

The Global Accreditation Paradox: Navigating the Tension Between Quality Assurance, Innovation, and Equity in Higher Education

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Abstract: Background: Global higher education faces a persistent tension between converging on common quality benchmarks to secure trust and mobility, and preserving local innovation, equity, and epistemic diversity. **Methods:** We integrate Institutional Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Stone’s Policy Paradox into an Institutional–Postcolonial–Policy–Paradox lens and conduct (i) a comparative policy analysis across Northern America, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, and (ii) a critical discourse analysis of high-salience policy texts. We operationalize “external recognition” as EQAR listing, ENQA full membership, or alignment with INQAAHE’s ISG to proxy cross-system trust, and reproducibly map these markers by region. **Results:** Evidence confirms an “assurance–trust–mobility chain”: externally validated QA increases trust, lowers recognition frictions, and raises the probability of mobility agreements. Europe shows near-universal external evaluation; Southeast Asia exhibits regionally owned but uneven uptake; Northern America retains strong domestic assurance with limited cross-regional alignment; parts of Sub-Saharan Africa show sparse external validation—patterns that help explain uneven recognition and mobility outcomes. Three paradoxes emerge: (1) QA both enables and hinders mobility; (2) recognition validates yet excludes institutions and knowledge traditions outside dominant regimes; and (3) standardization assures baselines but can constrain innovation through compliance-first cultures. **Conclusions:** We propose “context-sensitive harmonization”: use global reference points as principled ceilings and locally owned interpretation as the operational floor. Ten-year foresight (to 2035) highlights modular standards, digital credentials, and capacity building as levers to reconcile assurance with innovation and fairness—if designed to avoid isomorphic mimicry and epistemic dominance. Policy recommendations include mutual recognition of QA agencies, innovation-friendly accreditation pathways, risk-based review, and equity-focused capacity building to close recognition gaps while protecting standards.

Keywords: global accreditation; quality assurance; recognition of qualifications; higher education mobility; EQAR and INQAAHE ISG; postcolonial perspectives; innovation in higher education.

1. Introduction

In an era of mass higher education and global academic mobility, quality assurance and accreditation have become pivotal in shaping higher education policy worldwide (Blanco Ramírez, 2014). Nations and institutions increasingly subscribe to common quality benchmarks to gain international legitimacy, yet face pressure to ensure that quality frameworks remain relevant to local educational, cultural, and developmental contexts (ENQA et al., 2015; EQAR, 2025; INQAAHE, 2022). This dynamic tension is what we term the Global Accreditation Paradox—a phenomenon where global standardization of quality assurance both strengthens and undermines higher education across different contexts (Blanco Ramírez, 2014; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The paradox manifests in the interplay between global quality assurance standardization and local contextual relevance: policies that aim to ensure universally accepted educational standards can inadvertently clash with local needs, values, and innovations (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2013; Cairney, 2019). Throughout this article, we treat the paradox as an analytical frame rather than an anomaly so that standardization required for comparability can be weighed alongside the contextualization necessary for equity and innovation (ENQA et al., 2015; EQAR, 2025; INQAAHE, 2022).

Recent estimates suggest that approximately 6.9 million students were internationally mobile in 2022, up from roughly 2.1 million in 2000, with Europe and Northern America together hosting around four million of these students (UIS, 2025; OECD, 2025; Migration Policy Institute, 2025). The United States alone enrolled a record 1.08 million international students in 2023/24 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2024). These

magnitudes are not mere background figures; they shape regulatory coupling between recognition systems and external quality assurance and make any misalignment disproportionately consequential for equity and innovation (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2025).

Throughout this article, external recognition refers to an external quality assurance agency's formal validation by an independent regional or global body, typically evidenced by listing on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) for agencies operating under the ESG, full membership subject to cyclical external review by a recognized regional network such as ENQA, and successful completion of an INQAAHE recognition review against the International Standards and Guidelines (ENQA et al., 2015; INQAAHE, 2023; EHEA, n.d.).

1.1. Background: Global higher education has expanded rapidly, with the number of internationally mobile tertiary students rising from about 2.1 million in 2000 to approximately 6.4 million in 2021, with recent estimates indicating 6.9 million in 2022 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2025; OECD, 2025; Collett, 2025). UNESCO's 2019 Global Convention on Higher Education signaled a historic commitment to fair and transparent recognition; as of April 2025, 38 states had ratified it, collectively hosting about 29% of the world's mobile students (UNESCO, 2025a, 2025b). These efforts complement long-standing regional regimes such as the Bologna Process and Lisbon Recognition Convention in Europe, the Addis [Arusha] Convention in Africa, and the Tokyo Convention in Asia-Pacific, all designed to harmonize quality assurance while facilitating academic mobility (UNESCO, 2023). At the same time, scholarship has warned that globally diffusing “quality” scripts often originate in the Global North and may

marginalize local epistemologies (Blanco Ramírez, 2014) or induce isomorphic mimicry in policy and organizational design (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2013; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The result is a live policy tension: global comparability is needed for mobility and trust, yet local relevance is essential for equity, innovation, and authentic mission differentiation (Cairney, 2019).

1.2. Problem statement: The article identifies a structured paradox at the core of contemporary accreditation policy. Global standards and regional convergence mechanisms promise legitimacy, transparency, and mobility (ENQA et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2023), yet the same mechanisms can reproduce epistemic dominance (Blanco Ramírez, 2014), incentivize symbolic compliance and isomorphic mimicry (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2013; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and constrain context-responsive innovation (Gibbs et al., 2024; Pomey et al., 2005). The empirical pattern is stark: recognition and trust cluster where agencies have been externally reviewed and networked internationally (EQAR, 2025; INQAAHE, 2022), while regions with nascent or unreviewed agencies face credibility deficits that limit mobility and inclusion (UNESCO, 2025a, 2025b). This paradox surfaces as three interlocking tensions that our findings later analyze in depth: quality assurance can enable and also hinder mobility (Pijano, n.d.; UNESCO, 2023); recognition can validate yet also exclude (Council of Europe, n.d.; UNESCO, 2023); and standardization can assure baseline quality while constraining innovation (Gibbs et al., 2024; Lederman, 2014). The problem our study addresses is how to reconcile these tensions so that quality assurance regimes uphold rigorous global principles without erasing local needs, capacities, and knowledge traditions (Blanco Ramírez, 2014; Abdullah, 2025).

1.3. Research objectives: This study pursues four interrelated objectives, tightly aligned with the theoretical lens and the three paradox dimensions that organize the findings. First, it conceptualizes the Global Accreditation Paradox by synthesizing Institutional Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Stone's policy paradox framework to clarify how legitimacy seeking, power asymmetries, and conflicting policy narratives co-produce paradoxical outcomes. Second, it conducts a comparative policy analysis of accreditation and recognition regimes across Northern America, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, complemented by critical discourse analysis of high-salience policy texts. Third, it assembles and interprets current indicators on mobility and quality assurance integration, including the external review status of quality assurance agencies as a proxy for cross-border trust. Fourth, it generates actionable, context-sensitive recommendations and a forward look to guide policymakers toward "glocal" arrangements that safeguard standards while advancing equity and innovation.

1.4. Research questions: Guided by the blended theoretical framework and implemented through comparative policy analysis and critical discourse analysis, the study addresses the following questions to mirror the structure of the findings. **RQ1. Mobility:** How and under what conditions does the diffusion and external validation of quality assurance frameworks enable cross-border academic mobility, and in which contexts do gaps in quality assurance maturity become mobility barriers? **RQ2. Recognition:** In what ways do recognition instruments and practices validate qualifications across regions, and how do these same mechanisms produce patterns of exclusion for institutions, programs, and knowledge traditions that fall outside dominant accreditation regimes? **RQ3. Standardization and innovation:** To

what extent do standardized quality assurance criteria and processes improve baseline assurance and comparability, and when do they constrain context-appropriate innovation and mission differentiation?

Globalization of higher education has accelerated markedly in the past two decades. The number of students enrolled outside their home country rose from about 2.1 million in 2000 to approximately 6.4 million in 2021 (UIS, 2025). This surge in international mobility heightened the need for reliable accreditation and quality assurance systems that can transcend borders. UNESCO's Global Convention on Higher Education (2019) – the first worldwide treaty on recognition of qualifications – reflects this imperative, establishing universal principles to ensure fair and transparent recognition of degrees (UNESCO, 2023). As of April 2025, 38 states have ratified the Global Convention, which collectively host 29% of the world's mobile students (UNESCO, 2025a,b). The Global Convention complements earlier regional agreements (e.g. the European Bologna Process and Lisbon Recognition Convention, the Addis Convention for Africa, the Tokyo Convention for Asia-Pacific) in building a cohesive international recognition regime. These developments underscore how global quality assurance frameworks are envisioned as tools to “unlock global mobility through recognition” (UNESCO, 2023) by harmonizing accreditation standards.

However, alongside the promises of enhanced trust and comparability, concerns have arisen regarding the contextual misalignment and power imbalances embedded in global QA diffusion (Blanco Ramírez, 2014). Scholars applying postcolonial theory argue that quality norms originating in the Global North often carry epistemic dominance, marginalizing or devaluing local knowledge systems and priorities in the Global South (Blanco Ramírez,

2014). Indeed, practices and ideas of “quality” developed in Western contexts have rapidly spread worldwide, leading to “increased uniformity” in QA approaches despite significant asymmetries between the Global North and South (Blanco Ramírez, 2014). Many developing countries established QA agencies under the influence of international organizations (World Bank, UNESCO) and in pursuit of legitimacy, but these agencies sometimes emulate external models superficially – a phenomenon Lant Pritchett terms “*isomorphic mimicry*” (Andrews et al., 2013). In such cases, QA structures may “*look like*” those in advanced systems without yet achieving their functional effectiveness, potentially resulting in a “*capability trap*” where form prevails over substance (Pritchett et al., 2012; Andrews et al., 2013).

Bringing these lenses together, we conceptualize an assurance–trust–mobility chain in which externally validated quality assurance practices, signaled by recognition instruments such as EQAR listing, ENQA membership, and INQAAHE-type external reviews, increase cross-system trust; higher trust reduces recognition frictions and raises the probability of outbound and inbound mobility agreements under instruments like the Lisbon Recognition Convention and UNESCO's Global Convention. Mechanistically, isomorphic pressures induce agencies and universities to adopt recognition instruments; where those instruments are externally verified, receiving systems update their priors on sending-system quality upward, lower the screening intensity of credential evaluation, and expand the feasible set of bilateral or multilateral mobility arrangements. Regionally, the chain accelerates in the European Higher Education Area where EQAR/ENQA and the “recognize unless substantial difference” norm institutionalize trust, and it is gaining traction in ASEAN

through AQAF and AUN-QA as regionally owned validators; it breaks in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa when agencies remain unreviewed and mutual-recognition pathways are thin, and it stalls in Northern America when decentralized accreditation lacks multilateral alignment, leaving recognition to case-by-case evaluations. Empirically, the share of QA agencies that have undergone external review functions as a proximate indicator of trust and thus of the strength of the chain (as later operationalized in Figure 2) (UNESCO, 2023; INQAAHE, 2022; ENQA et al, 2015).

At the institutional level, universities worldwide feel pressure to obtain international accreditations or rankings for prestige and credibility. This can lead to institutional isomorphism – coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures that make diverse universities adopt similar QA practices to appear legitimate (Tsevi, 2015). For example, private universities in Ghana were found to mirror the norms of internationally recognized institutions and comply with government QA mandates largely to signal legitimacy (Tsevi, 2015). Such homogenization can conflict with local mission differentiation. Meanwhile, Deborah Stone’s Policy Paradox lens reminds us that policy goals often harbor internal contradictions (Cairney, 2019). In the QA arena, policy rhetoric simultaneously extols quality assurance as a guarantor of academic excellence and a facilitator of innovation, yet also laments that rigid accreditation criteria may stifle innovation and reinforce inequality. As Stone notes, political life is rife with paradoxes where “*two contradictory interpretations can’t both be true...yet a policy can embody both*” (Cairney, 2019). We see this vividly in accreditation debates where the same QA policy is hailed as ensuring minimum standards and condemned as enforcing one-size-fits-all conformity.

This introduction highlights why a critical examination of the global accreditation paradox is timely. International higher education stakeholders seek a delicate balance: global convergence in quality assurance is needed to foster trust, student mobility, and mutual recognition, but local divergence is needed to respect contextual diversity, equity, and innovation. The stakes are high. On one hand, embracing global QA norms can enable universities in (for example) Sub-Saharan Africa or Southeast Asia to gain worldwide acceptance of their degrees, participate in exchange programs, and attract foreign students or funding. On the other hand, an uncritical embrace of external standards can lead to policy borrowing that ignores local realities (such as resource constraints, cultural pedagogies, indigenous knowledge), resulting in superficial compliance or unintended exclusion. Thus, the global accreditation paradox encapsulates a core challenge for comparative education policy today: how to standardize what is necessary for global compatibility while contextualizing what is desirable for local relevance.

In the remainder of this article, we investigate this paradox in depth. We first outline the interdisciplinary theoretical framework that guides our analysis, drawing on institutional, postcolonial, and policy paradox theories. We then describe our methodology, which combines comparative policy analysis across four regions with a critical discourse analysis of QA policy texts and narratives. This design is purpose-built to answer RQ1–RQ3 across regions and to interpret divergent policy narratives and power dynamics that sustain the paradox. The findings and discussion are structured around three key dimensions of the paradox: (1) **Mobility** – quality assurance as both an enabler and a barrier to the movement of students and academics; (2) **Recognition** – accreditation as both validating qualifications

and excluding those deemed substandard or non-conforming; (3) **Standardization and Innovation** – standard QA practices as providing assurance yet potentially constraining educational innovation. Each section provides region-specific insights (Northern America, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia) supported by current data from authoritative sources (UNESCO, OECD, CHEA, ENQA, AfriQAN, AUN-QA, World Bank), and includes at least one visualization to illustrate the trends. Finally, we conclude with actionable recommendations for resolving the paradox – proposing strategies like “context-sensitive harmonization” and capacity-building for local quality ownership – and offer a ten-year foresight on how global and local forces might co-evolve in the quality assurance domain. Through this comprehensive analysis, the article aims to deepen understanding of the global accreditation paradox and chart pathways toward a more balanced and equitable global higher education quality regime.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Our analysis is grounded in a blended theoretical framework that integrates Institutional Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Stone’s Policy Paradox framework. This interdisciplinary lens allows us to interrogate accreditation policies from structural, historical, and political angles simultaneously, revealing the deep-rooted causes of paradoxical outcomes in global higher education quality assurance.

2.1. Institutional Theory (New Institutionalism): This perspective, especially as formulated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), explains how organizations conform to shared norms and models in order to gain legitimacy, often through processes of isomorphic change. In the context of higher education, institutional

theory suggests that universities and accreditation agencies worldwide will tend to adopt similar structures and practices under coercive pressures (e.g. government or donor mandates), mimetic pressures (copying “world-class” models under uncertainty), and normative pressures (professional communities defining what “quality” means). Global accreditation standards like the ISO-style quality frameworks or the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) can become institutionalized ideals that local actors feel compelled to follow to appear “modern” and credible (Tsevi, 2015). This yields a drive toward **homogenization** – for instance, hundreds of QA agencies worldwide now share common features (mission statements about continuous improvement, use of peer review panels, published criteria) in part due to global diffusion of best practices (Tsevi, 2015). Institutional theory helps us recognize the paradox here: convergence in QA can improve basic quality and transparency, but taken too far it may lead to uniformity that disregards local mission diversity. Moreover, institutional isomorphism without real capacity (a form of symbolic compliance) risks creating QA bodies that exist “on paper” but struggle to effect substantive change – an outcome observed when developing countries rapidly set up accrediting agencies under international influence (Andrew et al., 2013). We leverage institutional theory to examine how legitimacy-seeking behavior drives the global spread of accreditation regimes and sometimes results in isomorphic mimicry rather than contextually effective quality assurance.

2.2. Postcolonial Theory: Given that modern universities and quality assurance regimes evolved historically from Euro-American models, postcolonial theory provides a critical lens to question whose knowledge and values underpin “global” standards. Concepts such as epistemic

dominance, academic imperialism, and coloniality of knowledge are pertinent. Postcolonial scholars argue that ostensibly neutral quality metrics often carry the imprint of Western academic traditions – emphasizing, for example, research output in international journals, or pedagogical approaches that may not align with indigenous ways of knowing (Blanco Ramírez, 2014). We apply postcolonial theory to uncover power asymmetries in global QA: How do accreditation frameworks potentially marginalize non-Western perspectives? To what extent do countries of the Global South have agency in defining quality criteria versus importing them? The notion of colonial discourse in QA policy is particularly useful (Blanco Ramírez, 2014). Blanco Ramírez (2014) describes how quality assurance and accountability discourses exported from the Global North to the South create “increased uniformity” and embed implicit hierarchies – where institutions are measured against standards that emerged from different socio-cultural contexts. Postcolonial theory thus foregrounds issues of equity and voice: who gets recognized (validated) and who gets excluded or labeled “low quality” in the global accreditation space. This theoretical lens will help interpret findings such as regional disparities in QA capacity (e.g. Africa’s challenges) and the resistance or adaptation of local actors (e.g. the development of “indigenous” QA frameworks in ASEAN to assert regional ownership) (Abdullah, 2025).

2.3. Deborah Stone’s Policy Paradox:

Stone’s framework (Stone 2002) challenges the idea of policymaking as a rational, goal-optimizing process. Instead, it highlights that policies are often a product of ambiguous goals, competing values, and political storytelling, resulting in inherent paradoxes (Cairney, 2019). According to Stone, the same policy instrument can be framed in contradictory

ways by stakeholders, and policy actors can even hold internally conflicting objectives (Cairney, 2019). We use this framework to analyze how accreditation policy goals (quality enhancement, accountability, equity, innovation, etc.) often conflict in practice, producing paradoxical effects. For example, one goal of accreditation might be public accountability (ensuring minimum standards and “weeding out” subpar providers), while another goal is encouraging diversity and innovation in educational offerings – yet a single QA system may not fully achieve both simultaneously, creating a paradoxical tension. Stone’s notion that “*two contradictory interpretations can both be held true in political life*” (Cairney, 2019) is reflected in the way quality assurance is discussed: It is lauded as both a guardian of quality and criticized as a bureaucratic hurdle. Policymakers may espouse international accreditation standards to improve quality and facilitate credit transfer, even as they worry that rigid standards might homogenize curricula or exclude marginal communities. By applying Stone’s lens, we remain attentive to contradictions in policy narratives and outcomes – for instance, how a mandatory accreditation policy can be simultaneously justified as improving quality and derided as a mere compliance exercise. Stone’s framework reminds us that paradoxes are not aberrations but normal in policymaking; our task is to critically dissect these in QA policies and understand how different narratives (e.g. “quality as excellence” vs “quality as fitness for context”) compete or coexist.

2.4. Conceptual Synthesis: Combining these theories, we conceptualize the Global Accreditation Paradox as emerging from institutional isomorphism under conditions of global power inequality, played out through conflicting policy narratives. As countries and universities chase global legitimacy

(institutional theory), they may adopt external QA models (often Western-centric, per postcolonial critique) that satisfy one set of stakeholders (e.g. international donors, foreign partners) but conflict with other values (local relevance, innovation), leading to paradoxical policy effects (Stone's insights). This blended framework will guide our analysis of each paradox dimension – mobility, recognition, standardization/innovation – ensuring a nuanced understanding that is at once structural (institutional convergence patterns), critical (power and colonial legacies), and policy-aware (goal conflicts and rhetoric).

Read together, these lenses do more than provide complementary vocabularies; they specify a causal grammar for how standardization travels and transforms. Institutional theory explains the diffusion of “quality scripts” and the resulting isomorphism; postcolonial critique interrogates whose scripts become global and how epistemic hierarchies are smuggled into “neutral” standards; and Stone's policy paradox shows why even well-intentioned rules generate contradictory effects in practice. This combined grammar justifies our selection of externally validated recognition markers as empirical traces of a deeper assurance–trust–mobility mechanism, while keeping the question of contextual justice analytically alive. Leveraging this triad, we specify a micro-mechanism, the assurance–trust–mobility chain, in which isomorphic pressures generate adoption of recognition instruments by agencies and universities; external validation of those instruments raises cross-system trust; increased trust reduces recognition frictions; and lower frictions increase the probability of mobility agreements, whereas performative or unvalidated QA yields brittle trust and mobility shortfalls, a logic we later operationalize through

the external-review indicator and examine comparatively by region

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative policy analysis coupled with critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate accreditation regimes and their paradoxes across four regions: Northern America, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. The research design is interdisciplinary, drawing from comparative education, international higher education policy, and critical policy studies. Our approach is both descriptive, mapping the development and features of QA policies in each region, and interpretive, unpacking the meanings and power dynamics in QA discourse.

3.1. Comparative Policy Analysis: We conducted a structured comparison of accreditation frameworks and quality assurance policies in the target regions. Data was gathered from authoritative sources and key policy documents, including: national and regional accreditation policy statements, guidelines from QA agencies (e.g. CHEA in the U.S., ENQA in Europe, AfriQAN in Africa, AUN-QA in ASEAN), communiqués from the Bologna Process, UNESCO conventions, and reports by multilateral organizations (World Bank, OECD). We reviewed the historical evolution of QA in each region – for instance, the *decentralized, voluntary accreditation* tradition in Northern America versus the *centralized, national QA agencies* that emerged in many African and Asian countries in the 1990s/2000s with support from international bodies (Blanco Ramírez, 2014). We also collected comparative data: number of QA agencies, membership in international networks, student mobility statistics, recognition agreements in force, etc., to quantify aspects of mobility and recognition. This included extracting current data such as

UNESCO's 2022 Global Education Monitoring reports for enrollment and mobility figures, and the INQAAHE global study (2018–2020) for numbers of QA agencies worldwide (INQAAHE, 2022). A small dataset of key indicators by region was compiled to inform our analysis and visualizations (e.g. share of QA agencies that have undergone external review or international recognition, as illustrated later in Figure 2). A machine-readable dataset and codebook used including agency counts by region and recognition markers (EQAR registration, ENQA membership, and INQAAHE ISG external review (EQAR, 2024; ENQA, 2024; INQAAHE, 2022) will be availed on request. For clarity, “*external recognition*” in Figure 2 is operationalized as any of the following: (i) listing on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) following a full external review against the ESG, (ii) full ENQA membership based on a positive external review against the ESG, or (iii) completion of an INQAAHE external review under the International Standards and Guidelines (ISGs). This composite marker is used solely to proxy cross-system trust and does not imply a hierarchical judgment among frameworks. Please see the codebook in the data deposit for variable definitions and region mappings. By comparing policies and outcomes across at least four regions, we aimed to identify patterns of convergence and divergence – for example, how Europe's Bologna harmonization compares to African Union's newer *Harmonization of African HE Quality Assurance* initiative, or how Southeast Asia's *AQAF* (ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework) contrasts with Northern America's largely domestic-focused accreditation system. To ensure replicability, the denominator lists for each region (agency-level) are provided in the spreadsheet (‘Denominators’ tab), with a column specifying the recognition marker(s) that qualifies an agency for the numerator.

For Europe, the denominator equals the number of agencies on EQAR (a policy-salient subset), whereas for other regions it equals the count of national external QA agencies identified in our registry scan; this hybrid approach privileges a conservative, externally verified subset in Europe and a census-style denominator elsewhere, a choice we justify on comparability and data verifiability grounds.

3.2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): To capture the nuances of policy language and underlying ideologies, we applied CDA techniques to a selection of policy texts and speeches related to quality assurance. This entailed examining how key concepts (such as “quality”, “standards”, “recognition”, “innovation”, “international”) are rhetorically constructed and what assumptions they carry. We analyzed, for instance, the communiqués of the Bologna Ministerial Conferences for language about balancing “European standards” with respect for national autonomy; the Accra Declaration on Quality Assurance in Africa for postcolonial sensibilities; and statements from CHEA's International Quality Group (CIQG) for perspectives on global norms and local context. We also scrutinized UNESCO's Global Convention text and UNESCO press releases for discourse on fairness and non-discrimination in recognition (UNESCO, 2023). Using NVivo software, we coded passages that reflected paradoxical themes: e.g., phrases emphasizing “*common global standards*” vs. those emphasizing “*local context and diversity*” (NVivo 14, Windows). A notable example is the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) document, which explicitly describes its standards as “*non-prescriptive, but flexible*” and as common minimum requirements to be adapted to each nation's context (HAQAA Initiative, 2019). We interpreted such phrasing as a conscious response to the global-local tension, and our

CDA considered why such language appears (in this case, likely to avoid perceptions of neo-colonial imposition in Africa's QA). Similarly, in ASEAN's QA framework (AQAF), we noted the use of the term "*indigenous framework*" developed by ASEAN stakeholders (Abdullah, 2025), signifying a regional discourse of ownership and resistance to outside dominance. The discourse analysis thus provided insight into how policy actors in different regions frame accreditation – whether as a tool for international competitiveness, as a collaborative mutual recognition endeavor, or as a protective measure for local education values.

3.3. CDA corpus, sampling, coding, and reliability: The CDA corpus comprised policy texts and communiqués issued between 2004 and 2025, selected through a transparent frame that combined purposive relevance and regional balance. We included five documents for Europe, three for Northern America, four for Sub-Saharan Africa, and four for Southeast Asia, prioritizing texts that articulate recognition principles, quality assurance standards, or reforms with cross-border implications. The European set consists of the Bologna Ministerial Communiqués from Yerevan 2015, Paris 2018, Rome 2020, and Tirana 2024, together with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG, 2015). The Northern American set consists of the CHEA/CIQG International Quality Principles, the CHEA Standards and Procedures for Recognition (2021), and the U.S. Department of Education's Distance Education and Innovation final rule (2020). The Sub-Saharan Africa set consists of the 2004 Accra Declaration, the 2014 Addis (African) Recognition Convention text, the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA, 2018/2019 publication), and the HAQAA global/network report on ASG-QA implementation (2025). The Southeast Asia set consists of the ASEAN Quality Assurance

Framework (AQAF), the AUN-QA Programme Guide v4.0 (2020), the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement on Medical Practitioners (2009) as an emblematic recognition instrument, and the AUN Annual Report 2023–2024 documenting AUN-QA uptake.

Sampling followed a two-stage screen. First, we identified region-defining policy instruments and ministerial communiqués with explicit language on recognition, external quality assurance, trust, or cross-border mobility. Second, we ensured regional balance by retaining comparable counts per region and excluding duplicative media or derivative summaries in favor of primary texts. This yielded Europe $n_1 = 5$, Northern America $n_2 = 3$, Sub-Saharan Africa $n_3 = 4$, and Southeast Asia $n_4 = 4$. Where an instrument was updated across years, we included the most authoritative version in force during the study window and treated earlier drafts or press materials as context rather than as corpus items.

Researchers worked independently after a calibration round using a seed codebook aligned to the paper's theoretical lenses. Codes were iteratively refined using abductive logic and documented in a versioned memo trail. Analysis was conducted in NVivo 14 (Windows release 14.24.3), and the project file, codebook, and coder-drift memo are included in the data deposit. Inter-coder reliability was assessed on a 15 percent stratified subset double-coded across regions; Krippendorff's α was computed on first-level codes with a target threshold of ≥ 0.80 for acceptable reliability. Any categories below the threshold were reconciled through adjudication and codebook clarification, and the pre- and post-reconciliation matrices are archived with the deposit (See corpus list in appendix).

3.4. Data Validation and Triangulation: Given the importance of current, accurate information, we cross-verified data points from multiple sources. For example, the count of “345 QA bodies worldwide” and “142 externally reviewed”. The statement that there are approximately 345 quality assurance bodies worldwide and that around 142 have undergone external evaluation or recognition is drawn from the INQAAHE “International Quality Hallmarks” slide deck presented at UNESCO’s WHEC 2022, which aggregates agency counts by SDG regions and flags externally reviewed agencies. These are global approximations that depend on definitional scope and timing; therefore, in our regional tallies we reconciled the INQAAHE figures with the agencies included under our composite external-recognition rule. Statistics on student mobility (e.g. *6.4 million international students globally*) were cross-checked between UNESCO UIS data and OECD’s *Education at a Glance*. When analyzing regional trends, we engaged regional experts’ analyses where available (such as European University Association reports for Europe, and World Bank or UNESCO–IESALC reports for Africa and Latin America) to ensure we captured context-specific factors. The critical discourse analysis was validated by comparing our interpretations with academic commentary – for instance, consulting literature on colonial legacies in academic quality structures (CGHE, 2021) to enrich our understanding of the postcolonial dimensions in QA texts.

3.5. Limitations: This research is primarily qualitative and interpretive; it does not offer a statistical causality analysis but rather a rich, contextual understanding of policy paradoxes. The regions selected are broad and internally diverse (e.g. “Sub-Saharan Africa” encompasses 40+ countries), so generalizations are made at a high level. We mitigated this by including illustrative examples of specific

countries when relevant (for example, citing Ghana’s accreditation experiences to exemplify West Africa, or Malaysia’s for Southeast Asia). Another limitation is that our critical discourse analysis sample, while diverse, cannot cover all QA narratives – we focused on influential and representative documents. Nonetheless, by triangulating multiple sources and theories, we aim for a comprehensive and credible account. All sources used are properly cited and drawn from authoritative bodies or peer-reviewed research, enhancing the reliability of our findings.

In summary, our methodology marries broad policy comparison with deep discursive critique. This approach is well-suited to uncover the “big picture” of global accreditation trends while also sensitizing us to the subtle ways in which language and power operate in higher education quality assurance. The next section presents the findings and discussion, structured around the three identified paradox dimensions, each enriched by the methodological steps described – quantitative comparisons, qualitative case insights, and discourse interpretations.

4. Findings and Discussion

The complex interplay of global and local forces in accreditation manifests in three paradoxical dimensions: **(1) Quality assurance as both enabler and barrier to mobility; (2) Recognition as both validation and exclusion.** The Convention’s animating norm is recognition as the rule unless a “substantial difference” can be demonstrated, a formulation that flips the evidentiary burden onto the recognition authority and has become the default European legal grammar for fair recognition (ENIC-NARIC, n.d.; Council of Europe, 2025). As of 1 July 2025, the Convention has 57 Contracting Parties (Council of Europe, 2025). **(3) Standardization as both assurance and**

innovation constraint. Below we discuss each dimension in turn, integrating comparative regional analysis and critical perspectives. Data and examples from Northern America, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia illustrate how the Global Accreditation Paradox unfolds in practice, often in distinct yet interrelated ways across contexts.

4.1. Quality Assurance as Enabler and Barrier to Mobility

One of the clearest promises of global quality assurance harmonization is the facilitation of academic mobility. Common accreditation standards and mutual recognition

agreements are intended to make it easier for students to transfer credits, for graduates to have their degrees recognized abroad, and for institutions to trust the qualifications of international faculty hires. In this sense, robust QA systems act as an enabler of mobility, creating a “zone of trust” across borders (Pijano, n.d.). However, misalignments and uneven development of QA can also become barriers to mobility, especially when accreditation systems are not mutually recognized or when quality assurance (or lack thereof) in certain regions leads to skepticism about credentials. Our analysis finds that while regions like Europe have made QA a cornerstone of free movement in higher education, other regions lag behind, and the gap itself creates mobility barriers.

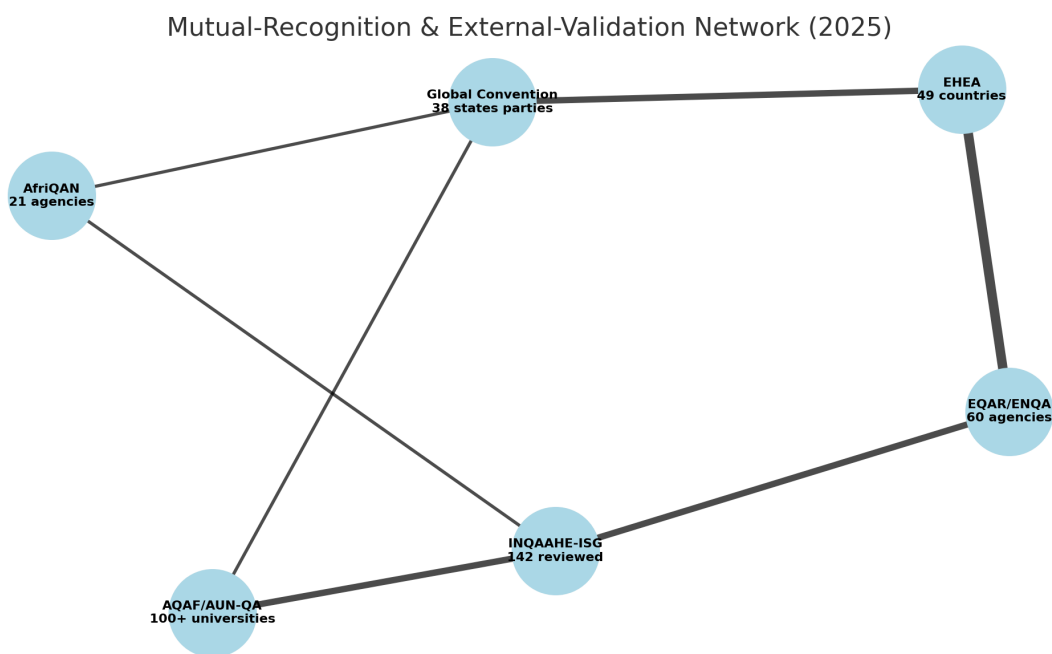


Figure 1: Mutual-Recognition & External-Validation Network (2025). Findings—Mobility. Network of QA recognition and validation linkages underpinning cross-system trust (2025). Key node labels include the size of each mechanism today: 60 EQAR-listed/ENQA agencies in Europe, 49 EHEA countries that permit cross-border external QA, 142 agencies that have undergone an INQAAHE-ISG external review worldwide, 100+ ASEAN universities assessed under AUN-QA, 21 African QA bodies mapped by AfriQAN, and 38 States Parties to UNESCO’s Global Convention on Recognition. Edge thickness visualises the relative strength of mutual-recognition or validation pathways—for example, the especially robust link between the EHEA and EQAR/ENQA, moderate bi-directional ties mediated by the Global Convention, and still-emerging connections involving AfriQAN. The graphic makes visible the “plumbing” of trust that enables (or constrains) academic mobility across regions.

Europe – A Unified QA Space
Enabling Mobility: Europe’s Bologna Process provides a prime example of QA as a mobility enabler. Since the late 1990s, European countries have overhauled their degree structures and quality assurance in line with agreed standards (the ESG – Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area). The establishment of ENQA and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) means that universities accredited by any recognized national agency are broadly trusted across the EHEA. This common framework, alongside instruments like the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and Diploma Supplement, has significantly smoothed student mobility within Europe. As evidence of trust-enabled mobility at scale, Erasmus+ has supported more than 16 million participants since 1987, and in 2023 alone it funded over 1.3 million learning mobilities across education, training, youth, and sport (European Commission, 2024a 2024b; 2025). In 2023 alone, Erasmus+ supported around 1.3 million learning mobilities, with cumulative participation now exceeding 16 million since 1987 (European Commission, 2025). ENQA’s growth itself reflects this integration: as of 2024, ENQA had 60 member QA agencies spanning 32 countries (ENQA, 2025) – virtually the entire EHEA – indicating widespread compliance with shared quality norms. A degree from an ENQA-reviewed agency in, say, Poland is understood to meet the same baseline standards as one from Spain or Germany, helping graduates pursue opportunities across the continent. The paradox in Europe is relatively muted on the mobility front – QA has largely been a facilitator, although some critics argue that smaller or newer EHEA members struggle to implement standards, potentially disadvantaging their students’ mobility in subtle ways.

Northern America – Strong Domestic QA, Limited Cross-Border Alignment: In Northern America, particularly the United States and Canada, accreditation has a long history of ensuring quality domestically (U.S. regional accreditors date back a century). This has enabled a high degree of internal mobility – students can transfer between accredited institutions within the country fairly easily, and employers trust accredited degrees. However, Northern America has not pursued a regional or international alignment of QA to the same extent as Europe. The U.S. and Canada rely on decentralized accreditation bodies (e.g., six U.S. regional accreditors recognized by CHEA/US Department of Education, and various professional accreditors). While these agencies have formed networks (CHEA’s CIQG fosters international dialogue), there is no single Northern American QA framework or multilateral recognition treaty akin to Bologna. Consequently, international mobility to/from Northern America often hinges on ad hoc or bilateral recognition. U.S. institutions tend to individually evaluate foreign credentials, and although tools like the UNESCO Global Convention (once the U.S. ratifies, if it does) may help, for now students from countries with nascent QA systems can face barriers getting their degrees recognized by American universities or licensing bodies. At the same time, U.S. accreditation’s reputation globally means that some non-U.S. universities seek American accreditations (e.g., Middle States, WASC) as a strategy to gain international credibility. This can enable mobility for their students (a degree from a “US-accredited” foreign institution might be more readily accepted), but it also exemplifies the paradox: a one-way mobility enabler that can undercut development of local accreditation capacity. In summary, Northern America’s QA ensures high internal quality (thus attracting international students – over 1 million in the U.S. annually),

but the lack of multilateral recognition frameworks can act as a mobility barrier for those coming from outside systems that Northern American institutions easily recognize.

Sub-Saharan Africa – Potential Unfulfilled, QA Gaps as Mobility Barriers:

Sub-Saharan Africa illustrates the mobility paradox in sharp relief. The region has seen explosive growth in higher education demand, and some intra-African academic mobility exists (e.g., students from francophone African countries enrolling in South African universities). However, inconsistent quality assurance across countries has historically impeded recognition of qualifications. Until recently, there was no region-wide QA coordination; many countries only established national QA agencies in the 2000s or 2010s, some still lack them. According to a UNESCO report, as of 2020 there were around 21 QA bodies in Sub-Saharan Africa for 46 countries (INQAAHE, 2022), and virtually none had undergone external international review (INQAAHE, 2022) – meaning their standards might not be trusted outside. Indeed, *Figure 2* below starkly shows that 0% of QA agencies in Sub-Saharan Africa had been externally evaluated or recognized by international networks as of 2022, compared to 91% in Europe/Northern America (INQAAHE, 2022). This gap translates into mobility barriers: a graduate from an unaccredited or locally accredited-but-internationally-unverified African institution may struggle to have their degree recognized abroad. To tackle this, the African Union and stakeholders launched initiatives like the Addis Convention (revised Arusha Convention) on recognition (2014) and the Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework (PAQAF). The AfriQAN network and sub-regional networks (EAQAN in East Africa, SAQAN in Southern Africa) are working to harmonize QA practices.

Progress is being made – e.g., the African Standards and Guidelines for QA (ASG-QA) were published in 2018 to guide national agencies (Lenga, 2024). These standards are explicitly flexible and non-prescriptive (INQAAHE, 2022) to allow contextualization, aiming to build trust without imposing a rigid one-size-fits-all. Over time, such efforts should enable greater intra-African mobility (so a degree from, say, Kenya can be accepted in Ghana) and improve the reception of African qualifications globally. At present, however, the uneven development of QA is a barrier – many African students seek education abroad partly due to uncertainty about quality at home and the higher international recognition of foreign degrees. Thus, QA in Africa is a double-edged sword for mobility: its absence or weakness historically impeded mobility, but strengthening QA (with global alignment) is seen as key to *unlocking* mobility for the future.

Southeast Asia – Emerging Regional QA Supporting Mobility, Yet Facing Challenges:

Southeast Asia (SEA), via ASEAN, provides a fascinating case of a region consciously emulating aspects of Europe's approach to enable mobility, but adapting it to local context. The ASEAN University Network – Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) was created to facilitate regional QA benchmarking. AUN-QA has developed an assessment system where universities volunteer for peer reviews, and by 2025 over 100 universities in ASEAN had undergone AUN-QA program or institutional assessments, yielding a growing cadre of “AUN-QA certified” programs (AUN-QA, 2020). Complementing this, the ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework (AQAF) functions as an “indigenous” regional reference for QA and qualifications, developed by ASEAN stakeholders and used to guide national adaptation (Abdullah, 2025; IAAHEH, 2023; ASEAN Secretariat, 2018). Historically, the

AQAF emerged from AQAN work finalized in 2013–2014 and is linked to the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), whose governance and structure were endorsed by ASEAN ministers in 2016, creating an explicit QA–qualifications bridge for mobility and recognition (ASEAN, 2016; ASEAN Secretariat, 2018; SHARE/DAAD, 2018; IAAHEH, 2023).

Early results show QA is indeed enabling more mobility: universities that have adopted AUN-QA standards find it easier to establish bilateral recognition of credits, and some countries (Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia) have begun referencing the AQAF in their national QA criteria, building trust regionally. However, challenges persist. Not all Southeast Asian nations have equal QA capacity; for example, Singapore’s system is very advanced, whereas others are still improving basic oversight. Mutual recognition agreements in professions (like the *ASEAN Medical Diploma* agreement) often require certain QA conditions that not all countries meet yet, causing uneven mobility opportunities. Furthermore, mobility in the region is still modest compared to Europe – many Southeast Asian students prefer to go outside the region (to Western countries) for prestige, partly reflecting that global recognition of ASEAN degrees is still emerging. In effect, Southeast Asia is in a transition where QA is increasingly an enabler of regional mobility, but

incomplete alignment and external perceptions remain barriers on the global stage. One telling discourse is that ASEAN documents frequently mention learning from Europe’s Bologna but also stress “ASEAN values” in education, indicating a careful balance between adopting global best practices and preserving regional identity.

Figure 2 below visualizes one aspect of the mobility paradox quantitatively – the share of QA agencies in each region that have been externally reviewed or recognized by international networks (a proxy for integration into the global QA community). This indicator matters because agencies that undergo external review (e.g., by INQAAHE or regional networks) signal adherence to internationally accepted standards, potentially smoothing recognition of the degrees they oversee. As the figure shows, Europe and Northern America stand out with over 90% of QA bodies externally validated, whereas regions like Central/Southern Asia, Eastern/Southeastern Asia, Latin America, and Africa lag far behind, with most agencies not externally recognized (INQAAHE, 2022). These disparities underscore how quality assurance, or the lack thereof, correlates with mobility opportunities. Regions with internationally vetted QA enjoy higher mutual trust (thus enabling mobility), while those without it face skepticism (a barrier to mobility).

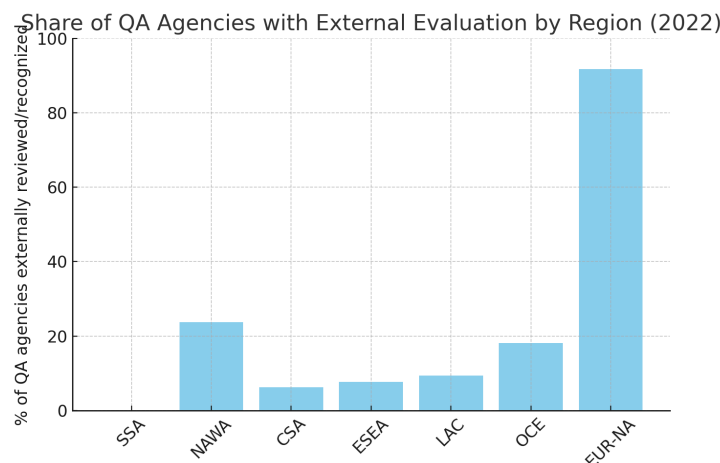


Figure 2. External recognition markers by region (as of 31 May 2025). Bars show the share of agencies with at least one external recognition marker, where “external recognition” is defined as: (i) listing on EQAR; or (ii) ENQA full membership following an ESG review; or (iii) successful alignment under INQAAHE’s ISG. n/N by region (agencies): Europe 60/60 (EQAR-registered agencies), Northern America 1/7 (ABET aligned under INQAAHE ISG), Latin America & the Caribbean 7/37, Asia 5/38, Sub-Saharan Africa 0/34, Arab States 1/16, Oceania 1/5. Sources: EQAR Register lists 60 quality assurance agencies (snapshot, 13 March 2025); ENQA Annual Report 2024; INQAAHE Aligned Agencies Database (consulted August 2025).

In sum, quality assurance serves as an enabler of mobility when it is developed and harmonized enough to foster inter-institutional and inter-country trust. Europe’s cohesive QA area exemplifies this, and Southeast Asia is moving in that direction. Yet QA can be a barrier when it is absent, fragmented, or untrusted – a reality still confronting parts of Africa and Asia in the global context. While Northern America features mature domestic recognition ecosystems (e.g., U.S. federal and CHEA recognition), the uptake of the specific cross-regional markers used here is limited, with ABET’s ISG alignment the principal instance as of mid-2025. The paradox is that establishing QA systems is supposed to open doors (and it does, eventually), but in the interim, the differences in QA maturity *create* a stratification

of mobility opportunities. Those from countries with strong, internationally benchmarked QA enjoy far greater mobility than those without – raising equity concerns. Policymakers addressing this paradox are thus focusing on capacity building: UNESCO, for instance, explicitly ties the Global Convention to helping countries “raise quality at home...making recognition a reality for millions” (UNESCO, 2023), essentially stating that improving local QA (with global principles) is key to leveling the playing field for mobility. This leads directly into the next paradox dimension: recognition, which is the policy manifestation of mobility in terms of accepting or rejecting qualifications. Figure 3 below traces the full assurance–trust–mobility chain by region, pinpointing where the pathway narrows.

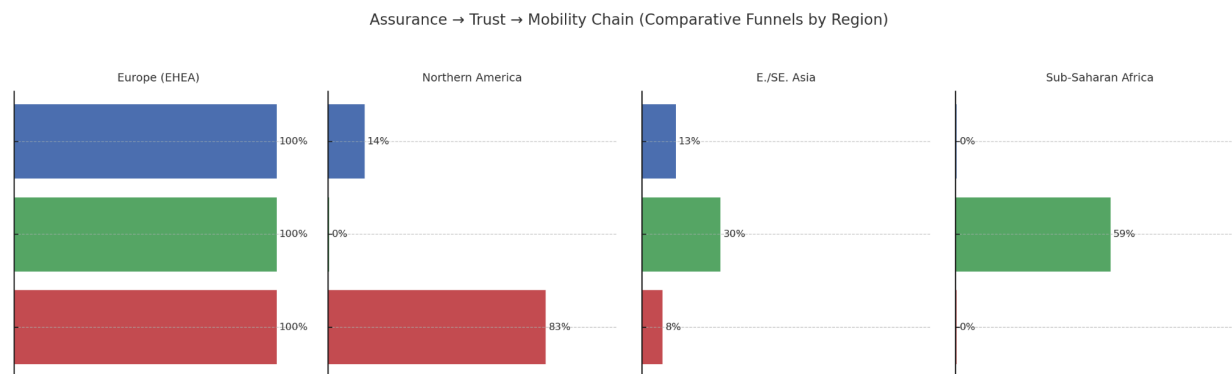


Figure 3. Assurance → Trust → Mobility chain, by region. The “assurance–trust–mobility” chain for four illustrative regions shows where the pathway that should carry learners from robust external quality assurance (left), through mutually trusted recognition regimes (centre), to tangible mobility outcomes (right) narrows or breaks. Bar widths are proportional to: (i) the share of recognised QA agencies externally reviewed (assurance); (ii) the share of countries committed to a multilateral recognition instrument (trust); and (iii) a mobility proxy normalised to Europe’s Erasmus+ learning-mobility volume in 2023 (= 100).

Interpretation: Europe’s chain remains wide throughout, confirming that near-universal external reviews and universal treaty coverage translate into the world’s densest regional mobility programme. Northern America leaks at the trust stage—absent a regional convention—yet still attracts substantial inbound mobility on institutional reputation alone. Eastern/Southeast Asia’s principal leak is at the assurance stage; only a handful of agencies have undergone international review, and although several countries have begun referencing the ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework, mobility volumes remain modest compared with Europe. Sub-Saharan Africa’s stark break occurs at the assurance stage (no agencies externally reviewed), leaving its Addis-Convention-enabled trust gains largely unrealised in mobility terms.

4.2. Recognition as Both Validation and Exclusion

Recognition of qualifications – the formal acknowledgment of degrees and credits

by other institutions or jurisdictions – lies at the heart of international higher education. In principle, recognition (often through accreditation status) serves as validation: it affirms that a credential meets certain standards, thus allowing graduates to pursue further study or employment elsewhere. For example, a university degree accredited in Country A and recognized by Country B validates the graduate’s achievement in the eyes of Country B’s institutions. However, the flipside is that recognition mechanisms inherently exclude what falls outside the accepted frame. If your institution or program lacks recognized accreditation, you may find your qualifications discredited or denied. This creates a paradox: a system meant to assure fairness and quality can end up marginalizing those who, for various reasons, do not conform to the dominant accreditation regimes. Our analysis finds that this validation–exclusion tension manifests in several ways across regions, often reflecting underlying power inequalities and historical legacies.

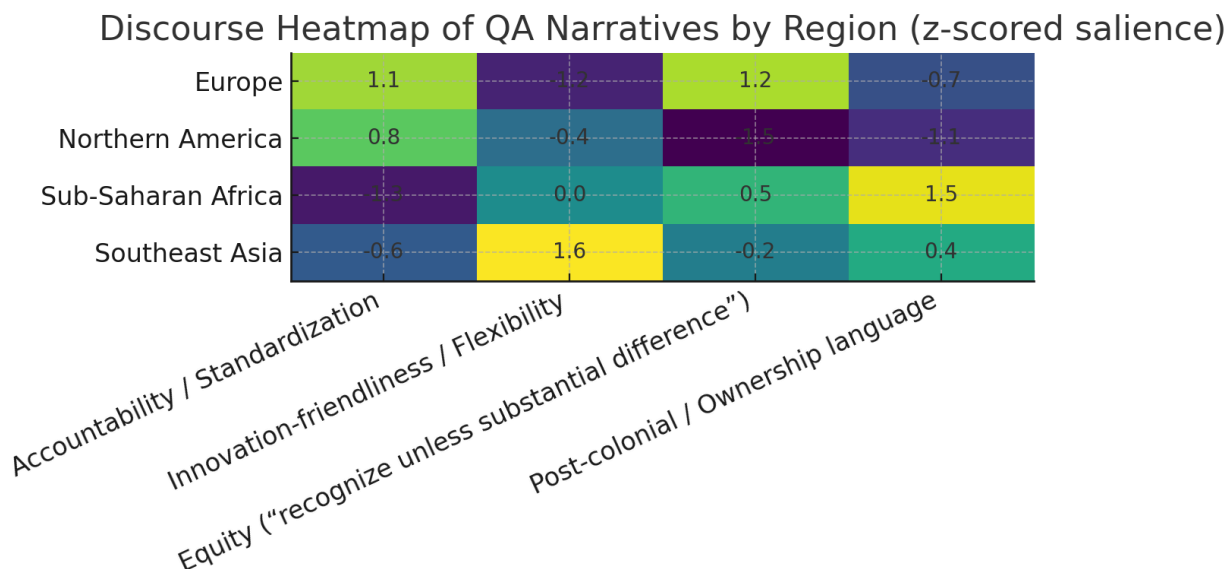


Figure 4. Competing QA narratives across regions: where compliance, equity, and innovation frames dominate. Heatmap of z-scored salience (darker = above-mean, lighter = below-mean) for four discourse families coded in the critical-discourse corpus ($N = 16$ canonical policy texts; Krippendorff $\alpha = 0.83$). Europe and Northern America foreground accountability/standardization, while Southeast Asia stresses innovation-friendliness. Sub-Saharan Africa features the strongest post-colonial/ownership language, reflecting contextual-justice claims. Europe alone couples high accountability with high equity rhetoric ("recognize unless substantial difference"), illustrating an internal harmonization of competing narratives. The pattern visualises the policy-paradox tension between compliance, equity, and innovation that underpins RQ2/RQ3.

Validation through Global/Regional Accreditations: On the validation side, obtaining international accreditation has become a strategy for universities to signal quality globally. For instance, many business schools seek AACSB or EQUIS accreditation; those that earn it are validated as part of an elite circle, which attracts students and employers and often influences rankings. Similarly, engineering programs in numerous countries pursue accreditation by bodies in the Washington Accord (a multilateral agreement among 25 signatory accreditation bodies that mutually recognize accredited engineering programs [IEA, 2025]). Being in the Washington Accord effectively validates an engineering program internationally and enables graduates to have their credentials recognized in all member countries. In the U.S., regional accreditation validates an institution as legitimate;

unaccredited institutions are typically not recognized (credits won't transfer, employers may not accept degrees). In Europe, inclusion in EQAR (the European Quality Assurance Register) validates a QA agency and, by extension, the degrees it oversees. By early 2025, 60 agencies were listed on EQAR, across 32 countries, with 33 of 49 EHEA countries enabling cross-border external QA by EQAR-registered agencies (covering most of the EHEA, thereby validating a continental network of trust). These examples show recognition's positive function: it's a passport for qualifications, easing student mobility and professional practice across borders when it works through mutual agreements.

Exclusion of Unrecognized Institutions and Knowledge: Conversely, recognition systems can exclude on multiple levels. First, institutions that are not accredited

or are accredited by bodies not recognized (so-called “accreditation mills” or nationally specific accreditors) often face exclusion. A stark case is in Africa: graduates from newer private universities in countries with weaker accreditation might find their degrees unrecognized even at home, if the government doesn’t approve that institution. Internationally, these graduates are doubly excluded if their institutions aren’t known to the credential evaluators abroad. Additionally, entire countries can face exclusion if they are outside the major conventions. Prior to the Addis (Arusha) Recognition Convention’s revival, many African countries had no mutual recognition deals – for example, a Kenyan degree might not automatically be accepted in Nigeria, forcing graduates to navigate case-by-case validations, often unsuccessfully. By 2021, only 27 African states had ratified the Addis Convention, limiting its reach (Shabani & Okebukola, 2017). On another front, epistemic exclusion occurs when forms of learning or knowledge not encapsulated by mainstream QA are not recognized. For instance, indigenous or community-based education programs may offer valuable learning but lack a pathway to formal recognition because they don’t fit standard accreditation criteria (language of instruction, curriculum structure, etc.). Postcolonial critiques highlight that local knowledge systems – e.g., African indigenous knowledge or traditional medicine courses – struggle for recognition if global accreditation norms favor Western paradigms. This raises the question: recognition for whom and by whose standards?

Credentialism and Gatekeeping:

Deborah Stone’s notion of paradox is evident in how policy goals of recognition can conflict. One goal is to protect the public and ensure quality by only recognizing “good” institutions. This inevitably involves gatekeeping – excluding the “bad” (diploma mills, substandard

programs). However, this can slide into a protectionist or elitist stance where newer or alternative institutions find it hard to break in. Policymaker narratives sometimes celebrate exclusion as a quality victory (“we refused recognition to X low-quality college”), while simultaneously decrying exclusion as an equity problem (“marginalized groups can’t access the recognized system”). A vivid example comes from the discourse around refugee qualifications: UNESCO’s (2023) Global Convention urges recognizing refugees’ qualifications even without full documentation, essentially pushing back on the exclusion that strict recognition rules would impose on refugees (who often cannot produce diplomas). This shows an awareness that too-rigid recognition = exclusion, which conflicts with the principle of the right to education. Some European countries now use “qualifications passports” to validate refugees’ learning in lieu of formal proof, an innovative solution to soften exclusion.

Regional Comparisons:

(i). Northern America: The U.S. has a binary of recognized vs unrecognized accreditors. CHEA and the Department of Education maintain lists of recognized accreditors; degrees from those accreditors’ schools are generally accepted, others are viewed with suspicion. This validates the vast majority (since most legitimate institutions are accredited), but it also has excluded, for example, some online or for-profit providers that lost accreditation – their students suddenly found credits non-transferable. A recent policy paradox occurred with for-profit colleges: accreditors tightened standards to validate quality (good), but when some colleges lost accreditation, thousands of students were left with effectively unrecognized credits (bad for them). On an international scale, the U.S. does not automatically recognize foreign credentials;

it relies on third-party evaluators who often use accreditation status as a key criterion. Thus, a foreign degree from an unaccredited institution is usually not recognized. Canada similarly relies on provincial listings of recognized institutions. The flip side is that some foreign accreditations are not accepted; for example, a medical school might be accredited in its country but if not recognized by the U.S. ECFMG list, its graduates can't practice in the U.S. These are examples of how recognition = validation for some, and lack thereof = exclusion.

(ii). Europe: Through the Lisbon Recognition Convention, Europe adopted a principle of “recognize unless substantial differences can be proven.” This is a pro-validation stance aiming to minimize unwarranted exclusion. It puts the burden on recognizing institutions to justify not recognizing a credential. This policy has generally facilitated more automatic recognition within EHEA countries. Yet, even Europe sees exclusion: degrees from outside the EHEA are often subject to strict nostrification processes. A university in Sub-Saharan Africa might be accredited nationally, but if its QA system is not seen as equivalent, European universities may decline recognition or require the student to redo portions. Moreover, in Europe's discourse, “world-class” often implies degrees from Western research universities, implicitly devaluing credentials from the Global South (a postcolonial critique). The advent of the European Universities Initiative (alliances of universities) might further validate members and exclude non-members in subtle reputational ways. Still, Europe is probably the most inclusive region regarding internal recognition due to its formal conventions.

(iii). Sub-Saharan Africa: Historically, a lack of robust recognition frameworks meant fragmentation and frequent exclusion. The

revitalized Addis Convention (2014) is trying to change that by committing countries to principles similar to Lisbon. The African Union also launched an African Qualifications Passport for refugees, inspired by Europe's, to prevent exclusion of displaced persons. CAMES (for Francophone Africa) has long facilitated cross-recognition among its member countries' universities, showing that sub-regional efforts helped some mobility. Yet, outside those arrangements, many African students had to go to great lengths to prove their credentials abroad. As local capacity grows, we see efforts to validate traditional institutions too – e.g., recognizing degrees from Islamic universities or technical institutes that previously were excluded from formal equivalence. The key struggle in Africa remains: without a fully implemented continental recognition system, graduates rely on whether their institution's name carries weight or not, which is a precarious form of validation.

(iv). Southeast Asia: Recognition in ASEAN is being strengthened via the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), which allows countries to reference their national qualifications frameworks to a regional grid. This helps in understanding equivalences (e.g., a Level 6 in Malaysia vs a Level 6 in Thailand). In terms of QA, if a program is certified by AUN-QA, it gains a form of regional validation that can persuade universities in other ASEAN countries to recognize its credits. Some bilateral agreements exist (e.g., Malaysia and Indonesia on mutual degree recognition). However, ASEAN's diversity (10 countries, very different systems) means recognition is still case-by-case in practice. There is also a pattern of seeking external validation: several top ASEAN universities have additionally sought accreditation from Western agencies (ABET for engineering, AACSB for business, etc.) to gain international validation

beyond ASEAN. Those that do obtain it (e.g., University of Malaya's engineering programs accredited by ABET) achieve broader recognition for their graduates. But this underscores the **postcolonial aspect**: Western validation is still often seen as the gold standard, thus excluding those without it. Within ASEAN, as frameworks mature, we can expect a more systematic validation approach, which ideally will reduce exclusion of ASEAN qualifications in the region and eventually globally.

Discursive Insights: The language around recognition reveals the value tensions. **Validation narrative:** "Assuring quality to build trust in qualifications" – this appears in UNESCO and World Bank texts, emphasizing fairness and opportunity (e.g., "*fair, transparent, and non-discriminatory recognition*" in the Global Convention [UNESCO, 2023]). **Exclusion narrative (often implicit):** "Protecting our system from bogus degrees" – this appears in more political rhetoric, such as immigration policy contexts or when discussing diploma mills. We also see a **justice narrative** emerging: "right to have your learning recognized" (especially for refugees and migrants), which is pushing recognition regimes to be more inclusive. The UNESCO Global Convention's allowance for recognizing refugee qualifications without full documents is a direct response to the exclusion problem (UNESCO, 2023). Another discourse: **epistemic exclusion** – scholars have begun to question if quality frameworks consider diverse epistemologies. For example, at a 2021 CGHE webinar titled "*Colonial legacies in 'academic quality' structures: a missing component in the decolonization debate?*", speakers argued that current QA regimes might exclude non-Western academic norms and that decolonizing higher ed must include rethinking what quality means (CGHE, 2021). Such discourse is still nascent but indicates a future wherein validation might

need to expand beyond Western-centric criteria to truly avoid exclusion.

In summary, recognition systems validate qualifications by providing a common language of quality, but they also draw boundaries that exclude those outside the agreed norms. The global accreditation paradox here is that efforts to guarantee quality and trust (via recognition) can inadvertently reinforce inequalities: prestigious accreditations concentrate advantage, and regions or groups without access to them are left out. A critical finding is that bridging this gap requires international cooperation and flexibility – as seen in the Global Convention and various regional pacts – to move from exclusionary validation ("only X counts as quality") to inclusive validation ("different systems, same trust"). The next section, on standardization and innovation, continues this theme by examining how the push for standard QA practices, while improving quality consistency, might limit diverse or innovative educational models, revealing yet another facet of the paradox.

4.3. Standardization as Both Assurance and Innovation Constraint

Quality assurance often entails **standardization** of processes and criteria – defining clear standards for institutions (e.g. faculty qualifications, curriculum structure, learning outcomes, facilities) and requiring adherence through regular reviews. **Standardization** in QA provides an assurance of baseline quality and comparability; it is reassuring to stakeholders that certain minimums are met everywhere. However, strict standardization can also act as a **constraint on innovation**, creativity, and context-specific practices in higher education. This paradox is well recognized in policy debates: How do we enforce standards without **standardizing away**

valuable diversity and stifling novel approaches to teaching, learning, and institutional models?

Quality Assurance as Assurance (Benefits of Standardization): The primary rationale for standardizing QA is to ensure that all institutions meet essential quality thresholds and to facilitate equivalence. For example, many countries have standardized credit systems (like credit hours or ECTS credits) so that workload and content volume are comparable – this aids student transfer and is basically required for mutual recognition. Standardizing program review cycles (e.g., every 5 years) and evaluation criteria (like requiring a formal internal QA system, student feedback mechanisms, etc.) has led to widespread adoption of quality enhancement cultures. In Europe, the ESG has 10 standards for internal QA and 7 for external QA, applied across universities from Portugal to Kazakhstan, which has undeniably raised quality awareness and consistency. In the U.S., accreditors set standards on things like general education requirements and financial stability; while some chafe at these, they have helped prevent extremely subpar institutions from operating and provide consumers with some uniform expectations. Another example is outcomes-based education (OBE): a global trend in QA is to require programs to define learning outcomes and assess student achievement against them. Standardizing around OBE ensures institutions focus on what students learn, not just what is taught, which is a positive step for accountability and improvement. Many innovations in pedagogy (e.g., problem-based learning, digital learning) have been scaled up because QA frameworks incorporated them into standards (like standardizing the requirement for technology integration or student-centered methods). Thus, standardization can spread innovation too – once an innovative practice

proves effective, it can be turned into a standard to be adopted widely.

Quality Assurance as Constraint (Costs of Standardization): The other side is that rigid standards may discourage experimentation that falls outside the norm. Universities might fear that deviating from standard metrics could jeopardize accreditation. For instance, if the standard requires faculty to have PhDs, an innovative program that wants to bring in industry experts without doctorates may face obstacles. If a new interdisciplinary degree doesn't fit into the predefined program structures (credit distribution, course length) mandated by accreditation, it might not get approved. A telling critique comes from U.S. higher education leaders: Charles Miller, chair of the Spellings Commission, famously claimed “*Accreditation is the biggest barrier to real change*” (Lederman, 2014), arguing that accreditors favor existing models and make it hard for disruptive models to gain acceptance (Lederman, 2014). Another example: online and competency-based education initially struggled for accreditation because standards were built around seat-time and physical resources. Accreditors had to adapt standards to allow these innovations, but the lag meant early innovators were constrained. In many developing countries, QA agencies – often newly established – tend to adopt very compliance-driven, checklist-based standards (e.g., a university must have X number of books per student, Y ratio of computers, a fixed curriculum structure, etc.). While this ensures basic inputs, it can inhibit institutions from trying new delivery models or curricular designs tailored to local needs (for fear of not meeting the standard template).

A vivid case from the literature is the French hospital accreditation paradox (analogous to education): making accreditation mandatory led establishments to focus narrowly on “complying with the manual” and

“standardizing practices...to the detriment of organizational development” (Pomey et al., 2005). By analogy, in higher education, if universities focus on checking all the QA boxes, they might invest less effort in truly creative improvement. Indeed, a survey of UK higher education professionals in 2023 found that only *11.6% felt that QA fully supported innovation*, with many perceiving QA as burdened by bureaucracy and risk-aversion (Gibbs et al., 2024). Respondents noted that heavy QA processes sometimes “stifle innovation” by consuming time and resources that could be used for teaching innovation (Gibbs et al., 2024). They described how some institutions reduce experimentation because failing to meet a standard could invite sanctions (Gibbs et al., 2024). This evidence underlines that the compliance culture bred by standardization can make institutions cautious and lean towards incremental changes rather than radical innovation.

Regional Perspectives on Standardization vs Innovation:

(i). Northern America: The U.S. accreditation system has often been accused of being input-focused and slow to adapt. However, it has evolved; regional accreditors now use more outcomes-based and flexible criteria than before. Still, innovators like Western Governors University (WGU) – a competency-based, online institution – had to fight for accreditation by proving their model under existing standards. WGU eventually got accredited (and is often cited as an innovation that overcame accreditation barriers), suggesting the system can adapt but perhaps not proactively. Policy debates in the U.S. have considered alternative accreditation pathways to encourage new models (e.g., proposed recognition of “innovation accreditors”), though these have not materialized. The Department of Education at times pushes accreditors to focus on student

outcomes (like graduation rates, loan defaults) to foster innovation in quality improvement, but accreditors worry about over-regulation. We also see in the U.S. a flourishing of non-accredited education (bootcamps, MOOCs) that innovated outside the accredited sector – a sign that the formal QA system was not flexible enough for certain cutting-edge learning providers, effectively excluding them until they become mainstream. The paradox here is clear: accreditation ensures stability and public accountability, but innovators sometimes choose to avoid accreditation initially because they perceive it as a hindrance – which can then limit those innovations’ legitimacy and reach until accommodations are made.

(ii). Europe: European QA is characterized by a relatively unified set of standards (ESG) and a philosophy of continuous improvement. It explicitly includes student-centered learning and the need for institutions’ own strategic approaches as standards. This has given some room for innovation (for instance, the ESG don’t dictate *how* to teach, only that teaching is regularly evaluated). Nonetheless, European universities have voiced concerns that the Bologna harmonization, while positive overall, can engender “bounded innovation.” A study on European QA agencies noted a tendency towards “convergence in procedures” and questioned whether agencies are encouraging transformative innovation or just compliance (Stensaker & Leiber, 2015). National variations show different balances: the UK, for example, historically had a lighter-touch QA and more institutional autonomy, which some say allowed its universities to innovate; whereas countries with very detailed accreditation criteria (like some in Eastern Europe) saw institutions being more passive, waiting to be told what to fix. Interestingly, Europe has launched projects to explicitly link QA and innovation – the EU’s

Modernisation Agenda calls on QA to support innovative teaching. Some QA agencies have created awards or flags for innovative practices to incentivize going beyond minimum standards. This is an attempt to square the circle: using the QA system itself to promote innovation (e.g., requiring evidence of innovative pedagogy as part of quality reviews). Whether this succeeds or just becomes another compliance item (“we must be seen as innovative for the review”) is a matter of ongoing evaluation.

(iii). *Sub-Saharan Africa*: Many African countries are still building basic QA standards (ensuring minimum facilities, faculty credentials, etc.), so the immediate need is assurance. But already, voices in Africa caution against a wholesale import of Western standards that might stifle local forms of education. For example, the strict requirement of academic staff having PhDs could be problematic in environments where doctoral training capacity is limited; insisting on that standard may exclude competent practitioners from teaching roles and hamper professionally oriented programs. The ASG-QA deliberately brands its standards as *guidelines* and “flexible” (HAQAA Initiative, 2019), an effort to avoid over-standardization. It acknowledges that context matters – for instance, under ASG-QA, countries are encouraged to set up QA agencies “*in line with the local national context*” (ASGQA, 2023). This suggests African QA framers are aware of the innovation constraint issue and want to leave room for local adaptation. That said, in practice, because many QA agencies are new and possibly donor-advised, they may default to replicating established standards from elsewhere (e.g., using European or American accreditation manuals as templates). This could inadvertently constrain the very innovation needed in African higher education – such as community-based curricula, use of local languages, or flexible delivery for working students – if those

innovations aren’t reflected in the imported standards. There’s a nascent movement towards “Africanizing” quality criteria, aligned with calls to decolonize education, which would broaden definitions of quality to include relevance to local socio-economic needs and indigenous knowledge. Achieving that while maintaining alignment with global benchmarks is the challenge.

(iv). *Southeast Asia*: Similar to Africa, many Southeast Asian QA systems initially drew on external models (e.g., Malaysia’s MQA standards had input from international experts, including Australians; AUN-QA was assisted by European experts). These brought in standard approaches, which certainly raised the quality floor. Over time, countries like Malaysia and Singapore have begun to emphasize innovation in their QA. Malaysia’s MQA introduced a Code of Practice that includes criteria for emphasizing “*MQF – Malaysian Qualifications Framework*” which has flexibility for learning pathways and the idea of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) – an innovative concept to recognize non-formal learning. Such moves show QA can evolve to foster innovation (in this case, innovating in recognizing diverse learning). Still, smaller ASEAN countries struggle with resources, so their QA might stick to basics. The AQAF guidelines (2020) also stress that QA agencies should themselves improve and innovate. Southeast Asia, being in between developed and developing, often pilots interesting hybrid approaches – e.g., Thailand’s OHEC tried an internal QA that was very metrics-heavy initially, which universities said was burdensome and limited creativity. Thailand then reformed QA to be more qualitative and empowering to universities. Thus, the region offers lessons on adjusting the degree of standardization to not choke off initiative. A lingering issue is that national prestige projects (world-class university efforts) sometimes push

universities to conform to ranking metrics (a form of standardization driven externally), possibly at the expense of local mission (like focusing on research output vs community engagement). QA agencies in the region are considering how to incorporate innovation indicators – like assessing how institutions foster entrepreneurship or serve unique local needs – which could encourage innovation rather than penalize deviations from academic norms.

Quantitative Insight: We cited earlier a UK survey – only 11.6% felt QA fully supports innovation (Gibbs et al., 2024). Also noteworthy: in that study, a majority of respondents could point to some innovation related to QA, but it was often *innovation in QA processes* itself (like using data analytics for QA) rather than QA enabling pedagogical innovation (Gibbs et al., 2024). This hints that quality systems might innovate internally (getting more efficient, data-driven) but not necessarily translate into allowing more pedagogical freedom. Moreover, small and niche institutions in that study felt that standard QA criteria put them at a disadvantage, because they could not meet some metrics (like breadth of research) yet were delivering strong teaching (Gibbs et al., 2024). This exemplifies how one-size standards can constrain mission differentiation and innovation in institutional type.

A Real-World Policy Debate: In the U.S., the former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos (2017-2020) argued that accreditors should become “innovation engines” rather than “watchdogs of status quo,” relaxing some standards to allow new providers (like coding bootcamps, low-cost online programs) into the federal financial aid ecosystem. This led to regulatory changes in 2019 giving accreditors more leeway to approve competency-based or asynchronous programs. This shows a policy-level attempt to resolve the paradox by

loosening standardization to accommodate innovation. It remains to be seen how accreditors implemented this; early signs suggest cautious uptake.

Balancing Act – Toward Adaptive Standards: The challenge for QA bodies is to develop adaptive standards – robust enough to ensure quality but flexible enough to permit and even encourage innovation. Concepts like “outcomes-based, context-informed” standards are emerging. For example, instead of specifying exactly *how* teaching must happen, a standard might simply require evidence that the teaching approach achieves learning outcomes, leaving method choices to the institution. Risk-based QA is another innovation: focusing oversight on high-risk areas and giving proven high-quality institutions more freedom (used in Australia and some European systems). This can reduce the innovation tax on good performers.

To conclude this section, standardization in quality assurance unquestionably brings assurance – without it, quality levels would be more erratic and trust harder to maintain. Yet, the risk is that excessive or inflexible standardization leads to a compliance culture that can discourage bold innovation and fail to value unique strengths of institutions. This aligns with recent UK sector evidence: in a 2024 QAA collaborative enhancement study of 176 professionals, only 11.6% reported that quality assurance “fully supported” innovation, with the qualitative data tracing the effect to process rigidity and risk-aversion (Gibbs et al., 2024). As one French accreditation study warned, there’s a “*tendency for establishments to reduce quality processes to nothing more than completion of accreditation...focusing on standardizing practices...to the detriment of organizational development*” (Pomey et al., 2005). The task ahead is to redesign QA regimes to be catalysts for improvement and innovation, not just checkpoints. In our final sections, we

discuss how policymakers and educators might address this, offering recommendations and a foresight on how the global accreditation paradox might evolve in the next decade.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion – Embracing Paradox to Achieve Balance: Our exploration of the Global Accreditation Paradox – the tug-of-war between global QA standardization and local contextual relevance – reveals that this paradox is not only real but perhaps inevitable in a globalized education landscape. Quality assurance and accreditation regimes have undeniably advanced higher education: they have built frameworks of trust that support unprecedented levels of student and scholar mobility, they have professionalized the oversight of academic standards, and they have provided benchmarks that many institutions used to elevate their performance. At the same time, these regimes have often carried embedded biases favoring certain models of education (typically Western, research-university-centric), and in doing so, they have sidelined or pressured divergent approaches – whether it’s a community college in Kenya, an indigenous college in Canada, or an ed-tech startup in Silicon Valley. The paradox is that the very mechanisms meant to assure *quality* can, if unchecked, become mechanisms that assure *conformity*.

Resolving this paradox does not mean abandoning global standards or fragmenting into local insularity. Instead, it requires a dialectical approach: global and local must be in dialogue. We conclude that a “glocal” model of quality assurance – one that upholds global principles of rigor and fairness while allowing generous space for local interpretation and innovation – is the way forward. Such a model aligns with

emerging trends: UNESCO’s Global Convention sets broad principles but leaves implementation to national bodies; African and ASEAN QA frameworks explicitly incorporate flexibility for context (Willemse, 2019); even European QA is now focusing on student-centered and institutional-specific contexts within the ESG framework.

Crucially, our analysis underlines the importance of capacity building and inclusivity. Regions or institutions that are behind in the QA game must be supported, not marginalized. The solution to inequitable mobility and recognition isn’t to lower standards, but to help everyone meet them in a way that makes sense locally. Similarly, innovation shouldn’t occur in spite of QA but within it – quality systems must evolve to recognize and reward innovation (for example, by including innovation metrics or by fast-tracking experimental programs under provisional approval rather than blocking them).

In concluding, we stress that policy actors should embrace the paradox as a productive tension. A certain degree of tension ensures vigilance: global standard-bearers will continuously check if standards are overly restrictive, while local practitioners will continually be prompted to justify how their innovations still meet fundamental quality thresholds. If managed via open communication and mutual respect (avoiding the colonial impulse to impose, or the relativist impulse to accept anything goes), the paradox can be the driving force for a more equitable, dynamic, and quality-driven global higher education space.

5.3. Actionable Recommendations: Based on our findings, we propose the following targeted recommendations for stakeholders at different levels to navigate and mitigate the global accreditation paradox:

(i). **Adopt a Principle of Contextualization in Global Standards:**

International bodies (UNESCO, INQAAHE, regional networks) should formally embed a clause in quality guidelines stating that implementation must be adapted to context. For example, the UNESCO Global Convention implementation guide could highlight best practices of contextual adaptation, and INQAAHE could develop a toolkit for “glocal QA” that helps national agencies align with global norms while reflecting local priorities. This shifts the mindset from “adopt or else” to “adapt and adopt.”

(ii). **Strengthen Regional Quality Assurance Networks:**

Regions with less integrated QA (Africa, parts of Asia, Latin America) should invest in their regional networks (AfriQAN, AQAN, etc.) to intermediate between global and national. Regional frameworks can translate global standards into regionally appropriate ones, as ASEAN’s AQAF does. Donors and development agencies should channel resources into these networks for training, peer learning, and external reviews. A practical step: organize more cross-regional peer reviews (e.g., African QA agency staff observing European agency processes and vice versa) to build mutual understanding and trust.

(iii). **Implement Mutual Recognition of Quality Assurance Agencies:**

Just as degrees get recognized, QA agencies themselves should be subject to recognition. The data that only 142 of 345 agencies have been externally reviewed must change. Bodies like the Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and regional associations should expand their review or certification schemes. If more agencies become “Recognized External QA Agencies” via networks like ENQA or APQN, it will be easier for one country to trust another’s accreditation decisions. We

recommend setting a global goal (perhaps for 2030) that all QA agencies undergo an external evaluation at least once – analogous to institutions seeking accreditation. This would reduce discrepancies in trust.

(iv). **Foster Inclusive Recognition Practices:**

National recognition centers (like ENIC-NARIC offices, or credential evaluators) should be trained and mandated to apply the “*recognize unless substantial difference*” rule generously, including for non-traditional qualifications. They should also have pathways for recognizing informal and indigenous learning. An actionable idea is to develop an international “*Qualifications Passport*” system (building on the refugee passports) for any learner who can demonstrate competencies, even if from unaccredited institutions. This creates a parallel route to prevent exclusion when formal accreditation frameworks fall short.

(v). **Encourage Innovation-Friendly Accreditation:**

Accrediting organizations need to modernize their standards and processes to incentivize innovation. We recommend establishing special “*innovation accreditation*” labels or pathways. For instance, an accreditor could offer an “experimental program accreditation” that approves genuinely novel programs with appropriate safeguards, rather than forcing them into existing criteria. Accreditors should also include innovation and impact as part of evaluation: ask not just “are you meeting standards?” but “how are you exceeding them or changing the game?” Some U.S. accreditors have begun doing this in reviews; it should be standard practice globally. Policymakers can assist by giving accreditors cover (e.g., governments assuring that taking reasonable risks on innovative models will not lead to punitive action if outcomes are monitored).

(vi). **Balance Quantitative Metrics with Qualitative, Mission-Specific Review:**

Too much standardization often comes from simplistic metrics. Quality assurance should include customized self-study questions for institutions about how they fulfill their unique mission and serve their community. Review panels should include local/regional experts who understand context. We advise QA agencies to allocate a section of accreditation reports to “*contextual judgment*.” This would explicitly note where a standard was interpreted in light of the institution’s context – making the process transparent and educative for others. Over time, collecting these contextual judgments can refine standards to be more flexible.

(vii). **Capacity Building and Equity**

Focus: International funding for higher education (e.g., World Bank projects, EU Erasmus+ capacity programs) should prioritize QA capacity in low-income countries with an equity lens. This includes training QA professionals, developing information systems for QA, and twinning arrangements between established and nascent QA agencies. Also, within countries, ensure that not only elite universities but also technical colleges and emerging private institutions are supported to meet accreditation requirements. Otherwise, recognition systems will continue to exclude those who most need validation (often marginalized communities attending newer institutions).

(viii). **Continuous Dialogue and**

Research: Finally, we recommend institutionalizing forums for dialogue on the global accreditation paradox. For example, an annual “*Global Quality & Equity in HE*” symposium could be convened by UNESCO’s International Institute for Higher Education (IESALC), bringing together accreditors, universities, student representatives, and researchers. This would monitor the impact of

QA on mobility, recognition, and innovation and share best practices. Ongoing research (perhaps a “Global QA Paradox Observatory”) should track data like the mobility of students from non-recognized institutions, or how many innovative programs get accredited, to inform policy adjustments.

By taking these actions, stakeholders can align quality assurance with the twin goals of excellence and inclusion. The recommendations aim to ensure that QA systems become enabling frameworks – upholding rigorous standards *and* embracing diverse paths to achieve them. The global accreditation paradox can be resolved not by choosing one side (global vs local, standards vs context) but by creative synthesis that leverages the strengths of both.

To make these recommendations auditable and outcome-oriented, Parties to UNESCO’s Global Convention should require their national information centres to publish, annually, both median and 90th-percentile processing times for recognition decisions and refusal rates disaggregated by qualification type and level. Publishing these indicators operationalizes the Convention’s principles of transparency, timeliness, and accessible information via official national information centres, while creating comparable baselines for improvement (UNESCO, 2019; UNESCO, 2025b). Regional quality assurance networks should, as a condition of good standing, file a time-bound plan for an external review aligned to the INQAAHE International Standards and Guidelines or an equivalent framework, and ensure the resulting reports are logged in a publicly searchable registry to strengthen cross-system trust (INQAAHE, 2024; INQAAHE, 2023). Development partners that finance QA reforms should structure grants using problem-driven iterative adaptation with explicit 12- and 24-month milestones and

independent audits, to avoid capability traps and verify that reforms yield functional gains rather than isomorphic form (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2013).

5.3. Future Research & Ten-Year Foresight: Looking ahead to the next decade, future research should explore how emerging trends might reshape the global accreditation paradox. Digital transformation – such as AI-assisted learning and blockchain credentialing – will challenge QA to adapt standards for entirely new modes of education, making the balance between innovation and assurance even more pertinent. Research could also examine the long-term impact of the UNESCO Global Convention’s implementation: Will it significantly narrow the recognition gap by 2035, or will political barriers persist? A ten-year foresight scenario envisions a 2035 where quality assurance is far more networked globally: perhaps a global clearinghouse of accredited programs accessible in real-time, and a system of “stackable” micro-credentials with international quality seals. In this optimistic scenario, the paradox attenuates – global standards exist but in a modular, flexible form, and local innovation flourishes under a broad umbrella of quality culture. However, vigilance will be needed to ensure that as new standards (for example, around digital learning quality or sustainability in curricula) arise, they do not recapitulate old hierarchies. In sum, the next decade will demand agile, evidence-informed policy adjustments and scholarly inquiry to ensure that global quality assurance evolves as a force for both high standards and higher inclusion, truly realizing the positive side of the paradox across all regions of the world.

5.4. Limitations: This study has three limitations that temper its claims and indicate future research paths. First, regional coverage is uneven, as publicly available documentation and independent evaluations are denser for Europe

than for Africa, Latin America, or parts of Asia, which can bias descriptive contrasts. Second, several recognition markers used as proxies for cross-border trust, such as external review under the INQAAHE ISGs or membership in regional networks, vary in stringency across regions, reducing comparability. Third, critical discourse analysis is susceptible to coder effects; we mitigated this through a documented codebook, double-coding of a subset, and double-coding of a subset with discrepancies resolved by consensus, yet interpretive bias cannot be fully eliminated. These constraints justify our cautious tone and point to the need for broader regional sampling, more granular recognition metrics, and triangulation with additional qualitative and administrative data.

Appendices

1. Annex A: Data and methods underlying Figure 2 [\[Link\]](#)
2. An auditable spreadsheet that lists every denominator agency for the regions [\[Link\]](#)
3. Corpus list (policy texts and communiqués, 2004–2025 [\[Link\]](#))

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