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Accreditation, Student Outcomes, Continuous Quality Improvement Mechanisms: An Inquiry

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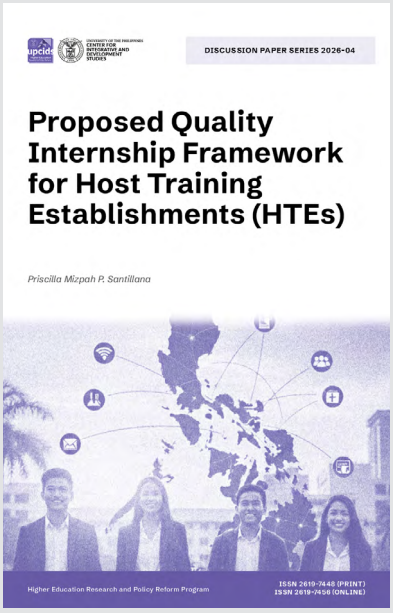

DISCUSSION PAPER

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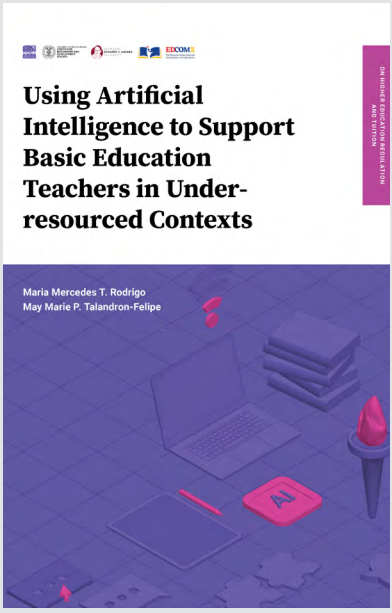

MONOGRAPH

Using Artificial Intelligence to Support Basic Education Teachers in Under-resourced Contexts

Accreditation, Student Outcomes, Continuous Quality Improvement Mechanisms: An Inquiry

Jovelyn G. Delosa, PhD[1]

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Key Takeaways

- Accreditation's Impact is Indirect and Inconsistent: The theoretical intent of accreditation successfully prompts structural reforms (like establishing QA units) and curriculum refinement, but its link to genuine improvements in student outcomes is often under-tested and inconsistent due to surface-level compliance rather than sustained quality enhancement since accreditation bodies can only recommend but not impose reforms.

- The Compliance Paradox: A rigid, top-down audit culture creates a "compliance paradox," wherein the pressure for quantification leads to administrative fatigue, episodic compliance (activity peaks around audits) rather than a continuous quality culture.

- Evidence Gap is the System's Weakest Link: The current quality assurance system experiences a significant evidence deficit, failing to transition from verifying academic processes (inputs) to verifying educational value (outcomes), specifically lacking robust, longitudinal data on graduate competencies and employability.

- Recalibration is a Structural Necessity: To ensure effectiveness, policy must recalibrate the assurance system from an audit model to a developmental partnership, requiring specific policy interventions across three strategies: Calibrating Enablers (resources and capacity), Transforming Process (shifting to continuous improvement), and Verifying Value (strengthening outcome-based evidence that cascade to student outcomes).

- Policy Recommendation: Policy must mandate the integration of longitudinal graduate tracking data and the shift of site-visit time to observing PDCA cycle effectiveness to bridge the divide between procedural mandates and substantive quality focused on student outcomes.

Introduction

Accreditation has become a central mechanism for assuring and improving the quality of higher education worldwide. As higher education institutions (HEIs) strive to demonstrate accountability to students, governments, industries, and the public, accreditation provides a formal process for evaluating whether institutions meet established standards of quality (Duarte and Vardasca 2023). Accreditation has grown from a voluntary recognition into a mandated requirement often driven by the need for competitiveness, funding, and institutional reputation. These standards, which serve as the backbone of accreditation systems, are embedded in widely accepted definitions. UNESCO, for instance, defines accreditation as the process through which a body evaluates an institution or program to determine whether it has met predetermined criteria or standards (Vlăsceanu et al. 2007). In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has a similar view, describing accreditation as an assessment and review process that certifies whether an institution or program meets appropriate standards (UNESCO Draft Toolkit 2012 as cited in CHED 2012). Although CHED does not directly conduct accreditation, it oversees the national quality assurance system and authorizes private accrediting agencies, such as those under the Federation of Accrediting Agencies of the Philippines (FAAP), to operate within its policy framework (CHED 2012). Across research literature, accreditation is similarly conceptualized as a standards-based process, with scholars consistently referencing criteria, benchmarks, and minimum requirements (Brahimi et al. 2016; Alenezi et al. 2023).

In recent years, one specific category of standards—student outcomes—has become increasingly important. Accrediting organizations in the United States, Europe, and the Philippines have explicitly emphasized student learning, performance, and competencies as key indicators of institutional quality. Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) identifies student achievement as a core requirement for recognition, urging HEIs to establish clear expectations for the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that graduates should possess (CHEA 2021). In the Philippines, CHED's 2012 outcomes-based quality assurance (OBQA) framework marks a significant paradigm shift, moving away from an input-focused model toward a system that prioritizes learner competencies, learning outcomes, and employability (CHED 2012). Accrediting bodies such as the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities (PAASCU) have aligned with this shift, now defining quality in terms of achievement of minimum standards based on learning outcomes, a more explicit orientation than earlier definitions (PAASCU 2000; PAASCU 2021).

Despite this emphasis, there remains no universal definition of student outcomes, largely because they vary according to national priorities, disciplinary orientations, and institutional missions. For this review, student outcomes are understood as the knowledge, skills, and attributes students are expected to acquire and apply by the completion of a program, consistent with frameworks used in accreditation and teaching effectiveness research (Waite 2004; Volkwein et al. 2007; Provezis 2010; Mauleon-Palay et al. 2022; ABET 2025).

The increasing reliance on student outcomes has fueled debates on the actual effectiveness of accreditation. While scholars argue that focusing on student learning brings accreditation closer to its true purpose (Beno 2004), traditional quality assurance frameworks have historically focused more on institutional inputs and administrative efficiency instead of pedagogy or student learning. This creates a tension where empirical evidence directly linking accreditation to improved student outcomes remains limited (Almurayh et al. 2022). Furthermore, accreditation often compels schools to focus on complying with heavy administrative documentation instead of prioritizing how teachers should teach and how learners should learn. This tension underscores a broader shift in accreditation's role: from assessing compliance to fostering continuous quality improvement (CQI).

Accreditation frameworks worldwide now incorporate CQI principles, positioning accreditation not as a periodic inspection but as a catalyst for ongoing institutional enhancement (ENQA et al. 2015; Brahimi et al. 2016; CHEA 2021). CHED (2012) explicitly embeds the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle in its national QA guidelines, reinforcing the importance of aligning an institution's vision, mission, goals, and learning outcomes with continuous review and enhancement processes. However, numerous studies have emphasized that accreditation efforts do not always mean continuous improvement, as many systems focus on checklists rather than sustained CQI. This results in performance gains that are often temporary and stagnant after compliance, leading to the fundamental concern of whether accreditation assures quality or merely certifies compliance. Moreover, the data collected through accreditation is often underutilized for improvement, and not all stakeholders, including students, are meaningfully engaged in the process. Research further indicates that sustained adoption of CQI practices, rather than compliance during accreditation visits, is necessary for genuine and long-term quality gains (Almurayh et al. 2022; Cura and Alani 2018).

The systemic tension—where policy mandates the pursuit of outcomes yet the evidence for accreditation's success is scarce, and its implementation is fragmented—underscores the critical need for an integrated study. While accreditation frameworks are established worldwide, a gap remains in understanding the breadth of evidence regarding whether these mechanisms translate into tangible educational benefits, particularly on whether accreditation enhances the achievement of student outcomes and supports the culture of continuous quality improvement. This paper addresses this deficit by employing a multimethod design, utilizing a scoping review to map the theoretical landscape and qualitative interviews with administrators to validate institutional practice. Therefore, this research seeks to address the following questions:

1. How does the literature describe the contribution of accreditation to the achievement of student outcomes?

2. In what ways does accreditation contribute to a culture of continuous quality improvement (CQI) in higher education institutions?

3. What lessons learned during the conduct of accreditation are reported by administrators?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative multimethod design to investigate the complex interplay between accreditation, student outcomes, and continuous quality improvement (CQI) in higher education. The methodology was structured in two sequential phases: first, a scoping review of literature to establish a foundational theoretical framework, and second, structured interviews with academic administrators to validate and refine that framework against practical experience.

Method 1: Scoping Review

The scoping review was utilized to synthesize existing evidence on the impact of accreditation on student outcomes and CQI, a field often characterized by mixed-methods and multi-domain literature. The process adapted the structure and rigor of the PRISMA-ScR checklist (Tricco et al. 2018).

Search Strategy and Data Retrieval

The scoping review's initial search was conducted across two major academic databases: ProQuest and ScienceDirect. These were selected for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed education and institutional management studies, while Gale Academic OneFile was excluded due to difficulties in downloading abstracts. The search used specific strings combining terms like "accreditation" and "quality assurance" with "continuous quality improvement" (CQI) or "student outcomes".

For ProQuest, filters were applied for full-text, peer-reviewed, English-language studies focused on higher education and published within the last 10 years, yielding 199 results. The search on ScienceDirect used filters for research and review articles, published in English between 2015 and 2025, and restricted to open access or open archive status, resulting in 667 retrieved studies. A total of 866 studies were initially retrieved from the databases. This number was supplemented by 50 relevant studies found through manual searches using Google Scholar and general Google searches, bringing the total to 916 studies for screening.

Screening and Selection Criteria

The selection process applied strict inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance and quality. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 that focused on higher education and examined the relationship between accreditation and either student outcomes or CQI, with full-text availability. Exclusion criteria filtered out non-peer-reviewed publications (e.g., editorials, conference proceedings), duplicates, studies focusing exclusively on primary/secondary education, and articles that failed to establish a link between CQI/student outcomes and accreditation. Studies lacking empirical data (purely conceptual or literature reviews) were also excluded. The screening process followed the PRISMA flow (Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Included)

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction, conducted by one reviewer, utilized a structured and AI-assisted process. Author, year, country, aim, methodology, and participants were extracted manually. Key findings related to accreditation, student outcomes, and CQI were extracted and summarized for each paper individually using the built-in Gemini 2.5 Pro in a private and secure Google Drive workspace.

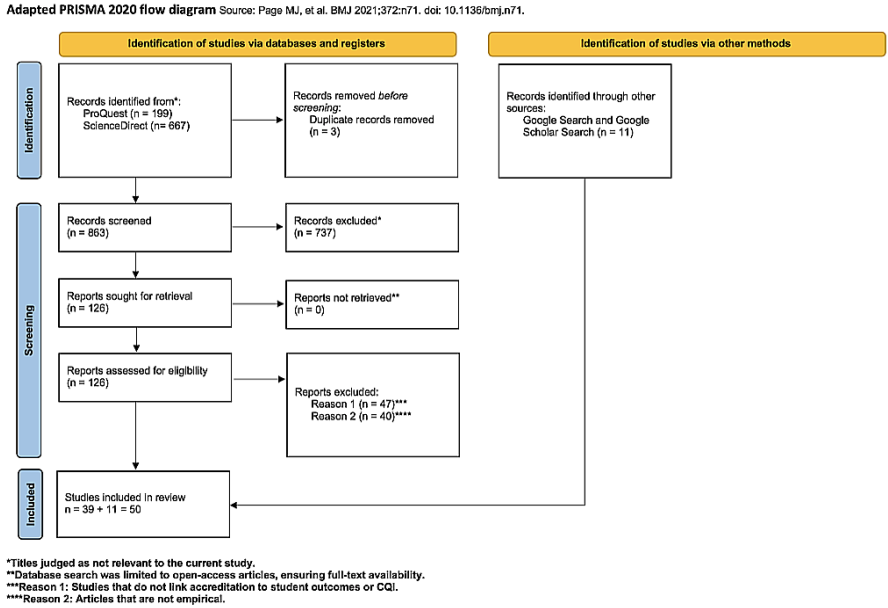

Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR Flow Diagram of Literature Screening and Selection Process. Source: Adapted from Tricco et al. (2018).

All AI-generated outputs were manually verified against the original full-text documents to ensure accuracy and ethical compliance.

Thematic synthesis was informed by the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006 cited in Naeem et al. 2023). The process combined manual line-by-line coding with an AI-assisted pre-coding step to generate candidate codes and cluster similar excerpts. All AI-generated codes and themes were reviewed and refined by one human coder.

Method 2: Framework Validation via Structured Interviews

This second method aimed to assess the ecological validity of the resulting "De Facto Accreditation Response Model."

Participants and Data Collection

A purposive sample of four academic administrators, directly involved in recent accreditation processes at either State Universities and Colleges (SUCs)

or private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), was selected to provide expert feedback. Data were collected using structured interviews. The protocol consisted of six open-ended questions mapped directly to the key nodes of the theoretical framework, probing perceived links between accreditation and student outcomes, operational mechanisms ("Evidence" and "QA Culture"), and implementation challenges.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using a deductive approach. Participant responses were subjected to a "pattern matching" technique by mapping them against the components of the theoretical model. This allowed the researchers to validate which theoretical mechanisms were active in practice and to capture distinct "barriers" and "enablers" needed to refine the final model.

Literature Review

The synthesis of recent literature reveals that accreditation functions as a complex catalyst within higher education. While widely adopted to assure quality, its impact is not uniform. The research highlights six distinct themes ranging from structural and cultural benefits to significant systemic barriers.

- **Theme 1: Accreditation promotes institutional and process reforms necessary for sustained, continuous quality improvement.**

  Initially, the literature identifies accreditation as a primary driver for structural permanence. Institutions frequently move from temporary compliance committees to formalizing permanent quality assurance (QA) units and offices (Kamel 2020; Pham et al. 2020). This structural shift often serves as a transformational journey that establishes new internal quality systems and provides a framework for program evaluation even amidst local versus international tensions (Sziegat 2021; Aburas, Nurunnabi, and Atyah 2021).

  These reforms operationalize Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) by mandating the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle (Mulyono et al. 2021; Bui and Yasri 2024). To support this, institutions implement "assets-based" reporting approaches and integrate digital tools like LMS plugins for efficient data management (Kremer 2024; El Marsafawy et al. 2022).

Furthermore, the process acts as a vehicle for systemic integration, aligning financial controls with quality goals and triggering necessary upgrades in infrastructure and student support services to gain a competitive advantage (Sofyani et al. 2023; Mohamed et al. 2021; Kumawat and Vardia 2023; Brahimi et al. 2016; Garwe et al. 2024).

- **Theme 2: Accreditation drives refinement in curriculum design and assessment practices.**

  The structural mandates of accreditation directly influence academic delivery. Empirical evidence shows a positive relationship between accreditation tenure and proactive curriculum refinement (Youssef et al. 2024). The review process compels faculty to identify and close content gaps and align learning outcomes with professional standards (Aljuffali et al. 2024; Bayerlein and Timpson 2017; Peters et al. 2022). Additionally, institutions adopt "meta-assessment" checklists and continuous improvement plans to ensure that assessment processes remain rigorous and valid (Salem, Itani, and El-Hajj 2021).

- **Theme 3: Accreditation fosters a culture of accountability, transparency, and ownership for quality.**

  Beyond physical changes, the literature suggests that accreditation cultivates a "culture of quality." The mandatory nature of these frameworks embeds public accountability and fosters trust and commitment between management and staff (Singh and Kshirsagar 2023; Sofyani et al. 2023). It encourages a shared responsibility where QA is driven bottom-up rather than just top-down (Zuhairi et al. 2020; Kamel 2020). By necessitating transparent digital assessment flows and engaging staff in self-assessment, accreditation raises awareness and shifts mindsets from episodic compliance to continuous learning (Javed and Alenezi 2023; Aljuffali et al. 2024; Pham et al. 2020; Liu 2020; Jalal et al. 2017).

- **Theme 4: Accreditation improves student outcomes, including examination performance, learning achievements, and employability.**

  When structural reforms align with a quality culture, studies point to tangible improvements in student success. Retrospective analyses link accreditation to statistically significant increases in examination scores and higher first-attempt pass rates on licensure exams (Alenezi et al. 2023; van Zanten et al. 2022; Mariano and Valenzuela 2021). High compliance

levels have been modeled to indirectly improve board passing rates by strengthening institutional factors (Hua 2024).

Indirectly, the shift toward accreditation-mandated Outcome-Based Education (OBE) is associated with "sharper" curricula, improved teaching strategies, and higher student engagement (Garwe et al. 2024; Sathya and Narayanan 2021; Alkhatib 2018; Volkwein et al. 2007; Brahimi et al. 2016). Higher accreditation levels also correlate with better OBE implementation in laboratories and increased student satisfaction (Hapinat 2022; Mauleon-Palay et al. 2022; Al-Eyadhy and Alenezi 2021). Furthermore, accreditation tenure is positively linked to improved graduate employability and starting salaries, with stakeholder models helping institutions prioritize employability dimensions (Anderson and Garman 2018; Prasad et al. 2020). However, some studies note that these improvements can be program-specific rather than universal (Almurayh et al. 2022).

- **Theme 5: Various barriers and challenges hinder effective CQI implementation.**

  A significant counter-narrative highlights the obstacles to these benefits. The extensive documentation required is often viewed as an "administrative burden" that diverts faculty from essential teaching and research (Yang 2024; Hail et al. 2019; Adnani et al. 2022). This pressure can lead to "cosmetic adaptations" rather than deep reform and result in episodic compliance where efforts fade after the review cycle (Aupetit 2022; Meiklejohn et al. 2023). Resistance also arises when external demands conflict with internal contexts or when staff do not cooperate with QA units (Hilliger et al. 2022; Jalal et al. 2017; Aburas, Nurunnabi, and Atyah 2021). Additionally, rigid standards may lack alignment with specific institutional realities, such as those in anatomy education (Valcke et al. 2025).

- **Theme 6: Limitations exist in achieving sustained CQI due to infrastructure, compliance focus, and other constraints.**

  Finally, even when implemented, sustainability remains a challenge. Improvements in outcomes can be inconsistent, sometimes appearing as temporary "spikes" during accreditation visits (Almurayh et al. 2022; Roy et al. 2020). In some regions, underutilized infrastructure limits the systematic application of QA results (Pham et al. 2022). A pervasive limitation is the "compliance paradox," where a focus on meeting static standards restricts the innovation and diversity necessary for genuine educational development (Sziegat 2021; Dashti-Kalantar et al. 2023).

Analytical Discussion

The De Facto Accreditation Response Model

The scoping review and its subsequent thematic synthesis identified six core themes concerning the relationship between accreditation, CQI, and student outcomes. To systematically organize, interpret, and test these findings against institutional practice, this study proposed the De Facto Accreditation Response Model (DFARM).

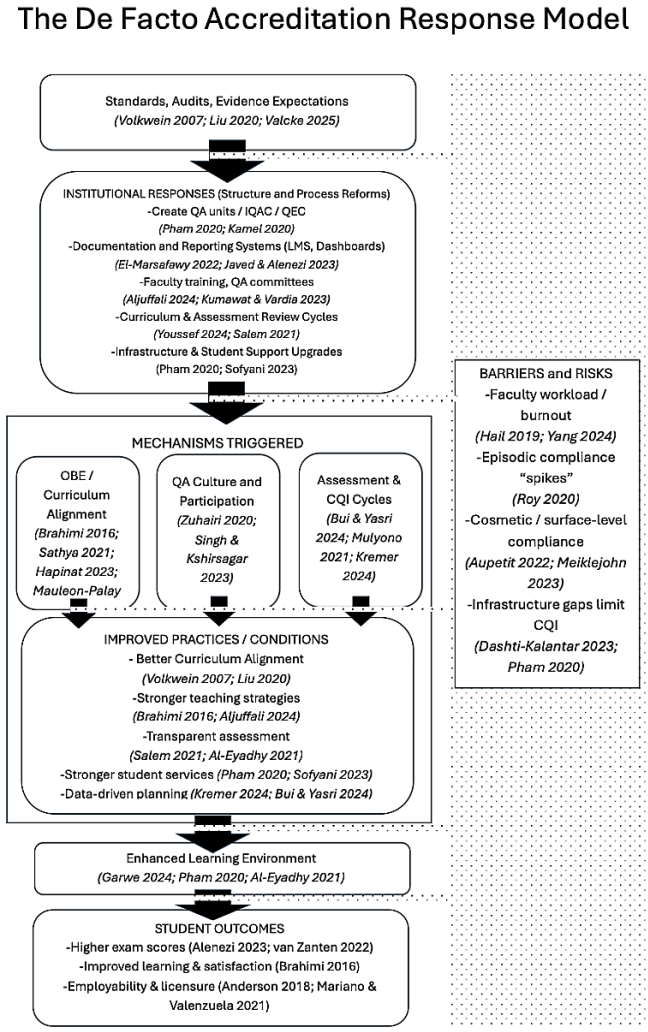

Figure 2. The De Facto Accreditation Response Model. Source: JGD Delosa.

The DFARM posits that accreditation operates as an external quality assurance mechanism that establishes standards, accountability expectations, and evidence requirements for higher education institutions (Volkwein et al. 2007; Liu 2020; Valcke et al. 2025). By imposing structured evaluation criteria and external review processes, accreditation serves as a policy lever that motivates institutions to demonstrate quality, document performance, and explain educational effectiveness.

In response to these requirements, institutions implement structural and procedural reforms to meet accreditation standards. These reforms commonly include establishing or strengthening internal quality assurance units such as internal quality assurance cells (IQACs) or quality enhancement cells (QECs) (Pham et al. 2020; Kamel 2020); developing systematic documentation and digital reporting systems to monitor learning outcomes and program performance (Javed and Alenezi 2023); expanding faculty development and quality committees to support continuous improvement (Aljuffali et. al 2024; Kumawat and Vardia 2023); institutionalizing curriculum and assessment review cycles (Youssef et al. 2024; Salem, Itani and El-Hajj 2021); and improving student services and infrastructure to support learning (Pham et al. 2020; Sofyani et al. 2023).

These institutional reforms activate several interrelated quality mechanisms. First, accreditation promotes outcomes-based education (OBE) and curriculum alignment through explicit learning outcomes, mapping, and constructive alignment (Brahimi et al. 2016; Sathya and Nayaranan 2021; Hapinat 2022; Mauleon-Palay et al. 2022). Second, it reinforces a culture of quality participation and shared responsibility through stakeholder involvement and accountability practices (Zuhairi et al. 2020; Singh and Kshirsagar 2023). Third, accreditation structures embed systematic assessment and continuous quality improvement cycles, including evidence-based review and feedback loops (Bui and Yasri 2024; Mulyono et al. 2021; Kremer 2024).

Through these mechanisms, institutions strengthen teaching, learning, and academic environments. Common improvements include more coherent outcome-aligned curricula (Volkwein et al. 2007; Liu 2020), enhanced instructional design and pedagogy (Brahimi 2016; Aljuffali 2024), improved assessment transparency and reliability (Salem 2021; Al-Eyadhy and Alenezi 2021), expanded student support systems (Pham et al. 2020; Sofyani 2023), and more systematic data-driven planning and decision-making (Kremer 2024; Bui and Yasri 2024). Collectively, these institutional and instructional practices contribute to a more supportive and effective learning environment (Garwe et al. 2024; Pham et al. 2020; Al-Eyadhy 2021).

Ultimately, the enhanced learning environment yields improvements in student outcomes, including higher academic performance and exam pass rates (Alenezi 2023; van Zanten et al. 2022), stronger student learning and satisfaction (Brahimi et al. 2016), and improved employability and professional readiness (Anderson and Garman 2018; Mariano and Valenzuela 2021).

However, while accreditation can stimulate meaningful quality improvements, its impact may vary depending on institutional capacity and implementation depth. Studies note risks such as faculty workload and compliance fatigue (Hail 2019; Yang 2024), episodic "audit spikes" rather than sustained improvement (Roy et al. 2020), and surface-level documentation efforts where infrastructure or capacity remains limited (Aupetit 2022; Dashti-Kalantar et al. 2023). These moderating factors highlight the importance of internal commitment and resource support for accreditation to translate into genuine student-centered outcomes.

Contributions of Accreditation to Student Outcomes and CQI: A Brief Synthesis

Accreditation's contribution to student outcomes is primarily described as an indirect result of institutional reform triggered by external quality assurance mechanisms. The mandates for accountability and evidence generation compel institutions to implement structural changes, such as strengthening internal QA units (IQACs/QECs) and developing systematic documentation. Crucially, these reforms activate quality mechanisms that promote outcomes-based education (OBE) and curriculum alignment, embedding explicit learning outcomes, mapping, and constructive alignment into practice. Collectively, the resulting improvements in the academic environment—including enhanced pedagogy, more transparent assessment, and expanded student support systems—are what ultimately yield positive student outcomes. These outcomes include higher academic performance and exam pass rates, increased student satisfaction, and improved employability and professional readiness.

Accreditation significantly contributes to CQI by functioning as an external policy lever that forces institutions to adopt structured evaluation criteria and processes. The pressure to document performance drives essential structural reforms, such as the establishment of QA units, the implementation of systematic documentation systems, and the institutionalization of review cycles. This process is critical because it embeds systematic assessment and continuous quality improvement cycles, reinforcing a culture of quality participation, shared responsibility, and data-driven planning. However, the

extent of this contribution is highly variable; the literature clearly notes risks such as compliance fatigue, "audit spikes" (episodic improvement rather than sustained change), and surface-level documentation efforts. Therefore, for accreditation to translate into genuine, sustained CQI, internal commitment, institutional capacity, and resource support are identified as critical moderating factors.

Validation of the DFARM: Lessons Learned from QA Administrators

To assess the ecological validity of the De Facto Accreditation Response Model, this study compared the theoretical framework against the lived experiences of higher education administrators. The "lessons learned" derived from interviews serve as a critical real-life check, confirming that the mechanisms identified in the literature—evidence, alignment, and culture—are indeed the operational levers of accreditation, though they are frequently complicated by implementation realities.

Specifically, the data confirmed that accreditation's effectiveness is rooted in (1) evidence-based practice and systematic documentation as the foundation of quality, and (2) alignment of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment to external standards. Furthermore, the findings emphasized the crucial human and relational dimensions: (3) reframing external evaluation into a partnership lens, and fostering (4) collaboration and shared accountability across the institution. Conversely, the interviews reinforced the systemic obstacles, highlighting the persistent challenges related to (5) institutional readiness and capacity-building, and the failure to fully realize accreditation as a (6) continuous improvement philosophy due to episodic compliance. These insights, combining theoretical confirmation with practical nuance, define the pathway toward sustainable quality.

Validating the Structural Responses and Mechanisms

Practitioners strongly validated the model's emphasis on evidence-based practice as the foundation of quality. One administrator reported that accreditation forced a shift toward systematic documentation and transparency,[2]

2 This consensus on the necessity of evidence and documentation was drawn from email correspondence with ADM01 and ADM02, October 2025.

corroborating literature on the establishment of institutional QA units (Kamel 2020; Pham et al. 2020), strengthened evidence systems (El Marsafawy et al. 2022), and data-driven reporting models (Kremer 2024).

Similarly, the mechanism of curriculum and pedagogy alignment was reinforced by interview data. Respondents noted that external standards necessitated improved constructive alignment and standardized syllabi,[3] directly supporting research showing that accreditation prompts curriculum refinement and targeted interventions in course quality (Volkwein et al. 2007; Youssef et al. 2024; Aljuffali et al. 2024). This alignment often extended to modernized content and assessment improvements (Salem et al. 2021; Peters et al. 2022), suggesting that the "OBE/Curriculum Alignment" node in the framework is highly active in practice.

The Human and Relational Dimensions

The interviews added significant nuance to the "QA Culture" node. While the literature describes stakeholder engagement as central to accreditation (Zuhairi et al. 2020; Brahimi et al. 2016; Singh and Kshirsagar 2023), a practitioner articulated this as shared accountability, emphasizing that "everyone must be QAs in their own sectors."[4] Furthermore, another administrator reframed the "Standards and Audits" input node, viewing accreditors as partners and mentors rather than mere inspectors[5]. This highlights an underdocumented benefit: while studies focus on accreditation as an external benchmark (Garwe et al. 2024; Mohamed et al. 2021), practitioners value the psychosocial elements of trust and collegiality that facilitate the process.

Operationalizing the Barriers

However, the "Barriers" identified in the model were also mirrored in practice. While administrators stressed that accreditation must be anchored in continuous improvement (PDCA) cycles—aligning with findings on CQI institutionalization (Mulyono et al. 2021; Bui and Yasri 2024; Kamel 2020)—

3 Email correspondence with ADM03, October 2025.

4 Email correspondence with ADM03, October 2025.

5 Administrator ADM04 noted that accreditors are often viewed as "friends/partners/guides/companions who do the task of enhancing effective implementation." Email correspondence with ADM04, October 2025.

they frankly acknowledged gaps in the "Check-Act" phases.[6] This confirms the literature's warning that improvement often degrades into episodic compliance or "audit spikes" (Hail et al. 2019; Meiklejohn et al. 2023; Roy et al. 2020). Finally, first-time participants highlighted institutional readiness as a steep learning curve,[7] reinforcing findings on capacity-building challenges in developing HEIs (Pham et al. 2022; Jalal et al. 2017; Hilliger et al. 2022). These insights confirm that while the model accurately maps the pathway of accreditation, the flow is often obstructed by capacity deficits.

Policy Discussion

Bridging the Gap Between Policy Intent and Educational Reality

Validating the De Facto Accreditation Response Model (DFARM) against lived experiences exposes a critical tension: the theoretical intent of accreditation to enhance student learning often conflicts with operational realities. While the data confirm that accreditation successfully institutionalizes quality assurance and prompts curriculum refinement, it simultaneously reveals a system burdened by episodic compliance and administrative fatigue. This section addresses these systemic gaps, interpreting the findings to propose policy recalibrations capable of bridging the divide between procedural mandates and substantive quality.

The findings highlight several key gaps in how accreditation currently operates:

1. Limited empirical evidence on direct impact: Much of the literature on accreditation focuses on institutional procedures and compliance metrics rather than measuring a direct, causal link to student learning gains.

2. Mixed or inconclusive findings: While some studies suggest accreditation can lead to improvements in institutional processes, other findings remain

6 Administrator ADM02 highlighted that while activities (Plan/Do) were implemented, the institution struggled with documentation and evaluation, specifically identifying the "Check and Act" phases as a critical lesson. Email correspondence with ADM02, October 2025.

7 Administrator ADM03 noted that as a first-time applicant, the institution "did not know where to begin," identifying preparedness as the most significant challenge. Email correspondence with ADM03, October 2025.

mixed or inconclusive regarding substantive changes to teaching and learning practices.

3. Policy and practice gap: Accreditation is often mandated by national policy and consumes significant institutional resources, yet the implementation frequently prioritizes documentation and procedural adherence over meaningful educational reform.

4. The accreditation–student outcomes link remains undertested: Although the literature posits a theoretical link between accreditation and student outcomes, the causal relationship between the specific standards and the quality of student achievement is rarely rigorously tested with empirical data.

5. Quantification overshadows learning quality: The drive toward easily quantifiable metrics (e.g., resources, faculty credentials, pass rates) often overshadows the qualitative aspects of learning quality, resulting in compliance that is prioritized over holistic student development.

The Evidence Deficit: Moving from Assumption to Verification

The current state of accreditation research is characterized by a significant evidence deficit, where the assertion of positive impact on student learning outcomes is weakly substantiated by direct data. The core problem, as visualized in the De Facto Accreditation Framework, is that while institutions demonstrate proficiency in managing the "Inputs" (structural reforms, QA units, documentation) and "Processes" (curriculum review cycles), the crucial connection to "Outcomes" remains the weakest link in the entire assurance chain.

As found in the review, the link between accreditation and student outcomes remains under-tested, with gains often inferred from signals like improved employability (Anderson and Garman 2018; Prasad et al. 2020) or short-term exam scores (Alenezi et al. 2023; van Zanten et al. 2022). While these studies provide rare instances of quantitative evidence, their focus is often limited to hard metrics within professional fields (e.g., medical licensure pass rates) and lacks consistency across diverse disciplines and institutional contexts (Almurayh et al. 2022).

The Implication of the Measurement Challenge

The implication of this evidence deficit is profound, residing primarily in the inherent difficulty of measuring tertiary outcomes. The process-based evidence often requested by accreditors is relatively easy to generate—meeting minutes, assessment rubrics, and policy documents—but these represent inputs to quality, not proof of learning. True learning is often manifested in complex, transferable skills, such as critical thinking, communication, and ethical reasoning, which resist easy quantification.

This methodological challenge creates a systemic vulnerability. If accreditation bodies continue to rely on process-based evidence, the system risks becoming a self-referential cycle of documentation. Institutions spend enormous time compiling dossiers that confirm the existence of their system, but the data rarely informs whether the system is effective (Yang 2024; Hail et al. 2019). This absence of high-fidelity, outcome-driven data means that the feedback loop from the "Student Outcomes" node back to the "Standards and Audits" node is fundamentally broken. Without this empirical feedback, continuous quality improvement (CQI) cannot be evidence-based; it can only be process-compliant.

Conceptualizing the Shift to Verifying Value

To break this cycle, the focus of quality assurance must fundamentally shift from verifying existence (Do you have a curriculum map?) to verifying value (Did the curriculum map lead to measurable competency? Where are your approved syllabi? Does the curriculum respond to community needs? are the processes followed to how have the processes improved quality service?)

This shift requires a policy mandate toward longitudinal assessment and graduate tracking. The policy should prioritize the implementation of systems capable of:

1. Tracking Post-Graduation Success: Moving beyond first-year placement rates to genuinely track career trajectory, salary growth, and professional competency attainment over three to five years. The learning experiences of the students can also be examined while they are with the institutions.

2. Authentic Assessment: Shifting away from reliance on easily quantifiable metrics (like multiple-choice exam scores) toward assessing complex skills using methods like portfolio review, capstone project evaluation, and

external competency exams. This aligns with the necessity of aligning policy with the principles of outcomes-based education (OBE), which is already a recognized framework (Sathya and Narayanan 2021; Hapinat 2022).

Policymakers can no longer afford to assume accreditation inherently improves learning; instead, the future framework must mandate the implementation of graduate-tracking and longitudinal assessment systems. By shifting the evidentiary requirement from static inputs to measurable student success—such as authentic competency development and employability—accreditation bodies can finally generate the empirical proof currently missing from the field. This justifies the necessity of strengthening outcome-based evidence as a foundational policy prescription, directly addressing both the limited empirical evidence (Gap 1) and the problem of the under-tested outcomes link (Gap 4).

The Compliance Paradox and the Burden of Quantification

The study highlights a persistent and debilitating tension at the center of the quality assurance landscape: the mixed or inconclusive findings regarding accreditation's value. While the literature provides ample evidence that some institutions successfully leverage accreditation for deep pedagogical reform (Brahimi et al. 2016), a counternarrative confirms that for many others, the process is experienced merely as a costly bureaucratic tax (Yang 2024; Hail et al. 2019). This fundamental divergence is primarily driven by the systemic pressure for quantification of quality, where the requirement to produce measurable evidence often leads to cosmetic adaptations rather than deep cultural change (Aupetit 2022).

The Perils of Episodic Compliance

The De Facto Model visualizes this issue as a compliance paradox: rigid, externally imposed standards intended to ensure quality often trigger "episodic spikes" of activity that fail to translate into sustained improvement (Roy et al. 2020). The research clearly demonstrates that institutional performance tends to peak around the accreditation visit and subsequently decline until the next review approaches, reflecting a classic top-down implementation failure. In this model, external pressure (the accreditor) is strong, but internal motivation is weak (Sziegat 2021). The effort becomes an external show for legitimacy, rather than an internal driver for improvement, leading to what some studies term a surface-level compliance or decoupling of formal structures from everyday practices (Meiklejohn et al. 2023; Sziegat 2021).

This environment fosters deep-seated faculty resistance, as the primary mechanism of engagement becomes centered on proving quality through paperwork rather than creating it through teaching. When accreditation is perceived as a purely punitive or evaluative exercise, resources are diverted away from the actual creation of educational value.

Administrative Burden as a Zero-Sum Game

The "administrative burden" documented in the literature is not merely an inconvenience; it represents a zero-sum trade-off with core academic functions. Studies consistently confirm that the time consumed by data compilation and documentation preparation is vast, fueling stress and workload issues (Hail et al. 2019; Yang 2024). This labor is disproportionately directed toward satisfying auditors rather than informing academic decision-making, leading to faculty burnout and the perception that the process is "burdensome and irrelevant."

This systemic inefficiency highlights the failure of the "Institutional Responses" node in the De Facto Model to adequately convert compliance efforts into a genuine QA culture. Instead of using the mandatory assessment cycles for internal growth, institutions expend resources on defense—producing "neatly organized" documents (Sofyani et al. 2023) without integrating the data into pedagogical practice. The result is a cycle where the administrative costs of QA actively overshadow educational benefits, undermining the very purpose of accreditation.

Redefining the Mechanism of Interaction

The discussion implies that the current audit-culture approach is fundamentally insufficient for sustaining quality. For accreditation to drive genuine, continuous improvement, the mechanism of interaction must be radically reengineered. This requires a paradigm shift rooted in implementation theory, moving from a punitive top-down model to a developmental partnership that encourages bottom-up ownership.

This necessary recalibration demands that accreditors balance enforcement with developmental guidance, thereby reducing the perception that the process is adversarial. Only by fostering trust and collegiality—the relational dimension that practitioners value (Theme 3)—can the system empower faculty and institutional leaders to internalize the standards. Without this critical shift, the administrative burden and the cycle of episodic compliance will likely persist,

fueling faculty resistance and preventing the essential mechanisms of QA from achieving maturity. This necessity justifies the policy calls to shift focus from compliance to improvement and mandate collaborative accreditation as a structural prerequisite for sustainable quality.

The Gap Between Mandate and Capacity

The study exposes a stark and deeply consequential policy and practice gap, representing a systemic failure where the de jure policy mandate is operating ahead of institutional capacity. The De Facto Model reveals that while accreditation demands structural reforms, the persistent presence of "infrastructure gaps" (Pham et al. 2022) and "faculty burnout" (Hail et al. 2019; Yang 2024) act as rigid barriers to meaningful implementation. This tension is particularly acute in resource-constrained or rural contexts, where the required investments in digital documentation systems, faculty training, and dedicated QA personnel are financially unsustainable.

The Structural Flaw of Monolithic Standards

The expectation that all HEIs, regardless of mission, size, or regional wealth, can meet uniform, universal standards lead to the conclusion that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to accreditation is structurally flawed. When standards fail to account for the necessary institutional diversity, they force compliant institutions into performative compliance rather than genuine quality enhancement (Aupetit 2022). For example, the need for continuous assessment and feedback required by international standards (Valcke et al. 2025) may be entirely unachievable in institutions lacking basic Learning Management System (LMS) infrastructure or the necessary budget for faculty release time.

This structural flaw results in a contrary policy outcome: instead of driving improvement, the mandate encourages the centralization of QA efforts, which ironically reduces faculty ownership and pedagogical creativity (Hilliger et al. 2022). Policies that do not allow for contextualization—the ability to align standards with local missions—ultimately exacerbate the gaps between elite and local establishments, as the former can afford compliance while the latter is forced to choose between compliance and educational necessity. This justifies the necessity of contextualizing accreditation standards.

The Resource Barrier: Funding the Gap

The implementation gap is, at its core, a resource gap. The De Facto Model clearly links structural reforms (Theme 2) to the availability of resources (Pham et al. 2020; Sofyani et al., 2023). When governments and regulatory bodies issue mandates without matching them with the necessary financial and digital resources, they are setting up implementing agencies for guaranteed failure.

Specifically, the ability of an institution to activate the CQI mechanisms is dependent on two key resources:

1. Digital infrastructure: The necessity for systematic, data-driven planning (Kremer 2024) is impossible without modern reporting systems (Javed and Alenezi 2023). Underutilized infrastructure limits the systematic application of QA results (Pham et al. 2022), directly preventing the "check-act" phase of the CQI cycle from being operationalized.

2. Human capital and time: The high administrative workload (Yang 2024) is a direct consequence of insufficient resources for QA staff and digital automation. Without investment in capacity and leadership, faculty time dedicated to accreditation will continue to be subtracted from teaching and research time, thus undermining the core academic mission.

This analysis suggests a fundamental need for policy realignment: mandates for quality assurance must be matched with the financial and digital resources required to sustain them. Therefore, policymakers must Ensure Adequate Resources for QA, not as a discretionary fund, but as a structural prerequisite to make accreditation an equitable policy lever for all HEIs.

Summary and Call for Recalibration

The analysis of the De Facto Model against existing gaps suggests that the current trajectory of accreditation is sustainable only as a compliance exercise, not as a quality enhancement strategy. The convergence of implementation theory and practitioner insights—where policy mandates are currently operating ahead of institutional capacity—demands an overhaul.

To bridge the gap between policy intent and educational reality, a comprehensive policy overhaul is required, focusing on contextualization and resource alignment. This overhaul must be multilayered to address systemic failures across all three components of the quality system:

1. Resolving the evidence deficit requires strengthening outcome-based accountability (refer to Strategy 3).

2. Dismantling the compliance paradox necessitates a fundamental change in the audit mechanism (refer to Strategy 2).

3. Closing the gap between mandate and capacity demands resource equity and contextualized standards (refer to Strategy 1).

The following section outlines specific recommendations to operationalize these insights, moving the sector from a culture of compliance to one of evidence-based improvement.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy strategy is directly synthesized from the findings of the policy discussion, addressing the three identified systemic failures: the evidence deficit, the compliance paradox, and the gap between mandate and capacity.

To bridge the gap between policy mandates and institutional capacity, this study proposes a three-tiered policy strategy. These recommendations are designed to address the specific node blockages identified in the De Facto Accreditation Response Model (DFARM), moving the sector toward a more resilient and effective quality assurance system. The three strategies are chosen because they correspond to the three core components of any quality system—inputsprocess, and outcomes—ensuring a holistic overhaul:

- Strategy 1: calibrating the enablers (inputs and resources) focuses on the inputs (financial resources, capacity, and appropriate standards), which are the prerequisites currently obstructing the system (the gap between mandate and capacity).

- Strategy 2: transforming the process (mechanisms) focuses on the process (the interaction between institutions and accreditors), which is currently adversarial and drives noncompliance (the compliance paradox).

- Strategy 3: verifying the value (outcomes) focuses on the final outcomes (student competency attainment and economic utility), which are the necessary long-term measures to resolve the evidence deficit.

Strategy 1: Calibrating the Enablers (Inputs and Resources)

This initial strategy targets the systemic "Infrastructure Gaps" and "Faculty Burnout" barriers by recognizing that the effectiveness of the quality assurance system is entirely dependent on its inputs. The goal here is to ensure the system is adequately fueled by two fundamental elements: sufficient financial and digital resources and context-appropriate standards. Without resolving these root-level enabler deficits, any downstream changes to process or outcomes will remain superficial.

1. Contextualize Accreditation Standards

Policy frameworks must move away from rigid, "one-size-fits-all" mandates and instead adopt flexible standards that reflect institutional diversity, particularly among rural and resource-constrained HEIs. Requirements should be aligned with each institution's mission and local context. This includes establishing a rural–urban differential in infrastructure expectations to recognize varied capacity levels, consistent with the policy discussion's finding on the structural flaw of monolithic standards. Flexibility should also permit mission-based substitutions for selected input metrics—for example, valuing deep community engagement over high-volume research output for institutions whose core mandate centers on extension work.

2. Ensure Adequate Resources for QA

Governments and institutional leaders must treat QA infrastructure as a capital necessity rather than an administrative overhead. Sustained funding and robust digital systems—such as LMS integration and automated dashboards—are essential to reducing the manual burden of compliance. Institutions should be required to allocate a protected portion of their operating budget specifically for QA and CQI infrastructure development, consistent with evidence on resource constraints and the high administrative workload. The dedicated funding stream should be subject to external review to ensure it is spent on sustained digital infrastructure upgrades and staff time, rather than becoming a revolving fund for temporary compliance consultants, thereby mitigating the risk of "audit spikes." Policies should also specify required digital tools, including system-wide, open-source QA reporting templates, to streamline documentation and lessen the reporting burden on individual HEIs.

3. Invest in Capacity and Leadership

To mitigate faculty burnout, institutions must prioritize professional development that goes beyond basic compliance procedures and builds leadership in change management, data-driven decision-making, and the assessment of authentic learning. This includes requiring accredited training for deans and quality officers on adaptive leadership and nonpunitive audit processes, directly addressing the faculty resistance underlying the compliance paradox. Adaptive leadership training is necessary to empower administrators to view accreditation not as a punitive external audit, but as an internal tool for change management that fosters trust and collegiality among faculty. Professional development should also mandate a module on integrating AI tools for data analysis and reporting to increase efficiency and reduce the manual workload placed on faculty.

Strategy 2: Transforming the Process (Mechanisms)

This strategy addresses the Compliance Paradox directly, recognizing that the current mechanism of interaction—an adversarial audit culture—is the primary driver of resistance and episodic performance. The goal of this transformation is to shift the relationship from one of external monitoring to collaborative and developmental improvement. This requires redefining the core metrics of evaluation and broadening stakeholder participation to dismantle the reliance on top-down, punitive assessments.

4. Shift Focus from Compliance to Improvement

Accrediting bodies should reweight their evaluation criteria so that the "evidence expectations" node prioritizes trends of continuous improvement—such as PDCA cycle effectiveness—over static checklist compliance. This shift encourages institutions to report challenges, learning, and growth rather than performative success. Accrediting teams should devote a substantial portion of their site-visit time to examining PDCA implementation and engaging with CQI action plans, addressing the tendency toward episodic compliance created by rigid audit culture. A complementary mechanism is the introduction of a "Growth Score" that tracks improvement since the previous accreditation cycle, rewarding institutions for sustained progress rather than one-time attainment.

5. Promote Collaborative Accreditation

The relationship between accreditors and institutions should shift toward a developmental partnership that emphasizes mentorship and guidance alongside evaluation. Such an approach builds trust and helps reduce the resistance documented in the literature. This includes establishing a mandatory pre-evaluation mentorship period in which accreditors offer guidance—rather than audit—on evidence preparation, reinforcing the policy discussion's conclusion on redefining mechanisms of interaction. A complementary strategy is the creation of a pool of HEI change-management consultants, composed of former administrators, who can provide paid support to resource-constrained institutions as they navigate complex reforms.

6. Build an Inclusive Quality Culture

To prevent quality assurance from becoming the sole responsibility of a small group of administrators, policies should mandate the active involvement of students, junior faculty, and staff in the accreditation process. Broad participation fosters shared ownership, the most effective antidote to episodic compliance. This includes establishing a Student Quality Assurance Council (SQAC) with representation and input rights on key curriculum decisions, addressing the need for bottom-up engagement highlighted in the compliance paradox. Policies should also require that accreditation survey data be disaggregated and shared internally with all faculty and staff to promote transparency and reinforce collective responsibility for continuous improvement.

Strategy 3: Verifying the Value (Outcomes)

The final strategy aims to resolve the Evidence Deficit by providing the missing empirical link between accreditation efforts and student success. The central goal is to fundamentally change how success is measured, moving beyond easily quantifiable process metrics (proxies) to verifiable, longitudinal evidence of value creation (authentic student competencies and economic utility). This shift is essential to make CQI evidence-based rather than merely process-compliant.

7. Strengthen Outcome-Based Evidence

To address the critical lack of direct evidence, policies should require robust graduate-tracking and longitudinal assessment systems. Accreditation success

should be measured by demonstrable gains in authentic student competencies and employability, rather than by process proxies. This requires moving beyond reliance on multiple-choice exams and simple passing rates toward authentic assessment methods such as portfolio review, capstone project evaluations, and standardized external competency exams. These methods provide high-fidelity evidence of complex, transferable skills (like critical thinking and ethical reasoning) that the current system fails to capture, thereby closing the evidence deficit. All HEIs should integrate longitudinal graduate tracking data—such as job placement, salary, and professional certification rates—directly into accreditation reports, directly addressing the "evidence deficit" and the issue of "quantification overshadowing learning quality." In addition, a large-scale, a recurring assessment system should be periodically used to measure the competencies attained by HEI graduates against the specific, evolving skill requirements of key industries, thereby linking accreditation success directly to national economic goals.

Final Implications

The transition outlined above—from compliance to culture—is not merely aspirational; it is a structural necessity. By implementing these recommendations, policymakers and educational leaders can transform accreditation from a burden to be managed into a genuine engine for educational excellence. Future research should focus on longitudinally testing this revised framework to empirically validate the impact of these strategic interventions on student learning outcomes.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the disparity between the intent of accreditation and the de facto reality of its implementation in higher education. The findings, synthesized in the De Facto Accreditation Response Model (DFARM), confirm that while accreditation serves as a powerful catalyst for structural permanence and curriculum alignment, its potential to drive sustainable continuous quality improvement (CQI) is frequently compromised by systemic friction. The analysis identified critical gaps—specifically the predominance of episodic compliance, excessive administrative burden, and the lack of direct empirical evidence linking accreditation to student learning outcomes. The DFARM analysis revealed that the institutional feedback loop is fundamentally broken; systems are excellent at documenting processes but fail to capture and utilize

high-fidelity, longitudinal data on student competency attainment, leaving CQI based on compliance rather than evidence.

The persistence of these gaps suggests that the current audit-driven model of accreditation has reached a plateau. This plateau is characterized by a "zero-sum" relationship where the administrative costs of maintaining a compliance-focused QA system actively subtract resources and faculty time from the core academic mission. Without structural changes—particularly addressing resource equity and the nature of the evaluation mechanism—institutions risk remaining trapped in a compliance paradox, where resources are consumed by the documentation of quality rather than its creation. Therefore, achieving the ultimate goal of accreditation—measurable student success and sustainable excellence—requires a comprehensive policy overhaul that mandates a strategic, structural shift from a culture of verification to a culture of improvement. This shift, as outlined in the three-tiered policy strategy, must transform inputs, recalibrate the process from adversarial to collaborative, and mandate robust outcome-based evidence to establish the true value of quality assurance.

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