FROM TOKENISM TO TRUST: MATURING INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES
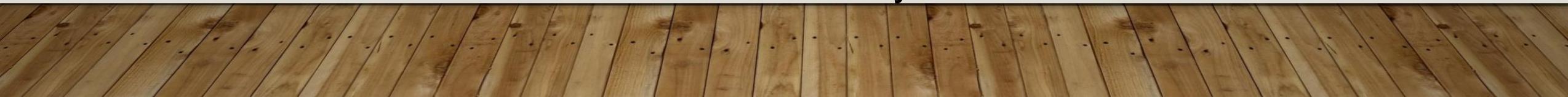
By Hardson Kwandayi (PhD, University of Arizona, USA)

Zimbabwe Council For Higher Education (ZIMCHE)

Director, Academic and Institutional Audits

Sun City, SA

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POINT OF CLARIFICATION/CAUTION

- Tokenism or simplistic or ritualistic QA is not only found in Africa. It is global phenomenon. E.g. theories and references I use most of them if not all were not developed in Africa.

MAIN THESIS OF GROUP DISCUSSION

- Tokenistic IQA practices in some African universities undermine trust and fail to drive genuine quality improvement.

- Institutional isomorphism and impression management explain why many universities adopt superficial QA models to gain legitimacy.

- Mature IQA systems are strategically aligned, inclusive, evidence-based, transparent, and contextually relevant.

- Transitioning to trusted IQA requires cultural change, capacity building, stakeholder engagement, and decentralization.

- Evaluating IQA maturity demands multi-dimensional indicators that go beyond compliance checklists to assess real impact.

INTRODUCTION: QUALITY ASSURANCE CONTEXT IN AFRICA

- Quality assurance (QA) systems in Africa are in their infancy (Odiambo, 2014, Mukora, 2022)

- QA on the continent faces several challenges such as limited financial and human capacity (Materu, 2007; Mukora, 2022)

- Managerialism premised on the New Public Management paradigm resulting in the risky ritualistic quality assurance in universities (Davis, 2017)

- Limited study of higher education as a discipline on the continent (Altbach, 2014) resulting in lack of what Lynham & McDonald (2011) call the triadic relationship of theory, research and practice.

- High competition associated with massification in higher education has also compounded the problem resulting in marketization (Kivinen & Kaipainen, 2002) associated with **selling education**.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LIMITED QA CAPACITY AND STIFF COMPETITION

❑Owing to limited QA capacity and stiff competition, some institutions have been tempted to engage in ritualistic or performative QA activities which I characterize as tokenism.

❑These ritualistic or performative QA activities are characterized by marketization which is closely related to promotional culture.

Examples of authors associated with marketization and promotional culture include:

❑The Marketisation of Higher Education: Concepts, Cases, and Criticisms (Branch & Christiansen, 2021)

❑Moving from Marketization to Marketing of Higher Education (Judson & Taylor, 2014)

MARKETIZATION AND PROMOTIONAL CULTURE

Marketization in Higher Education refers to the process where institutions operate more like businesses competing in a market. This means adopting market-driven practices—such as branding in order to attract students, funding, and prestige.

Promotional culture in higher education: refers to the growing emphasis on image-building and strategic communication by universities as they compete for students, funding, partnerships, and prestige. It describes a shift in which institutions increasingly prioritize branding, public relations, reputation management, and the showcasing of achievements to influence how they are perceived by external audiences.

MARKETIZATION – KEY ELEMENTS

- Marketization often results in IQA becoming symbolic rather than substantive

- Focus is on reputation management rather than real improvement

- Marketized institutions prioritize appearing high quality to attract students, funders, and partners.

- Emphasis on compliance culture over developmental culture -in a competitive market, quality assurance becomes tied to regulatory compliance.

- Staff perform QA tasks (course reviews, evaluations, audits) to satisfy requirements, not to meaningfully reflect on quality. This reduces IQA to a tick-box exercise.

MARKETIZATION -MANAGERIALISM AND METRICS REPLACE ACADEMIC JUDGEMENT

- The focus is on performance indicators, ranking metrics, student evaluation scores

- There is pressure to avoid negative findings

- Internal reviewers fear exposing weaknesses that could harm departmental rankings or funding. Managers often push for "positive" results.

- This leads to sanitised reports, minimal critique, and rubber-stamping of programs. Quality assurance becomes about protecting image—not improving quality.

MARKETIZATION-STUDENT-AS-CONSUMER MENTALITY ENCOURAGES SUPERFICIAL QA ACTIVITIES

- When students are viewed as customers: "Customer satisfaction" surveys dominate.

- Institutions prioritise what is *marketable* rather than what is *pedagogically sound*.

- This skews IQA toward short surveys, satisfaction metrics, branding exercises

rather than deep evaluations of curriculum, pedagogy, or assessment integrity.

PROMOTIONAL CULTURE BEHAVIOURS

1. Branding and image management: Universities craft strong institutional brands—logos, slogans, storytelling, and visual identities—to shape how they are perceived and differentiate themselves in a competitive environment.

2. Strategic marketing and advertising: Institutions use digital marketing, social media campaigns, recruitment fairs, and targeted advertisements to attract prospective students, donors, and partners.

3. Rankings and performance showcasing: Universities selectively highlight favourable rankings, awards, accreditation outcomes, and success indicators to project prestige and academic excellence.

4. Reputation management and public relations: Dedicated PR teams manage media relations, produce positive news stories, and mitigate negative publicity.

5. Student experience promotion: Institutions promote campus life, support services, facilities, employability statistics, and student testimonials to enhance attractiveness and reinforce perceived value.
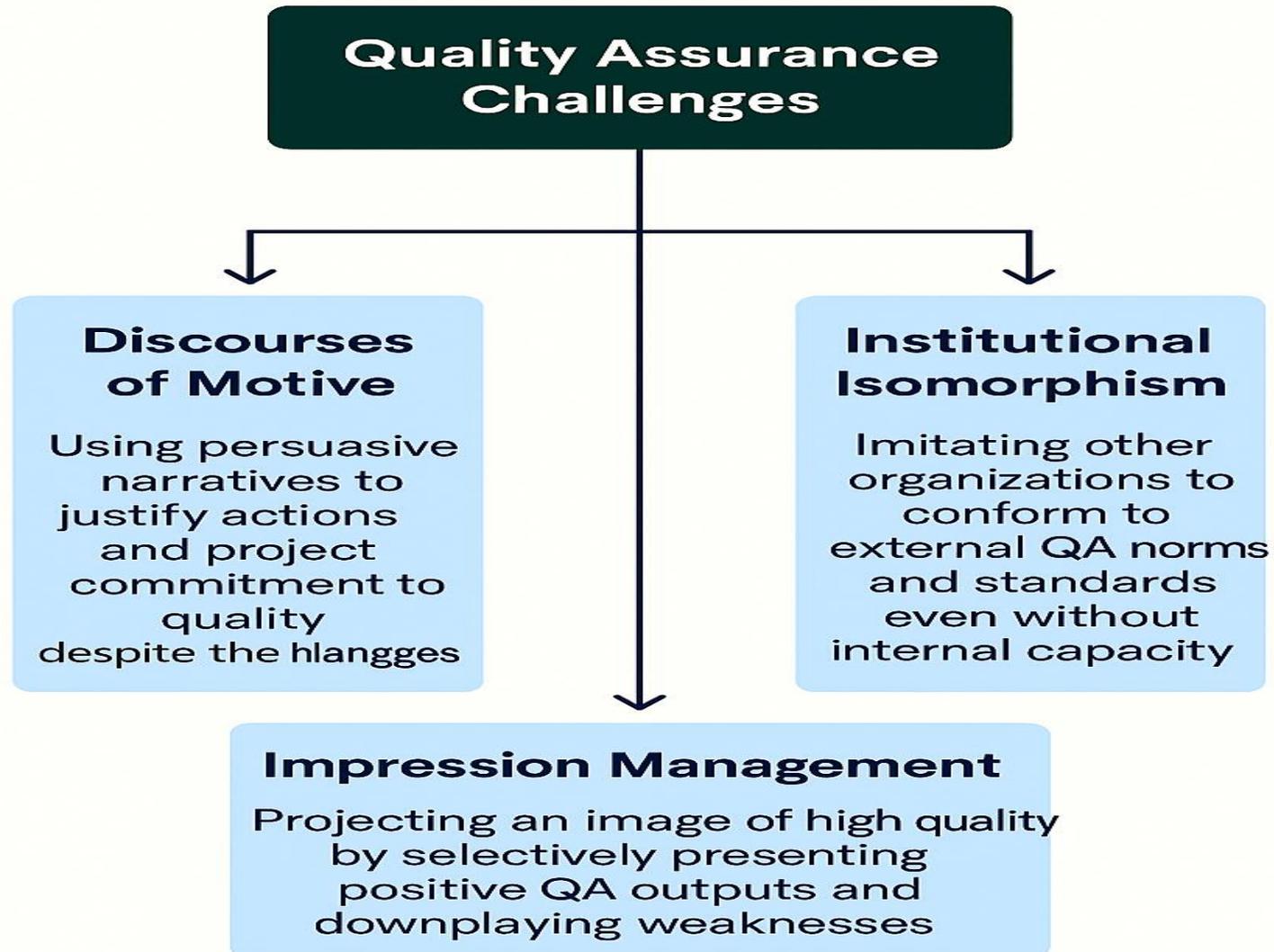
CONCEPTS/THEORIES EXPLAINING THESE INSTITUTIONAL BEHAVIOURS

1. Discourses of motive: Institutions use persuasive narratives to justify their actions and to sshow commitment to quality.

2. Institutional isomorphism: External pressures push universities to imitate QA structures from other global institutions. This creates ritualistic compliance and homogenisation without necessarily improving real quality.

3. Impression management: Universities selectively showcase favourable QA outputs and branding messages to project an image of quality, compensating for shortcomings in capacity and implementation.

4. Academic capitalism: Explains marketization and promotional culture by showing how universities increasingly behave like competitive economic actors. As they seek external revenue, prestige, and industry partnerships, they adopt market-driven behaviours (marketization) and invest heavily in branding, marketing, and reputation management (promotional culture).

Effects of Quality Assurance Challenges in African Universities

Quality Assurance Challenges

Discourses of Motive

Using persuasive narratives to justify actions and project commitment to quality despite the hlangges

Institutional Isomorphism

Imitating other organizations to conform to external QA norms and standards even without internal capacity

Impression Management

Projecting an image of high quality by selectively presenting positive QA outputs and downplaying weaknesses

WHY STUDYING SPECIFIC THEORIES AND TOKENISTIC QA IS IMPORTANT IN QUALITY ASSURANCE CONTEXTS

- **Diagnosing systemic problems:** These theories reveal *why* QA often fails

- **Discourses of motive** → Exposes how institutions use "quality" rhetoric to mask financial/political agendas.

- **Institutional isomorphism** → Explains why QA becomes a "copy-paste" exercise (e.g. mimicking peers).

- **Impression management** → Uncovers how institutions hide flaws (e.g., burying dropout data) to "pass" QA audits.

- **Academic capitalism** → Highlights conflicts when revenue goals override educational quality.

- **Tokenistic QA** → Shows how checklists replace genuine improvement.

- → *Without this understanding, QA reinforces performative compliance.*

UNDERSTANDING THESE CONCEPTS HELPS IN DESIGNING AUTHENTIC QA SYSTEMS

- These concepts help build guard against empty formalism or rhetoric

- Prevent isomorphism → Helps in designing context-specific QA metrics aligned with institutional mission.

- Counter impression management → Mandate transparent data (e.g., publishing *all* student outcomes).

- Disrupt tokenism → Replace box-ticking with stakeholder-led reviews (faculty/students as co-evaluators).

- ***QA shifts from bureaucratic ritual to transformative process.***

UNDERSTANDING THESE CONCEPTS HELPS IN DRIVING CULTURAL CHANGE

Studying these concepts fosters:

- Critical consciousness → QA teams spotting institutional gaslighting.

- Accountability → Demands greater accountability from education providers.

- Resistance to commodification → Protecting pedagogy from market pressures.

- → *QA becomes a tool for integrity, not just accreditation.*

WHAT HAPPENS IF WE IGNORE TOKENISTIC QA

- QA becomes mere rhetoric and dramaturgy

- Faculty/students see QA as meaningless, disengaging from improvement.

- Reinforcing inequity → Marginalized groups bear the brunt of shallow QA activities exacerbating educational inequality through vicious cycle

IS TOKENISTIC QA COMPLETELY USELESS?

QUESTIONS AND POSSIBLE ANSWERS

- SEE WORD DOCUMENTS.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To build trust, universities must move beyond tokenism and develop mature IQA systems. Maturity is not perfection but the embedding of quality assurance into institutional life. Key features include:

- **Strategic Alignment**: IQA must influence planning, budgeting, and governance. Quality goals should shape academic strategy, not exist in isolation.

- **Stakeholder Ownership**: Faculty, students, and staff must actively participate in QA processes. Shared ownership fosters relevance and commitment.

- **Evidence-Based Practice**: Reliable data—both quantitative and qualitative—should inform decisions. This includes student feedback, peer reviews, and employer input.

- **Transparency and Accountability**: QA findings must be openly communicated and linked to follow-up actions. Honest reporting builds credibility.

- **Contextual Relevance**: QA frameworks must reflect institutional missions and socio-economic contexts. Imported models should be adapted, not adopted wholesale□cite□turn1search1□.

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PATHWAYS FROM TOKENISM TO TRUST

- **Reframing IQA as Developmental**: Shift institutional discourse from compliance to continuous improvement. Emphasize learning cycles—assessment, reflection, action, evaluation.

- **Investing in Capacity Building**: Train QA personnel and academic staff in evaluation methods, data analysis, and change management. Reduce reliance on external consultants.

- **Fostering a Culture of Reflection**: Create safe spaces for honest dialogue about institutional weaknesses. Encourage experimentation and reward improvement.

- **Decentralizing Quality Ownership**: Empower faculties and departments to lead QA initiatives. Central units should coordinate, not control.

- **Engaging Stakeholders Inclusively**: Involve students, employers, and communities in defining quality and evaluating performance.

- **Building Context-Sensitive Architectures**: Design QA policies that reflect national priorities and institutional capacities. Avoid one-size-fits-all models□cite□turn1search1□.

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