

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM AZERBAIJAN STATE PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY

Bayim Nabiyeva

Specialist, Quality Assurance Department, Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University, Baku, Azerbaijan

Ph.D. student, Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University, Baku, Azerbaijan

bayim.nabiyeva@adpu.edu.az

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8887-9960>

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the conceptual bases, institutional practices, and strategic views on quality assurance (QA) in higher education, focusing on the case of Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU). The study incorporates a descriptive-analytical methodology, combining literature review, policy document analysis, and evaluation of institutional practices, with particular attention to management frameworks, internal quality assurance systems, and stakeholder engagement.

The findings reveal that ASPU has developed QA mechanisms aligned with international standards (ESG), while adapting them to local needs through three complementary approaches: excellence-oriented management, transformative and adaptive educational services, and accountability-based monitoring. Results from surveys, rating assessments of academic staff, and accreditation reviews demonstrate progress in transparency, institutional reputation, and quality culture. However, challenges remain in achieving a shared institutional vision, overcoming reliance on traditional teaching methods, and inhibiting the formal implementation of quality assurance procedures.

The discussion emphasizes the dual function of QA as both a compliance tool and a driver of institutional development, highlighting the importance of reflexive analysis and integration of organizational values. ASPU's experience indicates that effective QA fosters internal cultural change, enhances trust among stakeholders, and strengthens the university's international visibility.

The paper concludes that sustainable quality culture in higher education requires continuous self-assessment, dynamic adaptation to societal changes, and collective participation of all stakeholders. Recommendations emphasize the need to improve methodological coherence among faculty and to establish quality assurance as a transformational institutional approach rather than merely a procedural tool.

Keywords: *Quality assurance, higher education, management, Azerbaijan, ASPU*

Introduction

Higher education systems worldwide are undergoing rapid transformation driven by digitalization, evolving socio-economic needs, and rising expectations for institutional accountability, transparency, and quality. For countries building knowledge-based economies – such as Azerbaijan – quality assurance (QA) has become a core mechanism for strengthening higher education governance and supporting national development priorities. Within this context, universities are gradually transitioning from traditional teaching-oriented structures to dynamic, innovation-driven institutions capable of embedding digital technologies, evidence-based decision-making, and continuous quality enhancement into their organizational culture.

Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU), as one of the country's leading teacher education institutions, has been at the forefront of implementing internal quality assurance systems aligned with both national policy reforms and emerging global standards. Theoretical and empirical literature highlights that the effectiveness of QA in higher education depends on its integration into strategic management cycles, its capacity to guide evidence-informed decision-making, and its ability to foster institutional learning and improvement. Research also shows that universities with well-developed QA systems tend to achieve higher levels of performance, innovation capacity, and alignment with societal needs.

Thus, the study is positioned within the broader discourse on quality assurance, strategic governance, and organizational transformation in higher education. It argues that QA is not merely a mechanism for compliance

but a strategic tool that influences institutional development, contributes to human capital formation, and ultimately shapes macro-level socio-economic progress. Through an in-depth analysis of ASPU's experience, the study investigates how QA practices can strengthen institutional effectiveness and support national educational modernization goals.

Aim

The aim of this research is to analyze the internal quality assurance practices of Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University and examine how these mechanisms enhance institutional performance, support evidence-based management, and contribute to broader national education objectives. Specifically, the study focuses on:

- Assessing the structure, processes, and effectiveness of ASPU's internal QA system;
- Exploring how QA practices inform strategic planning, decision-making, and continuous improvement across the university;
- Identifying institutional and policy-related conditions that enable QA to drive organizational development and align university outcomes with national priorities.

By doing so, the study aims to develop a conceptual and practical understanding of how internal QA can function as a strategic instrument for institutional transformation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is built upon four complementary perspectives – New Public Management (NPM), Human Capital Theory, Institutional Theory, and Innovation Systems Theory – which together provide a multidimensional conceptual structure for understanding quality assurance (QA) in higher education and its institutional and societal implications. These theories collectively explain how internal QA mechanisms at Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU) influence organizational behavior, strategic decision-making, and broader educational and economic outcomes.

Above-mentioned theories create a comprehensive conceptual map for the study. NPM explains governance and performance mechanisms; Human Capital Theory situates QA within national development; Institutional Theory clarifies organizational adaptation to external pressures; and Innovation Systems Theory highlights the role of QA in fostering innovation. The integrated framework thus allows the research to examine how ASPU's internal QA practices operate at the intersection of institutional governance, human capital enhancement, organizational legitimacy, and innovation-driven development. This theoretical configuration guides the analysis of variables – including QA processes, institutional performance, strategic governance practices, and socio-economic outcomes – and provides a structured foundation for interpreting the empirical findings of the study.

Literature Review

The literature on quality assurance (QA) in higher education generally conceptualizes the notion of “quality” through three dominant perspectives. First, several scholars define quality as a management approach oriented toward excellence, where universities seek to align their teaching, research, governance, and internationalization processes with globally or regionally recognized standards such as the ESG (Harvey, 2024). Second, quality is described as a transformative and adaptive service approach in general management, emphasizing the need for institutions to respond to dynamic social, economic, technological, and cultural changes through context-specific strategies (Galkute, 2014). Third, quality is examined as a mechanism of control and accountability, positioning QA as a core component of political evaluation and strategic decision-making processes (Westerheijden, 2014).

At Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU), QA practices reflect all three conceptual traditions. According to the University's QA Department Regulations, institutional functions are organized around (1) activities aimed at improving academic staff and student preparedness (excellence-oriented management), (2) participation in national and international projects and the adaptation of external institutional experiences (transformative and adaptive service approach), and (3) systematic monitoring, performance evaluation, and rating-based assessment of academic and administrative units (accountability mechanism). These dimensions together constitute the university's strategic pillars for quality enhancement.

The literature further indicates that effective QA implementation requires the identification of clear objects of evaluation (what is assessed?), standards (who defines them and how?), content (which features are evaluated?), and values (guiding principles) (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2023). ASPU's QA Policy reflects this framework by defining QA as the system of policies, procedures, and practices ensuring alignment with academic, research, and community service goals. Continuous changes in stakeholder needs necessitate regular review, evaluation, and updating of monitoring tools, self-assessment procedures, and improvement plans.

Empirical studies categorize QA practices into four broad domains: (1) institutional and policy frameworks regulated through normative standards, (2) service-centered approaches that promote student-centered learning, (3) accreditation mechanisms aligned with national and international standards, and (4) dynamic management frameworks that integrate complementary processes and stakeholder participation (Pramono, 2024). Consistent with broader findings, Carvalho (2023) and Zhang (2022) argue that QA is both an institutional responsibility and a professional mandate that safeguards minimum standards in educational services and capacity building. In ASPU's context, this dual perspective is reflected in the application of both internal QA (stakeholder-led monitoring and evaluation) and external QA (accreditation, state agencies, and international partners).

Harvey (2023) highlights that QA contributes to institutional improvement primarily by cultivating a culture of reflexive analysis, enabling universities to confirm achievements, identify areas for improvement, and justify strategic priorities. This aligns with ASPU's recent initiatives, including the development of its QA Policy, the adoption of the ESG standards, preparation of internal QA guidelines, and establishment of multiple QA structures—Quality Commission, Monitoring Commission, and university-wide working groups. Furthermore, ASPU's engagement in national and international projects, including the IQAinAR initiative, and its extensive reporting practices (e.g., annual rating evaluation of staff and departments) have strengthened both quality culture and reflective practices.

Research on contemporary higher education emphasizes that modern universities operate simultaneously as pedagogical institutions, competitive service providers, strategic decision-makers, and innovation-driven organizations. QA contributes to these expanded roles by reinforcing transparency, strengthening institutional reputation, and facilitating network-based collaboration among universities (Oktarina, 2024). ASPU's recent experience demonstrates similar gains: transparent rating evaluations, stakeholder surveys, and the public dissemination of assessment reports have improved institutional accountability. Large-scale student surveys – for instance, participation of 5,137 students in the 2024/2025 academic year QA survey – signal enhanced trust and institutional visibility.

The literature also underscores the importance of stakeholder engagement in QA processes. According to Kayyali (2023), effective QA relies on the active involvement of academic staff, students, administrative personnel, and employers, as broad participation strengthens strategic goal attainment and collective ownership. Limited participation, on the other hand, reduces individual responsibility and undermines institutional improvement. Reflecting these insights, ASPU has expanded stakeholder roles across multiple QA activities, including working groups, commissions, surveys, rating evaluations, and curriculum reform efforts. Additionally, initiatives such as integrating global best practices into master's thesis topics and updating course content based on leading country models further illustrate strong stakeholder engagement.

Although QA brings significant advantages, the literature also identifies ongoing challenges. Oktarina (2024) notes obstacles such as incomplete staff awareness of shared goals, the risk of QA processes becoming formalistic, and the scarcity of qualified QA professionals. ASPU's 2025 student survey results reflect similar concerns, which are signals of partial misalignment between staff perceptions and quality expectations. Addressing these challenges requires a unified institutional vision and stronger methodological coherence across academic units, along with a shift from procedural compliance to meaningful, improvement-oriented QA practices.

The literature further emphasizes the dynamic nature of QA. According to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2023), QA systems should not be static; rather, they must evolve in response to societal, technological, and

economic conditions. This perspective supports ASPU's ongoing efforts to continuously update strategic plans, quality targets, and managerial mechanisms.

An emerging theme in the literature is the integration of organizational values with quality culture. Vettori's "quality engineering model" suggests that internal processes and structures must be organized to promote effective governance and sustainable development, not merely accreditation compliance (Harvey, 2024). This conceptualization is mirrored in ASPU's experience, where quality culture contributes to collective understanding of improvement needs and fosters alignment between institutional values and quality imperatives. International evidence, particularly from Finland, illustrates that transparency, progressive learning environments, entrepreneurial attitudes, and social integration reinforce strong quality cultures (Harvey, 2024). These findings imply that long-term success depends on embedding quality deeply within institutional identity and strategic direction.

Literature gap and contribution of this study: Although the global literature extensively discusses QA frameworks, stakeholder participation, and institutional culture, there is a limited body of research examining QA implementation in teacher-training universities within emerging economies, particularly in the context of digital transformation and innovation ecosystems. Existing studies seldom analyze QA as a multidimensional mechanism that simultaneously influences governance, learning outcomes, institutional culture, and university-industry collaboration.

This study contributes to the literature by providing an integrated examination of QA practices at ASPU through the combined lenses of New Public Management, Human Capital Theory, Institutional Theory, and Innovation Systems Theory. By linking QA processes to strategic governance, human capital development, organizational adaptation, and innovation capacity, the study offers a holistic conceptualization of QA that expands existing theoretical and empirical discussions, especially within the regional context of Azerbaijan.

Methodology

Research Model

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, employing an institutional case study approach combined with document analysis. The research model is designed to examine internal quality assurance (IQA) practices and strategic development processes at Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU). The focus is on understanding how QA mechanisms, strategic planning instruments, and organizational practices contribute to institutional performance and align with contemporary quality assurance theories.

The qualitative case study approach enables an in-depth examination of QA as a multidimensional institutional process, allowing the study to capture interactions between governance structures, resource capacity, operational processes, and performance outcomes. Document analysis provides a systematic means of examining formal policies, evaluations, and performance indicators within internationally recognized QA frameworks.

Sampling Method

The study examines the institutional environment of ASPU, a teacher-training university in Azerbaijan that is in the process of developing and strengthening its internal quality assurance system. The research sample consists of official institutional documents and datasets produced between 2021 and 2025, selected through purposeful sampling based on their relevance to QA implementation and strategic development.

Key data sources include:

- The 2023 Accreditation Report of the Education Quality Assurance Agency of Azerbaijan (TKTA), evaluating institutional resources, academic staff capacity, and QA governance mechanisms;
- The University's 2030 Strategic Development Plan and internal QA policy documents;
- Institutional performance indicators, including ASPU's results in the THE Impact Rankings 2025 and the UI GreenMetric World University Rankings 2025;
- Internal evaluation instruments, such as the 106-criterion academic staff rating system;

- Large-scale stakeholder surveys conducted in 2025, covering 5,137 students as well as academic and administrative personnel.

Together, these sources provide a comprehensive dataset for assessing ASPU's internal QA practices and institutional development.

Collection of Data

Data collection was conducted between January and October 2025 using a systematic document analysis procedure, complemented by a secondary review of relevant scholarly literature. Accreditation reports were used to assess institutional resource capacity, structural organization, and governance mechanisms supporting teaching, research, and administrative processes. Strategic plans and policy documents provided insight into developmental priorities and future-oriented initiatives.

Internal QA instruments – such as self-assessment reports, rating evaluations, and stakeholder surveys – offered evidence on the implementation and monitoring of QA processes. International ranking data served as outcome-based indicators for evaluating institutional effectiveness and external recognition. Scholarly literature informed the conceptual framework and supported the interpretation of institutional QA practices.

All documents were identified, compiled, and categorized according to a resource–process–outcome framework. To ensure reliability and authenticity, all materials were cross-checked against official institutional releases. Ethical considerations were strictly observed; the study relied exclusively on publicly accessible and anonymized institutional data, and no personal or sensitive information was collected.

Analysis Method

Data analysis followed a qualitative content analysis approach supported by thematic coding. Deductive codes were derived from established QA literature, including critiques of compliance-oriented QA systems (Harvey, 2023), integrated resource–process–outcome models (Oktarina, 2024), and IPA-based (Importance-Performance Analysis) institutional improvement frameworks (Dwaikat, 2020).

Institutional data were systematically mapped against these conceptual categories to examine how resource availability, organizational structures, and strategic planning practices support QA implementation at ASPU. Triangulation across multiple data sources – accreditation reports, policy documents, internal evaluations, ranking results, and stakeholder surveys – was employed to enhance analytical reliability and reduce interpretive bias.

Finally, findings were interpreted through the lenses of New Public Management, Human Capital Theory, Institutional Theory, and Innovation Systems Theory, enabling an integrated understanding of how ASPU's internal QA system functions as a mechanism for strategic governance, institutional development, and socio-economic contribution.

Findings / Results

This section presents the findings obtained from the qualitative analysis of accreditation reports, institutional policy documents, internal evaluation instruments, strategic plans, and stakeholder survey data related to internal quality assurance (QA) practices at Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU). The findings are organized according to the resource–process–outcome framework. The main findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Main Findings on Internal Quality Assurance Practices at ASPU

Dimension	Indicator	Data Source	Findings
Resources	Institutional structure	TKTA Accreditation Report (2023)	Existence of formally established academic and administrative units responsible for QA and governance
	Academic staff capacity	Accreditation Report; Internal records	Presence of qualified academic staff and specialized research units supporting teaching and research
	Digital infrastructure	Strategic Plan 2030; Internal QA documents	Developing electronic management systems supporting academic and administrative coordination
Processes	Stakeholder surveys	Internal QA reports (2025)	Annual surveys conducted among students, academic staff, and administrative personnel
	Student participation	QA Survey Data (2025)	Participation of 5,137 students in institutional quality surveys
	Performance evaluation	Internal QA mechanisms	Implementation of a 106-criterion academic staff rating system and regular self-assessment procedures
Outcomes	External evaluation results	THE Impact Rankings (2025)	Institutional placement reflecting assessed performance in sustainability and social impact
	Environmental performance	UI GreenMetric Ranking (2025)	Evaluated outcomes related to energy efficiency, environmental management, and green campus initiatives
	Internal monitoring outputs	Institutional evaluation reports	Annual evaluation reports produced for academic units and staff performance

As presented in Table 1, the findings indicate that internal quality assurance at ASPU is structured around three interrelated dimensions: institutional resources, QA processes, and performance outcomes. Accreditation documentation confirms the presence of organizational structures, qualified human resources, and developing digital infrastructure that support QA-related activities across academic and administrative domains.

Process-related findings show that ASPU has implemented systematic internal QA mechanisms, including stakeholder surveys, self-evaluation reports, and performance monitoring tools. The participation of 5,137 students in the 2025 institutional surveys demonstrates large-scale engagement in QA activities. In addition, the application of a 106-criterion rating system provides structured input for monitoring academic staff performance and institutional processes.

Outcome-related findings are reflected in both internal and external evaluation results. External rankings, such as the THE Impact Rankings 2025 and the UI GreenMetric World University Rankings 2025, provide documented performance indicators in areas related to sustainability, environmental management, and institutional development. Internal evaluation reports further generate regular monitoring outputs used for institutional review and reporting purposes.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that ASPU's internal quality assurance system is operationalized through documented institutional capacities, systematically applied QA processes, and measurable outcome indicators. These results establish an empirical basis for examining the role of QA in institutional governance and development, which is further addressed in the Discussion section.

Discussion

The findings confirm that quality assurance in higher education extends beyond technical compliance and functions as a strategic mechanism for institutional governance and development. Consistent with contemporary QA literature, ASPU's experience illustrates that effective QA depends on the integration of stakeholder participation, data-informed monitoring, and alignment with institutional strategy.

The strong resource base identified through accreditation outcomes supports previous research emphasizing the importance of institutional capacity in QA effectiveness. Adequate staffing, structured governance units, and digital infrastructure enable universities to move beyond fragmented quality initiatives toward system-wide implementation. In ASPU's case, these resources create favorable conditions for embedding QA into daily academic and administrative practices.

The process dimension highlights the transformative role of internal QA mechanisms. Regular surveys, self-assessment procedures, and performance evaluations foster a culture of quality by engaging academic staff, students, and administrators in reflective practices. The application of the IPA-based Total Quality Management approach demonstrates that identifying weaker performance areas and prioritizing targeted interventions enhances overall institutional effectiveness. This supports existing critiques of purely compliance-oriented QA and reinforces the value of adaptive, improvement-focused models.

The outcome indicators, particularly international rankings, serve as external validation of internal QA efforts. While rankings are not comprehensive measures of quality, they provide useful signals of institutional progress, visibility, and alignment with global sustainability and development agendas. ASPU's improved ranking positions suggest that internally driven QA practices can translate into externally recognized performance gains.

Taken together, these findings align with theoretical perspectives such as New Public Management, Institutional Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Innovation Systems Theory. QA at ASPU operates at the intersection of accountability, organizational legitimacy, human capital development, and innovation, demonstrating how internal QA can simultaneously satisfy regulatory requirements and support strategic institutional transformation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that internal quality assurance at Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University functions as a strategic instrument rather than a purely procedural or bureaucratic mechanism. Through the integration of resource capacity, process coordination, and outcome evaluation, QA contributes to institutional effectiveness, accountability, and continuous improvement.

The analysis shows that ASPU's internal QA system supports evidence-based management, strengthens stakeholder engagement, and aligns institutional practices with national education priorities and international standards. Accreditation outcomes confirm the availability of institutional resources, while internal monitoring tools and surveys enable systematic evaluation and adaptive decision-making. Improvements in international ranking performance further indicate that sustained QA efforts can enhance institutional visibility and development outcomes.

Importantly, the findings underscore that meaningful QA requires a shift from compliance-driven practices toward improvement-oriented and strategically embedded approaches. When aligned with organizational values, digital transformation agendas, and stakeholder expectations, QA becomes a driver of innovation, institutional learning, and sustainable development.

In conclusion, the ASPU case illustrates how internal quality assurance can serve as a multidimensional mechanism that strengthens governance, enhances human capital development, and supports broader socio-economic objectives. These insights are particularly relevant for teacher-training universities and higher education institutions in emerging economies seeking to modernize their systems and build resilient, quality-oriented academic environments.

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