a costed government budget line; they are offered as a starting point for the detailed costing exercise that any implementing ministry would need to conduct.

Table 3. Indicative Resource Requirements and Success Indicators by Pillar

S/n	Pillar	Indicative Resource Requirement	Illustrative Success Indicators
1	Paradigm Shift	Low-to-moderate: a national inspector retraining curriculum and cascade training programme, built on the existing PEAS I&I model, using current DES staff rather than new hires	Share of school inspections followed by a documented support visit within 90 days; revised inspector appraisal criteria adopted; number of inspectors completing the new training curriculum
2	Sustainable Financing	High: annual budget increases toward the AU 20% benchmark, on the order of the US\$89–139 million per year the World Bank (2023) estimates for primary and secondary combined, phased over the pillar's 3–5 year horizon	Education's share of the national budget relative to the 20% benchmark; share of QA-designated budget lines protected from in-year reallocation; ratio of donor-funded to government-funded QA activity
3	Institutional Capacity	Moderate-to-high: recurrent salary cost of an expanded DES inspector cadre and specialist NCHE staff, plus one-off recruitment and legal/administrative costs of mandate rationalisation	DES inspector-to-school ratio against a published benchmark; NCHE staff-to-institution ratio; number of specialist (early childhood, TVET, SEN) inspection tracks operational
4	Technology & Data	High and capital-intensive: an education technology fund covering connectivity, device maintenance, and EMIS integration infrastructure, plus recurrent costs for data analysis staff	Share of schools with functioning connectivity and devices for TELA/IIS; share of districts with an operational EMIS feed; documented instances of inspection data triggering a specific corrective action
5	Community Engagement	Low-to-moderate: SMC capacity-building grants and civil-society partnership costs, small relative to Pillars 2 and 4 but requiring sustained, not one-off, funding	Number of districts publishing a School Report Card annually; share of SMCs completing capacity training; documented instances of community feedback linked to a school-level change
6	Teacher Welfare	Very high and recurrent: rural salary supplements, a teacher housing fund, and CPD credit infrastructure across a national teaching workforce; the largest and most politically demanding pillar in recurrent-cost terms	Survey-based teacher attendance and on-time-teaching rates against the World Bank (2021) baseline; salary payment timeliness; number of rural postings filled without disciplinary or political intervention
7	Anti-Corruption	Moderate up-front, self-financing over time: piloted biometric verification and audit-linkage systems are a modest initial outlay against the roughly UGX 1.8 trillion in annual leakage the Inspectorate of Government (2021) estimates could be recovered	Number of ghost-teacher cases identified and removed from payroll; UGX value of recovered payroll funds; share of districts submitting community financial reports

8	Higher Ed Oversight	Moderate: legislative drafting and legal process costs for sanction-power amendments, plus recurrent staffing costs already captured in Pillar 3	Passage of legislative amendment on NCHE sanction powers; number of institutional audits published under the revised holistic indicators; number of enforcement actions upheld on appeal
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Note: Resource categories are relative and qualitative (low to very high), not costed budget figures, except where a specific cited estimate (World Bank, 2023; Inspectorate of Government, 2021) is directly applicable. Indicators are proposed as a starting monitoring framework and would need to be formally adopted and baselined by MoES, DES, and NCHE before use in official reporting.

Pillar 1 — Paradigm Shift: From Compliance to Improvement

The foundational reform Uganda requires is a conceptual and operational shift from compliance-checking toward continuous, developmental quality improvement, from QC, in the terms of Section 2.2, toward genuine QA. This means redesigning inspection as a supportive process that helps schools identify specific quality challenges and build capacity to address them, rather than as a punitive audit that records failures without enabling corrections.

The evidence anchor for this pillar is primarily domestic. The PEAS Uganda Inspect and Improve (I&I) programme, piloted since 2019 in partnership with the DES, has demonstrated measurably improved attendance, pedagogy, and school leadership in participating schools through combined inspection and structured improvement support. Kenya's deliberate reorientation of QASOs toward instructional leadership under CBC provides a regional parallel at scale (Ministry of Education Kenya, 2021). The key institutional signal of this shift is a change in how inspector performance is evaluated: away from the number of schools visited and toward the improvement trajectory of schools supported. Inspector training must be professionalised, standardised, and regularly updated to incorporate current evidence on effective pedagogy, inclusive education, and curriculum implementation.

Pillar 2 — Sustainable Financing

No quality assurance reform can succeed without commensurate financing, and no financing argument carries more weight than the evidence that corruption currently drains UGX 1.8 trillion from the education sector annually, roughly equivalent to the additional investment the World Bank (2023) estimates is needed at primary and secondary levels combined. Uganda should commit to a phased increase in the education budget toward the African Union benchmark of 20 per cent of the national budget, as recommended by UNICEF (2024). Within the education budget, QA institutions specifically require dedicated and protected budget lines for school inspection operations, inspector training, technology infrastructure, and NCHE auditing, lines explicitly protected from reallocation during budget compression years.

Donor alignment is a critical dimension of this pillar. International support should be channelled through government systems and aligned with nationally owned strategies rather than parallel project structures that disappear when donor cycles close. This requires donors to accept slower disbursement and more complex accountability arrangements in exchange for reforms that are genuinely institutionally embedded. Uganda's government, in turn, must demonstrate the domestic resource mobilisation commitment that makes donor alignment credible and sustainable.

Pillar 3 — Institutional Capacity Rationalisation

The mandate and staffing crisis in Uganda's QA institutions requires urgent, transparent action. As Bakkabulindi (2024) recommends, the NCHE's mandate should be rationalised to focus on its core accreditation and quality oversight functions, with advisory and research functions distributed to appropriate bodies. Staffing levels should be benchmarked against the number of institutions being regulated, a transparent metric that makes the gap between current staffing and mandate-required staffing a matter of public record.

The DES requires a significant increase in trained inspectors, with emphasis on rural and underserved districts where the quality deficit is deepest and inspection reach is thinnest. Specialist inspection tracks for early childhood, TVET, and special educational needs would improve the rigour and relevance of school visits in areas currently assessed by generalist inspectors without subject-specific competence.

Pillar 4 — Technology and Data Systems

The TELA and IIS tools represent genuine advances in Uganda's inspection and instructional systems, but their effectiveness is contingent on infrastructure that does not yet exist uniformly across the country. An education technology fund should be established to address electricity, connectivity, and device maintenance systematically rather than school by school. Ministry discussions with telecom companies must be accelerated and tied to specific coverage targets and timelines.

Critically, data generated through digital inspection systems must be analysed and used to drive improvement, not merely collected and archived. Evidence from comparable EMIS implementations in Rwanda and Kenya suggests that data use is the harder and more important challenge: the technology is a means, not an end, and systems that collect without acting reproduce the compliance orientation in digital form. A national EMIS integrating inspection data, examination outcomes, enrolment figures, teacher deployment records, and financial flows would provide the evidence base for genuinely data-driven QA, but only if the analytical and decision-making routines that translate data into action are built alongside it.

Pillar 5 — Community Engagement and Social Accountability

Communities remain a largely underutilised quality assurance resource in Uganda. Evidence from School Report Card programmes in Uganda (Bjorkman & Svensson, 2009) and comparable African settings suggests that publicly available performance data, combined with supported community engagement, can create social accountability pressures that measurably improve service provider behaviour. School Management Committees require capacity building, genuine authority, protection from political capture, and financial resources to fulfil their oversight function effectively. Civil society organisations, NGOs, faith-based institutions, and teacher unions should be formally incorporated into QA partnerships.

The equity dimension of this pillar deserves emphasis. Community engagement initiatives must be deliberately targeted to underserved districts, rural areas, refugee-hosting communities, districts with the highest dropout rates, where both the need for accountability and the current weakness of formal inspection systems are greatest. SMC capacity grants and public data portals must be designed with these communities specifically in mind, not as extensions of urban-centred systems that reach the periphery as an afterthought.

Pillar 6 — Teacher Welfare as a Quality Imperative

Teacher quality assurance cannot be separated from teacher welfare, as Section 6.1 established. The concrete levers are competitive and timely salary payment, affordable rural housing, manageable classroom sizes, regular professional development, and career progression pathways; without them, inspection systems monitor symptoms rather than address causes. Popova, Evans, and Arancibia (2016), in a systematic review of in-service teacher training programmes, find that the most effective programmes combine professional development with improved working conditions and community support, not professional development alone. Uganda should adopt a differentiated teacher incentive system that provides meaningful supplements for rural postings, recognises pedagogical excellence, and rewards continued professional development. The National Teacher Policy (2018) provides the policy framework; what is required is the resource commitment and political will to implement it at scale, particularly in districts where teacher shortages and absenteeism are most severe.

Pillar 7 — Anti-Corruption Enforcement

Eliminating ghost teachers, preventing capitation grant diversion, and enforcing school registration standards are quality assurance interventions of the highest fiscal and educational order, given the UGX 1.8 trillion in

annual losses documented in Section 4.5. Practical steps include biometric teacher verification linked to payroll, though experience with biometric systems in Uganda's public sector counsels realism. Such systems have faced implementation failures in other sectors due to database integrity issues and political resistance to payroll reform.

The path forward is not to abandon biometric verification but to pilot it carefully, link it explicitly to the Inspectorate of Government's annual education audit cycle, and build community reporting mechanisms as a parallel accountability layer that does not depend on central database integrity alone. This layered approach, combining technology, institutional audit, and community monitoring, reflects the framework's broader principle that no single mechanism is sufficient, and that genuine accountability requires mutually reinforcing instruments operating at multiple levels simultaneously.

Pillar 8 — Higher Education Oversight Reform

For the NCHE specifically, meaningful reform builds on the mandate rationalisation and specialist recruitment set out in Pillar 3, and adds one further change: a shift from quantitative compliance indicators to holistic quality assessment, incorporating teaching quality, research productivity, graduate employment outcomes, and student satisfaction. This would move the NCHE from the QC orientation documented by Ssentamu (2018) toward the prospective QA standard that Section 2.2 requires.

Enforceable sanctions for institutions that defy regulatory directives are essential but require legislative amendment, since current sanction powers have been repeatedly and successfully challenged in the courts. Transparent public reporting of institutional quality audits serves as both a direct accountability measure and a signal to students and families that the higher education market contains genuine quality information. Kenya's experience with CBC implementation demonstrates that market-based accountability pressure, generated by public performance data, can complement regulatory pressure and reduce the enforcement burden on a resource-constrained agency (Ministry of Education Kenya, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explain why Uganda's extensive quality assurance architecture has not translated into acceptable learning outcomes, and to identify what kind of reform framework could realistically shift the system toward genuine, improvement-oriented quality. It did so by addressing three guiding questions and by integrating institutional mapping, structural analysis, and political-economy perspectives within a single conceptual frame that treats quality as both fitness for purpose and transformative, and quality assurance as prospective rather than purely retrospective.

With respect to the first question, how quality is conceptualised and operationalised, the analysis reveals a marked and consequential divergence between formal rhetoric and practical reality. Official policy documents invoke broad objectives of relevance, equity, and transformative learning, yet in everyday operation, quality is narrowly equated with performance on high-stakes examinations and compliance with minimum physical standards. This exam-centred and checklist-driven operationalisation is poorly aligned with Uganda's stated human-capital and social-justice goals, and fails to capture the competencies, critical thinking, and civic dispositions that a transformative conception of quality requires.

The second question asked how QA institutions function in practice relative to their mandates. Mapping the roles of the MoES, DES, NCHE, UNEB, NCDC, TVET bodies, district inspectors, and school-level governance reveals a landscape rich in organisations but characterised by chronic underfunding, understaffing, mandate proliferation, and blurred accountability lines. DES inspections become episodic and largely ritualistic; NCHE struggles to enforce standards consistently across a rapidly expanding higher education sector; and school-level bodies often lack the authority and capacity to influence teaching and learning. Institutions created to assure quality are structurally constrained to perform quality control, documenting non-compliance rather than supporting improvement.

The third question addressed the structural and political-economy factors that sustain the implementation gap. The analysis shows how rapid enrolment expansion, fiscal constraints, decentralisation without clear accountability, teacher absenteeism, corruption, and donor-dependent reform cycles combine to erode the very conditions under which QA institutions could succeed. These dynamics are not peripheral; they are central mechanisms through which quality is undermined and through which compliance-oriented practices become rational adaptations to scarcity and political pressure. Comparative evidence from Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, and Nigeria reinforces the argument that institutional architecture, without adequate resources, enforcement capacity, and genuine political commitment, cannot deliver sustained improvements in learning. Building on this integrated diagnosis, the paper proposes an eight-pillar reform framework that is deliberately sequenced and explicitly linked to findings from each research question. Early-stage pillars focus on re-framing QA from control to improvement, strengthening core financing and staffing for DES and NCHE, and re-orienting inspection toward instructional leadership and data-driven school support. Medium-term pillars address deeper structural constraints by investing in teacher welfare and professional development, integrating assessment data into improvement cycles, tightening anti-corruption and payroll controls, and rationalising overlapping mandates. Pillars 1, 3, and 5 constitute a minimum critical package achievable even under tight fiscal constraints, designed to build early institutional momentum and political will for the deeper reforms that follow.

The paper's main contribution lies in bringing together what are too often separate conversations: about institutional design, implementation capacity, political incentives, and classroom-level realities. By answering its three research questions in an integrated way, it demonstrates that Uganda's QA crisis is not simply a technical problem that more checklists or new agencies can fix, but a systemic problem of resources, incentives, and culture that must be addressed holistically. Future research should complement this desk-based analysis with district-level and school-level studies of inspection practice, evaluations of emerging initiatives such as the PEAS Inspect and Improve programme, and longitudinal assessments of how reforms in financing, teacher policy, and governance reshape the daily experience of teaching and learning in Uganda's classrooms. Only such combined analytical and empirical efforts will enable quality assurance to operate as a genuinely developmental lever, one that serves the learners, teachers, and communities whose transformation it is ultimately designed to support.

Declaration of Generative AI And AI-Assisted Technologies in The Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Claude (Anthropic, claude-sonnet-4-6) to assist with literature search support, reference verification, structural editing, and language refinement. The author reviewed and edited all outputs and takes full responsibility for the content of this publication. No AI tool was used as a co-author, and no AI tool is cited as an author or source in this manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical Approval

This study is a desk-based synthesis of publicly available legislation, policy documents, official statistics, oversight-body reports, and peer-reviewed literature (see Section 2.4). It did not involve the collection of primary data from human participants or animal subjects, and no institutional ethical approval was sought on that basis.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no known conflict of interest.

Data Availability

This paper does not report new primary data. All information relied upon is drawn from publicly available sources cited in the reference list, including government legislation and policy documents, national statistics, international-organisation reports, and peer-reviewed publications.

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