Teaching-Learning Enhancement Through Participatory Internal Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Higher education institutions face increasing pressure to enhance teaching quality, student learning, curriculum responsiveness, and institutional accountability through effective internal quality assurance (IQA) systems. Although participatory approaches to IQA have attracted growing scholarly attention, evidence remains fragmented across research on quality culture, leadership, stakeholder engagement, governance, and academic development. Consequently, limited understanding exists regarding the mechanisms through which participatory IQA contributes to teaching-learning enhancement. This study systematically reviews international research examining how participatory IQA supports educational improvement in higher education. Guided by PRISMA 2020 procedures, the review synthesized evidence from 72 peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and 2025 and indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. Data were analyzed using interpretive thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns, enabling conditions, and outcomes associated with participatory quality assurance practices. The findings indicate that participatory IQA supports curriculum enhancement, assessment improvement, pedagogical innovation, reflective teaching practice, faculty professional learning, and student engagement. Distributed leadership emerged as a critical enabling condition for meaningful stakeholder participation, while quality culture functioned as the central mechanism linking participation to continuous improvement and teaching-learning enhancement. However, managerialism, compliance-oriented accountability systems, symbolic participation, workload pressures, and resource constraints frequently limited authentic engagement in quality processes. The study refines a Participatory Quality Culture Framework that explains how distributed leadership enables stakeholder participation, participation strengthens collaborative quality cultures, and quality culture supports educational enhancement and organisational learning. By integrating insights from quality culture, participatory governance, distributed leadership, and academic development scholarship, the review repositions participatory IQA as an enhancement-oriented process of institutional learning rather than solely an administrative accountability mechanism. The findings highlight the importance of collaboration, trust, reflective practice, and shared responsibility in sustaining educational quality and continuous improvement in higher education.

Keywords: internal quality assurance; participatory quality assurance; quality culture; teaching-learning enhancement; distributed leadership; higher education; systematic literature review

Introduction

Microlearning has gained increasing prominence as an innovative pedagogical approach in higher education, particularly amid the post-pandemic expansion of flexible, technology-enhanced learning environments. Initially conceptualised as the delivery of short, focused learning units designed to facilitate rapid knowledge acquisition (Hug, 2005; Buchem & Hamelmann, 2010), microlearning has since evolved into a widely adopted instructional strategy across diverse educational contexts. Research has demonstrated its effectiveness in disciplines such as medical education, engineering, information technology, and language learning, where it has been associated with improved learner engagement, knowledge retention, motivation, and academic performance (Chamorro-Atalaya et al., 2024; Pham et al.,

2024; Qian et al., 2021; Skalka & Drlik, 2020). Its growing popularity stems from its learner-centred design, flexibility, accessibility, and capacity to support personalised, on-demand learning experiences that align with contemporary learners' preferences and digital learning practices.

Despite this expanding evidence base, the application of microlearning to higher-order cognitive domains, particularly research skill development, remains insufficiently understood. Existing scholarship has predominantly examined microlearning in relation to routine, procedural, or knowledge-based competencies, with comparatively limited attention given to its potential for supporting complex learning processes. Research training requires learners to engage in conceptual reasoning, methodological decision-making, critical evaluation, problem-solving, and sustained inquiry—activities that extend beyond the discrete learning tasks typically associated with microlearning. Although several studies have explored the use of microlearning within research methods instruction or milestone-based research support programmes (Sawarynski & Baxa, 2019; Yao & Ho, 2024), these initiatives have generally employed microlearning as a supplementary instructional resource rather than as a pedagogical framework guiding the research process itself. Furthermore, much of the existing evidence relies on quantitative measures of satisfaction or performance, providing limited insight into how learners experience and make sense of microlearning during the development of research competence (Díaz Redondo et al., 2021; Taylor & Hung, 2022).

This gap reflects a broader conceptual tension within the microlearning literature. Microlearning is frequently promoted as an effective approach for flexible, learner-centred education because it reduces cognitive overload, supports incremental learning, and enables learners to engage with content in manageable segments (Hug, 2005; Buchem & Hamelmann, 2010; Díaz Redondo et al., 2021). However, research training is inherently complex, requiring sustained engagement with interconnected concepts, iterative problem-solving, methodological judgement, and the integration of diverse forms of knowledge over extended periods. Consequently, an important question remains unresolved: can microlearning meaningfully support the development of research capability, or are its benefits largely restricted to lower-complexity learning outcomes? This question is both theoretically and practically significant because prevailing assumptions regarding the limitations of microlearning may constrain its adoption in educational contexts where learners require substantial scaffolding, sustained motivation, and progressive skill development. Clarifying this issue is therefore essential for advancing understanding of the pedagogical potential and boundaries of microlearning in higher education.

At the same time, the need for innovative approaches to research training has become increasingly urgent. Graduate students and novice researchers frequently encounter challenges related to research design, methodological decision-making, academic writing, data analysis, and navigating the broader research process (Nguyen, 2020; Pham, 2020). These difficulties are often exacerbated by limited supervisory capacity, uneven methodological preparation, and insufficient opportunities for structured practice, feedback, and peer support. Such challenges are particularly evident in emerging research contexts such as Vietnam, where growing expectations for research productivity coexist with constraints in institutional resources and formal research training provision. As universities seek to strengthen research capacity and support early-career scholars, there is a pressing need for pedagogical approaches that can make research learning more accessible, structured, manageable, and motivating while accommodating diverse learner needs and contextual realities.

To address these issues, this study investigates how microlearning can support junior researchers' engagement in research skill development within a structured research training and coaching programme in Vietnam. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), the study examines how psychological needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) and perceived task values (attainment, intrinsic, utility, and cost) shape learners' motivation and engagement within a microlearning-based research training environment. Through semi-structured interviews with graduate students and early-career researchers, the study

explores how microlearning facilitates step-by-step participation in authentic research activities and how these experiences influence learners' motivation, persistence, confidence, and research development.

This study makes two important contributions to the literature. First, it extends current understandings of microlearning by challenging the prevailing assumption that microlearning is primarily suited to procedural or lower-order learning tasks. By examining its application within research training, the study demonstrates how microlearning can support the development of higher-order research capabilities involving inquiry, reflection, methodological reasoning, and sustained cognitive engagement. Second, the study develops a Micro-Researching Framework that explains how microlearning principles can be systematically integrated into research training and supervision. By linking microlearning processes with motivational mechanisms derived from SDT and EVT, the framework provides a theoretically grounded explanation of how microlearning can support research competence, learner motivation, and sustained engagement in scholarly activity. In doing so, the study contributes both conceptual and practical insights for educators, supervisors, and institutions seeking scalable approaches to supporting novice researchers in higher education.

Literature Review

Microlearning in Higher Education

Microlearning has emerged as a prominent pedagogical approach in higher education, particularly in response to the growing demand for flexible, technology-enhanced learning environments. Initially conceptualised as the delivery of short, focused learning units that facilitate rapid knowledge acquisition (Hug, 2005; Buchem & Hamelmann, 2010), microlearning has evolved into a broader learner-centred approach that supports personalised, accessible, and on-demand learning. Empirical studies across disciplines—including medical education, engineering, information technology, and language learning—consistently report positive outcomes such as increased engagement, improved retention, enhanced motivation, and stronger academic performance (Chamorro-Atalaya et al., 2024; Pham et al., 2024; Qian et al., 2021; Skalka & Drlik, 2020).

Beyond supporting disciplinary knowledge acquisition, microlearning has also been associated with the development of transferable competencies, including teamwork, communication, leadership, and emotional intelligence (Luo & Li, 2025). Bibliometric analyses further demonstrate that higher education has become one of the most active contexts for microlearning research, reflecting both institutional interest in innovative pedagogies and students' growing preference for flexible digital learning experiences (Leong et al., 2020, 2021; Pham et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings suggest that microlearning has progressed beyond a simple content-delivery mechanism and is increasingly recognised as a pedagogical strategy capable of supporting diverse educational outcomes.

However, a closer examination of the literature reveals an important limitation. Existing research has predominantly examined microlearning in relation to knowledge acquisition, procedural learning, and discrete skill development, leaving its potential for supporting higher-order and cognitively demanding learning less well understood (Díaz Redondo et al., 2021; Taylor & Hung, 2022). Most evidence supporting microlearning originates from contexts involving knowledge acquisition, procedural learning, or discrete skill development. Consequently, while the effectiveness of microlearning for relatively bounded learning tasks is well established, its capacity to support complex forms of learning that require sustained cognitive engagement, reflection, integration of knowledge, and iterative problem-solving remains uncertain. This limitation raises important questions regarding the pedagogical boundaries of microlearning and its applicability to more demanding educational contexts.

Microlearning and Research Skill Development

Research skill development represents a particularly challenging context through which to examine these questions. Unlike many learning activities commonly associated with microlearning, research training requires learners to engage in conceptual reasoning, methodological decision-making, critical evaluation, academic writing, data analysis, and sustained inquiry. These activities are inherently iterative and often

involve navigating uncertainty, revising decisions, and integrating multiple forms of knowledge over extended periods.

Existing studies have explored the use of microlearning within research methods courses and milestone-based research support initiatives (Sawarynski & Baxa, 2019; Yao & Ho, 2024). While these studies suggest that microlearning can enhance accessibility and provide targeted support, they have generally positioned microlearning as a supplementary resource rather than as a pedagogical framework capable of structuring the research process itself. Furthermore, most investigations have relied on quantitative indicators of satisfaction, engagement, or performance, offering limited insight into how learners experience microlearning while developing research competence.

This limitation reflects a broader debate within the microlearning literature. Some scholars argue that microlearning is inherently better suited to simple, routine, or procedural tasks because its fragmented structure may constrain deeper conceptual understanding and sustained cognitive engagement (Díaz Redondo et al., 2021; Taylor & Hung, 2022). Others contend that these limitations are not intrinsic to microlearning itself but rather depend on how learning experiences are designed and scaffolded (Zhang & West, 2019). From this perspective, microlearning may support higher-order learning when individual learning units are strategically connected within a coherent developmental process.

Research skill development therefore represents a critical test of microlearning's pedagogical potential. If microlearning can support learners in navigating complex research processes, its value extends beyond efficiency and flexibility toward facilitating sophisticated forms of academic capability development. Conversely, if microlearning proves insufficient for such contexts, claims regarding its broader educational applicability may require reconsideration. Understanding how learners experience microlearning during research development is therefore both theoretically and pedagogically significant.

Microlearning Platforms and Tools in Higher Education

Parallel to pedagogical research, scholars have developed a growing range of microlearning platforms and digital tools designed to support learning in higher education. Design-based studies have informed the development of mobile microlearning applications that enhance reading comprehension and learner engagement (Robles et al., 2023), while microlearning-based MOOCs have been proposed as mechanisms for promoting independent learning and learner autonomy (Kustandi et al., 2024). These innovations demonstrate the adaptability of microlearning technologies and their capacity to provide flexible, self-paced, and accessible learning opportunities.

Despite these advances, most microlearning technologies remain oriented toward content delivery, course support, or independent study. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to designing microlearning environments that support complex developmental processes such as research capability building. Few studies have examined how microlearning structures might scaffold activities such as identifying research problems, formulating research questions, selecting methodologies, analysing data, interpreting findings, or producing scholarly outputs.

This omission is noteworthy because the characteristics commonly attributed to effective microlearning—manageable learning units, timely feedback, flexibility, and progressive scaffolding—align closely with challenges frequently encountered by novice researchers. Consequently, the limited application of microlearning technologies to research training does not necessarily reflect a lack of pedagogical relevance but rather an underexplored area of inquiry. Investigating how microlearning structures can be adapted to support research development may therefore provide important insights into both educational technology design and research pedagogy.

Challenges in Research Skill Development

Research skill development remains a persistent challenge across higher education systems, particularly for graduate students and early-career researchers. Novice researchers frequently struggle with research design, methodological reasoning, academic writing, data analysis, and managing the sequential demands of the research process. These challenges often extend beyond technical competence and involve

uncertainty, self-doubt, and difficulties maintaining momentum throughout lengthy research projects (Pyhältö et al., 2012; Bandura, 1997).

Such difficulties are frequently intensified by structural constraints, including limited supervisory capacity, uneven methodological preparation, insufficient feedback opportunities, and restricted access to mentoring and research communities. In emerging research contexts such as Vietnam, these challenges are particularly pronounced because increasing expectations for research productivity are not always accompanied by adequate institutional support, formal research training structures, or sustained mentoring opportunities (Nguyen, 2020; Pham, 2020). As a result, many novice researchers must navigate complex research processes with limited guidance, potentially affecting both research outcomes and learner motivation.

Importantly, these challenges are not solely cognitive. Research training requires sustained motivation, confidence, persistence, and a sense of progress despite setbacks and uncertainty. Consequently, effective research education must address both the development of research competencies and the motivational conditions that enable learners to persist in complex academic tasks. This dual challenge highlights the potential value of pedagogical approaches that provide structured guidance while simultaneously supporting learner engagement and confidence.

Microlearning may offer one such approach. By breaking complex research processes into manageable stages, providing just-in-time support, and enabling incremental achievement, microlearning has the potential to reduce cognitive overload and make research tasks more approachable. However, whether learners experience these benefits in practice and how such experiences influence motivation and persistence remain insufficiently understood.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, the literature reveals a significant disconnect between what is known about microlearning and what remains unknown about its role in research education. Existing evidence demonstrates that microlearning can effectively support engagement, learning, and skill development across a range of higher education contexts. However, most studies focus on relatively discrete learning tasks, leaving unresolved questions regarding its capacity to support complex, iterative, and cognitively demanding forms of learning.

Three interrelated gaps emerge from this review. First, the application of microlearning to research skill development remains limited despite the growing importance of research capability in higher education. Second, existing studies have largely conceptualised microlearning as a supplementary learning resource rather than as a structured pedagogical framework capable of guiding learners through complex research processes. Third, current evidence relies predominantly on quantitative evaluations, providing limited understanding of how learners experience microlearning, construct meaning from microlearning activities, and sustain engagement throughout research development.

More fundamentally, the literature has yet to explain how microlearning may influence the motivational processes that underpin successful research learning. This omission is important because research training requires not only cognitive skill acquisition but also sustained confidence, persistence, autonomy, and perceived value. Without understanding these motivational dimensions, it remains difficult to determine whether microlearning can genuinely support research capability development or merely facilitate isolated learning tasks.

Transition to Theoretical Framework

Addressing these gaps requires a theoretical perspective that explains both how learners engage with microlearning-based research training and why they persist in complex research activities over time. Motivation is particularly important in research education because learners must continually navigate uncertainty, overcome challenges, and sustain effort across extended periods of inquiry. Consequently, understanding research skill development requires attention not only to what learners do but also to the psychological processes that shape their engagement.

To examine these processes, this study draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT). SDT explains how the fulfilment of learners' needs for competence, autonomy, and

relatedness influences motivation, engagement, and persistence. EVT complements this perspective by explaining how learners' expectations of success and perceptions of task value shape effort, commitment, and performance. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how microlearning structures may support or constrain motivation, confidence, and sustained engagement during research skill development. By integrating SDT and EVT, this study moves beyond questions of instructional effectiveness to examine the motivational mechanisms through which microlearning may facilitate the development of research competence.

Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination Theory and Research Learning

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a powerful framework for understanding how learners initiate, sustain, and internalise engagement in complex learning activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020). At its core, SDT argues that the quality and persistence of motivation depend on the extent to which three fundamental psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—are satisfied. Competence refers to individuals' perceptions of effectiveness and mastery in performing tasks; autonomy reflects the experience of choice, ownership, and self-direction; and relatedness concerns feelings of connection, belonging, and support within meaningful social relationships. When these needs are fulfilled, learners are more likely to develop self-determined forms of motivation, demonstrate resilience in the face of challenges, and engage deeply in learning.

The relevance of SDT is particularly evident in research education. Developing research competence requires learners to engage with unfamiliar concepts, navigate ambiguity, make methodological decisions, solve complex problems, and persist through repeated cycles of inquiry, feedback, and revision. These demands often generate uncertainty and self-doubt, especially among novice researchers. Learners who perceive themselves as capable of conducting research, who experience ownership over their research decisions, and who feel supported by supervisors and peers are more likely to remain motivated and committed to the research process. In contrast, unmet psychological needs may undermine confidence, reduce engagement, and hinder research progress.

Microlearning offers a potentially valuable mechanism for supporting these psychological needs. By breaking complex research processes into manageable learning tasks, microlearning can create frequent opportunities for success and mastery, thereby strengthening perceptions of competence. Its flexible and self-paced nature may enhance autonomy by allowing learners to engage with research activities according to their individual needs and progress. Furthermore, when embedded within collaborative learning and coaching environments, microlearning can foster relatedness through ongoing interaction, feedback, and peer support. From an SDT perspective, therefore, microlearning may function not merely as a delivery strategy but as a motivational structure that supports sustained engagement in research learning. Although previous studies have applied SDT to explain learner engagement in microlearning environments (Nikou & Economides, 2018), little is known about how these motivational processes operate within research training, where learning is inherently complex, iterative, and cognitively demanding.

Expectancy-Value Theory and Research Engagement

While SDT explains how psychological need satisfaction influences the quality of motivation, Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) explains how learners evaluate academic tasks and determine whether those tasks are worth pursuing (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). EVT proposes that achievement-related behaviours are shaped by two interrelated factors: expectancy beliefs and subjective task values (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Eccles & Wigfield, 2020).Together, these factors influence learners' decisions to engage, persist, and invest effort in learning activities.

Expectancy beliefs refer to learners' confidence in their ability to successfully complete a task. Subjective task values comprise four dimensions: attainment value, which reflects the personal importance of performing well; intrinsic value, which reflects enjoyment and interest; utility value, which reflects perceived usefulness for future goals; and cost, which reflects the effort, emotional burden, risks, or

sacrifices associated with participation. Learners are most likely to engage when they believe they can succeed and when they perceive the task as meaningful, enjoyable, or beneficial. Conversely, motivation may decline when perceived costs outweigh anticipated benefits.

EVT is particularly relevant to research education because research activities are often characterised by uncertainty, delayed outcomes, substantial effort, and repeated setbacks. For many novice researchers, the perceived complexity of research can diminish confidence and increase perceptions of cost. At the same time, learners may vary considerably in the extent to which they perceive research as personally meaningful, professionally valuable, or intellectually rewarding. Understanding these evaluations is therefore essential for explaining why some learners persist in research despite challenges while others disengage.

Microlearning may influence these motivational evaluations in several ways. By dividing complex research processes into smaller and more achievable stages, microlearning can generate frequent experiences of success that strengthen expectancy beliefs. Incremental progress may also increase learners' perceptions that research is achievable and manageable. Simultaneously, opportunities to apply learning directly to authentic research tasks may enhance attainment, intrinsic, and utility value by making research activities more relevant, rewarding, and connected to learners' academic and professional aspirations. In this way, microlearning has the potential not only to reduce perceived costs but also to increase the perceived value of engaging in research.

Integrating SDT and EVT: A Motivational Mechanism for Micro-Researching

Although SDT and EVT originate from distinct theoretical traditions, they offer complementary explanations of learner motivation and together provide a robust framework for understanding research skill development in microlearning environments. SDT focuses on the psychological conditions that foster high-quality motivation, whereas EVT explains how learners cognitively evaluate the feasibility and value of academic tasks. Integrating these perspectives enables a more comprehensive understanding of both the affective and cognitive mechanisms that underpin engagement in research learning.

The integration of SDT and EVT is particularly important because motivation in research education cannot be adequately explained by either theory alone. Learners may perceive research as valuable but lack confidence in their ability to succeed. Conversely, they may feel capable of conducting research but fail to perceive sufficient value in investing the required effort. Sustainable engagement emerges when learners simultaneously experience psychological need satisfaction and positive task evaluations. Thus, motivation is shaped not only by how learners feel about themselves and their learning environment but also by how they evaluate the significance, usefulness, and attainability of research activities.

Within the context of microlearning-based research training, these processes can be conceptualised as a dynamic motivational mechanism. Microlearning structures—such as short learning modules, scaffolded tasks, flexible pacing, timely feedback, and collaborative support—may enhance competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Satisfaction of these psychological needs can strengthen learners' confidence, ownership, and sense of belonging, creating favourable conditions for engagement. These experiences may subsequently influence expectancy beliefs and perceptions of task value by helping learners view research as achievable, meaningful, and worthwhile. As expectancy beliefs and task values increase, learners are more likely to invest effort, persist through challenges, and engage deeply in research activities.

This integrated perspective is especially relevant to the concept of micro-researching proposed in this study. Research learning is not a linear process but a sustained journey requiring both emotional resilience and cognitive commitment. Learners must feel capable of conducting research, perceive ownership over their learning, and experience meaningful support from others. At the same time, they must believe that research activities are achievable, valuable, and aligned with their personal and professional aspirations. The combined SDT–EVT framework therefore provides a theoretically coherent explanation of how microlearning may transform complex research activities into manageable, motivating, and meaningful learning experiences.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding this study. The framework proposes that microlearning-based research training influences learners' experiences of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which subsequently shape expectancy beliefs and perceptions of attainment, intrinsic, utility, and cost values. Together, these motivational processes influence learners' engagement, persistence, and research capability development. The framework therefore positions motivation as the central mechanism through which microlearning contributes to research learning outcomes.

Guiding the Study and the Development of the Micro-Researching Framework

The integrated SDT–EVT framework informed both the design of the study and the analytical approach. Semi-structured interview questions were developed to explore participants' experiences of competence, autonomy, relatedness, expectancy beliefs, attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value, and perceived costs during their engagement with microlearning-based research training. These constructs served as sensitising concepts that guided data collection and deductive thematic analysis while allowing additional themes to emerge inductively from participants' experiences.

More importantly, the framework provided the conceptual foundation for developing the Micro-Researching Framework proposed in this study. Unlike conventional approaches that treat microlearning primarily as a content delivery strategy, the Micro-Researching Framework conceptualises microlearning as a structured pedagogical process for supporting research capability development. The framework proposes that complex research activities can be decomposed into manageable learning tasks that progressively build competence, strengthen autonomy, foster relatedness, enhance expectancy beliefs, and increase perceptions of task value. Through these interconnected motivational processes, learners become more willing and able to engage in sustained research activity.

By integrating SDT and EVT, this study moves beyond the question of whether microlearning is effective and instead addresses the more theoretically significant question of how and why microlearning supports research skill development. In doing so, it responds directly to ongoing debates regarding the suitability of microlearning for higher-order and cognitively demanding forms of learning. The study contributes a theoretically grounded explanation of the motivational mechanisms underpinning microlearning-based research training and establishes a conceptual foundation for future research, curriculum design, supervision practices, and research education initiatives aimed at developing the next generation of researchers.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesise and interpret evidence on participatory approaches to internal quality assurance (IQA) in higher education. An SLR was selected because it provides a transparent, rigorous, and replicable approach for identifying, evaluating, and integrating research findings across diverse higher education contexts. Given the conceptual breadth and methodological diversity of the IQA literature—including studies of quality culture, stakeholder participation, leadership, governance, curriculum enhancement, academic development, and teaching-learning enhancement—an interpretive thematic synthesis approach was adopted.

Thematic synthesis was considered appropriate because the included studies employed qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs, drew upon diverse theoretical perspectives, and reported heterogeneous outcomes. Consequently, statistical aggregation or meta-analysis was not suitable. Instead, thematic synthesis enabled the integration of diverse forms of evidence while supporting higher-order conceptual interpretation and the identification of patterns across studies. This approach aligns with contemporary higher education research that seeks not only to summarise evidence but also to generate explanatory insights into complex educational phenomena. To ensure methodological rigour and transparency, the review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. These databases were selected because they provide extensive coverage of higher education, educational leadership, quality assurance, and teaching-learning research. The initial search was conducted on 15 January 2026 and updated on 10 March 2026 to capture recently published studies.

Search terms were developed based on the study objectives, conceptual framework, and terminology commonly used within the literature. Core search concepts included *internal quality assurance*, *participatory quality assurance*, *quality culture*, *higher education*, and *teaching and learning*. Additional terms such as *student participation*, *faculty engagement*, *shared governance*, *distributed leadership*, and *academic development* were incorporated to enhance search sensitivity and comprehensiveness.

A representative search string was:

("internal quality assurance" OR "participatory quality assurance" OR "quality culture") AND ("higher education" OR university OR college) AND ("teaching and learning" OR "academic development" OR leadership OR "student participation" OR "faculty engagement")

Database-specific adaptations were applied where necessary to accommodate differences in indexing systems and search functions. To enhance comprehensiveness, the reference lists of included studies were also manually screened to identify additional relevant publications.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to screening to ensure methodological consistency and conceptual relevance. Studies were included if they: (a) were published in peer-reviewed journals; (b) were written in English; (c) were published between 2014 and 2025; and (d) examined participatory internal quality assurance, stakeholder engagement, quality culture, leadership, governance, academic development, curriculum enhancement, or teaching-learning enhancement within higher education institutions.

Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on external accreditation processes, quality assurance in school or vocational education settings, or topics unrelated to participatory approaches to IQA. Dissertations, conference proceedings, book chapters, editorials, commentaries, policy briefs, and other non-peer-reviewed publications were also excluded.

The 2014–2025 timeframe was selected because it reflects a period characterised by increasing emphasis on enhancement-oriented quality assurance, collaborative governance, student partnership, and quality culture within higher education. Seminal publications published before 2014 were consulted only to support conceptual framing and interpretation.

Screening Process

The screening process followed the four-stage PRISMA 2020 framework comprising identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. All retrieved records were exported into reference management software, where duplicate records were identified and removed.

Two reviewers independently assessed titles, abstracts, and full-text articles against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inter-reviewer agreement exceeded 90% throughout the screening process, indicating a high level of consistency in study selection. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus.

The database search yielded 1,246 records. Following duplicate removal, 978 unique records remained for screening. Title and abstract screening excluded studies that did not address higher education, participatory quality assurance, stakeholder engagement, or teaching-learning enhancement. This stage resulted in 214 articles proceeding to full-text review. During eligibility assessment, studies were excluded if they lacked methodological transparency, conceptual relevance, or substantive engagement with participatory IQA practices. Ultimately, 72 studies met all inclusion criteria and were retained for the final synthesis. A PRISMA flow diagram was developed to provide a transparent account of the study selection process.

Data Extraction and Study Mapping

A structured data extraction matrix was developed to ensure systematic and consistent extraction of information across all included studies. Extracted variables included publication year, country or region, institutional context, methodological approach, participant characteristics, theoretical framework, forms of stakeholder participation, leadership dimensions, quality assurance focus, implementation strategies, reported challenges, and pedagogical or institutional outcomes.

Following extraction, studies were mapped according to geographic region, methodological design, institutional setting, and thematic focus. This process enabled the identification of broad trends, contextual variations, and methodological patterns across the literature. Study mapping also supported comparative analysis and facilitated a comprehensive understanding of participatory IQA practices in higher education.

Quality Appraisal

Methodological quality appraisal was undertaken to evaluate the credibility and rigour of the included studies. Appraisal tools were selected according to study design. Qualitative studies were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist (CASP, 2018), mixed-methods studies were evaluated using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018), and quantitative studies were reviewed using relevant criteria from the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) appraisal framework (JBI, 2020). The appraisal process examined research design appropriateness, sampling adequacy, data collection procedures, analytical rigour, transparency of reporting, validity and reliability of findings, and ethical considerations. No studies were excluded solely on the basis of methodological quality. Instead, appraisal outcomes informed the interpretation of evidence during synthesis, ensuring that methodological strengths and limitations were considered when developing themes and drawing conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

As this study involved the analysis of publicly available, previously published literature and did not involve direct interaction with human participants, formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the review was conducted in accordance with recognised principles of research integrity, transparency, and academic ethics.

All included studies were appropriately cited and acknowledged. Ethical considerations reported within the primary studies were also examined during quality appraisal, including evidence of informed consent, confidentiality procedures, ethical approval, and responsible data management where applicable. Review procedures and analytical decisions were documented to enhance transparency, reproducibility, and scholarly integrity.

Data Analysis

The review employed thematic synthesis as the primary analytical strategy to integrate findings across diverse methodological traditions while preserving conceptual depth and interpretive richness (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

The first stage involved line-by-line coding of extracted findings to identify recurring concepts related to participatory internal quality assurance. Initial codes included stakeholder participation, distributed leadership, faculty engagement, student voice, quality culture, curriculum enhancement, academic development, organisational learning, and collaborative governance.

The second stage involved grouping related codes into broader analytical categories representing institutional, pedagogical, leadership, cultural, and governance dimensions of participatory IQA. Through constant comparison, similarities and differences across studies were examined to identify recurring relationships and contextual influences.

The third stage focused on generating higher-order interpretive themes that explained how participatory approaches contribute to quality enhancement within higher education institutions. These themes moved beyond descriptive summaries to provide explanatory insights into the conditions, processes, and outcomes associated with participatory IQA practices.

Throughout the analytical process, emerging interpretations were continually compared against the original studies to ensure analytical fidelity and conceptual grounding. Regular discussions among reviewers were conducted to refine coding decisions, resolve ambiguities, and strengthen analytical coherence.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the review, drawing on the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened through independent screening, reviewer triangulation, systematic cross-checking of extracted data, and ongoing discussion throughout the analytical process. Dependability was supported through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting search procedures, screening decisions, quality appraisal outcomes, coding processes, and theme development.

Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memoing, transparent documentation of analytical decisions, and continual reference to the original studies to ensure that findings remained grounded in the evidence base. Transferability was facilitated through detailed descriptions of study contexts, methodological characteristics, institutional settings, and participant populations, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other higher education environments.

Although data saturation is not directly applicable to systematic literature reviews, conceptual saturation was considered achieved when no substantially new themes or explanatory insights emerged during the final stages of synthesis. Collectively, these procedures enhanced the transparency, credibility, dependability, and rigour of the review, strengthening confidence in the trustworthiness of its findings.

Results

Overview of the Evidence Base

The review synthesised 72 studies examining participatory internal quality assurance (IQA) in higher education published between 2014 and 2025. The studies represented diverse institutional and geographical contexts across Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, and Oceania. Despite contextual differences, a common concern across the literature was how quality assurance could move beyond compliance-oriented procedures towards processes that actively support teaching-learning enhancement and institutional improvement.

Regional patterns revealed important differences in emphasis. European studies most frequently conceptualised participatory IQA through quality culture, stakeholder engagement, and enhancement-oriented quality frameworks. Asian studies commonly situated participatory IQA within broader institutional reform agendas, accreditation responsiveness, and leadership-driven transformation. Studies from African contexts highlighted tensions between external accountability requirements and locally embedded participation practices, often drawing attention to resource limitations and administrative capacity constraints. In contrast, North American and Oceanian studies placed greater emphasis on curriculum review, faculty development, student engagement, and collaborative academic practice.

The reviewed studies included public universities, private universities, research-intensive institutions, teaching-oriented universities, and open or distance learning providers. Across these diverse settings, meaningful participation was consistently associated with stronger academic ownership, improved curriculum responsiveness, and more sustainable approaches to teaching-learning enhancement.

Collectively, the evidence suggests that participatory IQA is not confined to particular institutional types or national systems. Rather, it represents a broadly applicable approach to educational improvement that can be adapted across diverse higher education contexts.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Included Studies (n = 72)

Dimension	Key Characteristics
Publication period	2014–2025

Geographic coverage	Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, Oceania
Institutional contexts	Public, private, research-intensive, teaching-oriented, open and distance learning institutions
Dominant focus areas	Quality culture, stakeholder participation, leadership, curriculum enhancement, academic development
Common outcomes	Teaching-learning enhancement, curriculum responsiveness, organisational learning, quality culture development

Theme 1: Stakeholder Participation Reframes Quality Assurance as an Academic Enhancement Process

The most consistent finding across the reviewed studies was that participatory IQA shifts quality assurance from an administrative activity towards a collaborative academic process. Faculty participation emerged as the most frequently reported dimension, appearing in approximately 51 of the 72 studies. Academics contributed through curriculum review committees, peer observation, assessment moderation, programme evaluation, faculty development initiatives, and institutional quality planning activities.

These participatory structures strengthened connections between institutional quality processes and classroom-level teaching practices. Rather than perceiving quality assurance as external monitoring, faculty members were more likely to view quality activities as opportunities for reflection, curriculum improvement, and pedagogical development. Participation therefore increased academic ownership and enhanced the likelihood that quality processes translated into meaningful educational improvement.

Student participation also emerged as a significant component of participatory IQA. Students contributed through course evaluations, focus groups, quality committees, student representation structures, and curriculum co-creation initiatives. However, the depth of student involvement varied considerably across institutional contexts. In some universities, student contributions directly informed curriculum redesign and learning support improvements. In others, participation remained largely consultative, with limited influence over decision-making processes.

Collaborative quality committees and peer review systems further reinforced academic engagement by creating spaces for dialogue among faculty members, students, quality assurance officers, and institutional leaders. These structures facilitated collective reflection on curriculum quality, assessment practices, and student learning experiences.

Table 2

Major Forms of Participation in Internal Quality Assurance

Participatory Practice	Primary Stakeholders	Purpose	Reported Outcomes
Curriculum review committees	Faculty, administrators	Programme evaluation and redesign	Curriculum enhancement
Student feedback systems	Students, faculty	Course and teaching evaluation	Improved student experience
Peer review systems	Faculty	Teaching and assessment quality	Reflective teaching practice
Quality assurance committees	Faculty, students, QA officers	Collaborative quality improvement	Academic ownership
Collaborative planning workshops	Multiple stakeholders	Strategic quality enhancement	Institutional alignment

Participatory Practice	Primary Stakeholders	Purpose	Reported Outcomes
Faculty development initiatives	Faculty, QA units	Pedagogical improvement	Teaching innovation

Overall, the findings indicate that participatory IQA is most effective when quality assurance is embedded within collaborative academic practices rather than implemented solely as an administrative requirement. Participation therefore serves as the foundation through which quality assurance becomes educationally meaningful and improvement-oriented.

Theme 2: Distributed Leadership Creates the Conditions for Meaningful Engagement

Building on the importance of participation, leadership emerged as a critical enabling condition shaping the effectiveness of participatory IQA. Across the reviewed studies, distributed and collaborative leadership approaches were consistently associated with stronger stakeholder engagement and more sustainable participation practices.

Rather than concentrating quality assurance responsibilities within senior management structures, distributed leadership shared responsibility across academic leaders, faculty members, quality assurance units, and students. This approach encouraged collaborative problem-solving, increased stakeholder ownership, and strengthened commitment to institutional improvement initiatives.

Communication and institutional trust were repeatedly identified as important leadership conditions. Institutions characterised by transparent consultation processes, regular feedback mechanisms, and supportive leadership climates reported stronger faculty engagement and lower levels of resistance to quality assurance activities. Conversely, institutions that framed quality assurance primarily as monitoring or compliance frequently experienced weaker participation and reduced academic commitment.

Several studies also linked collaborative leadership with faculty professional learning. Participation in peer review, curriculum dialogue, instructional reflection, and assessment review enabled academics to engage in continuous pedagogical learning and develop more reflective teaching practices.

The evidence suggests that leadership influences participatory IQA not only through governance structures but also through the creation of institutional conditions that support trust, dialogue, and shared responsibility. Effective leadership therefore acts as the catalyst that transforms participation into sustained engagement and collective action.

Theme 3: Participatory IQA Strengthens Teaching, Learning, and Academic Development

The literature further demonstrated that participatory IQA contributes directly to teaching-learning enhancement. Curriculum redesign, assessment improvement, pedagogical innovation, and faculty reflection emerged as the most frequently reported educational outcomes.

Curriculum enhancement was commonly observed when faculty members participated in programme review, curriculum evaluation, and learning outcome alignment activities. These processes supported stronger alignment between curriculum content, assessment practices, student needs, and institutional educational goals. Several studies reported that participatory curriculum review encouraged greater responsiveness to changing disciplinary, professional, and learner expectations.

Assessment enhancement also emerged as a recurring outcome. Collaborative moderation, peer review, and assessment dialogue improved consistency, transparency, and alignment between assessment tasks and intended learning outcomes. In many cases, participatory quality processes encouraged more authentic, formative, and student-centred assessment practices.

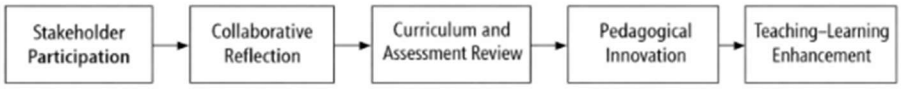
Pedagogical innovation was particularly evident within institutions characterised by strong quality cultures and collaborative learning environments. Faculty members involved in participatory quality

activities reported greater willingness to adopt active learning approaches, digital pedagogies, collaborative teaching practices, and reflective instructional design strategies.

Importantly, many studies described participation itself as a form of academic development. Through engagement in quality processes, faculty members acquired new pedagogical insights, strengthened reflective practice, and developed greater awareness of teaching-learning improvement strategies.

Figure 1

Conceptual Relationship Between Participation and Teaching-Learning Enhancement



Overall, the evidence indicates that participatory IQA contributes to educational enhancement not only by monitoring quality but also by creating opportunities for ongoing professional learning and pedagogical development. Participation therefore functions as a mechanism for academic capacity building rather than merely quality control.

Theme 4: Quality Culture Mediates the Relationship Between Participation and Improvement

While participation and leadership create the conditions for engagement, the literature consistently identified quality culture as the mechanism through which participatory IQA influences educational improvement. Institutions characterised by stakeholder dialogue, collegial reflection, and shared responsibility were more likely to develop quality processes perceived as meaningful by academic communities.

In these environments, quality was understood as a collective responsibility rather than a managerial obligation. Faculty members, students, administrators, and quality assurance officers jointly contributed to curriculum review, teaching enhancement, and institutional learning. Such participation strengthened institutional trust and reinforced a shared commitment to continuous improvement.

A recurring characteristic of strong quality cultures was the adoption of cyclical improvement processes involving reflection, feedback, implementation, evaluation, and revision. These cycles promoted organisational learning and enabled institutions to respond adaptively to changing educational expectations.

Comparative evidence suggested that institutions characterised by strong collegial communication and academic engagement were more successful in sustaining quality improvement than institutions dominated by audit-oriented procedures.

Figure 2

Quality Culture as the Mechanism Linking Participation and Improvement

The findings therefore indicate that participation alone does not produce improvement. Rather, participation contributes to educational enhancement when it becomes embedded within institutional cultures that value collaboration, trust, shared ownership, and continuous learning.

Theme 5: Accountability Pressures Limit Authentic Participation

Despite the reported benefits of participatory IQA, the literature also identified several persistent barriers that limit its effectiveness. The most frequently reported challenge concerned tensions between enhancement-oriented participation and compliance-oriented accountability systems.

Many studies described quality assurance processes dominated by documentation requirements, audits, performance indicators, accreditation evidence, and managerial reporting. Under these conditions, quality assurance often became procedural rather than developmental, limiting opportunities for meaningful academic engagement.

Faculty resistance was another commonly reported challenge. Where quality assurance was perceived as an additional administrative burden or a mechanism of surveillance, academics were less likely to participate actively in improvement processes. Similarly, student participation frequently remained vulnerable to tokenism when feedback mechanisms lacked influence over substantive curriculum or assessment decisions.

Resource limitations further constrained implementation, particularly in developing or underfunded higher education contexts. Insufficient staffing, limited professional development opportunities, inadequate technological infrastructure, and competing institutional priorities reduced the sustainability of collaborative quality initiatives.

Table 3

Benefits and Challenges of Participatory Internal Quality Assurance

Dimension	Reported Benefits	Reported Challenges
Leadership	Collaborative academic leadership	Centralised managerial control
Faculty participation	Reflective teaching enhancement	Increased workload
Student engagement	Improved learning experience	Tokenistic involvement
Quality culture	Shared responsibility and trust	Compliance orientation
Teaching-learning	Curriculum and assessment enhancement	Limited institutional support
Institutional processes	Continuous improvement	Resource constraints

These findings reveal a persistent tension between accountability and participation. Although institutions increasingly promote participatory quality assurance rhetorically, meaningful participation remains difficult to achieve when quality systems are dominated by managerial and compliance-oriented priorities.

Integrated Synthesis of Findings

Across the reviewed studies, participatory IQA emerged as a collaborative institutional process linking leadership, stakeholder engagement, quality culture, and educational improvement. The findings reveal a coherent pathway in which distributed leadership enables meaningful participation, participation strengthens quality culture, and quality culture subsequently supports teaching-learning enhancement and academic development.

Importantly, the themes are interconnected rather than independent. Participation provides the foundation for engagement, leadership creates the conditions that sustain involvement, and quality culture embeds participation within institutional practice. Together, these processes contribute to curriculum improvement, assessment enhancement, pedagogical innovation, and organisational learning. However, accountability pressures, managerial control, and resource constraints can disrupt this pathway by limiting authentic stakeholder involvement.

Figure 3

Integrated Participatory Quality Assurance Pathway

Taken together, the findings support a conceptual pathway in which participatory IQA functions most effectively as an enhancement-oriented academic development process rather than merely as a mechanism of institutional accountability. This pathway provides the empirical foundation for the Discussion section and informs the development of a Participatory Quality Culture Framework for higher education.

Discussion

Participatory IQA as a Mechanism for Building Quality Culture

This review demonstrates that participatory internal quality assurance (IQA) contributes to teaching-learning enhancement primarily by strengthening institutional quality culture. Institutions that actively engaged faculty members, students, administrators, and academic leaders in curriculum review, assessment dialogue, peer evaluation, and quality planning were more likely to cultivate cultures characterised by collaboration, trust, reflection, and continuous improvement. Rather than functioning as a technical or administrative exercise, participatory IQA emerged as a socially embedded process through which stakeholders collectively enacted and sustained educational quality. This finding aligns with quality culture scholarship, which argues that sustainable quality enhancement depends on the integration of structural quality mechanisms with shared institutional values, collegial engagement, and collective responsibility (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Ehlers, 2009; European University Association [EUA], 2006).

The findings indicate that participation is most effective when quality assurance is understood as a shared academic responsibility rather than a compliance-driven obligation. Collaborative structures such as peer review systems, interdisciplinary committees, and student partnership initiatives connected institutional quality policies with everyday teaching-learning practices, embedding quality assurance within routine academic work. Similar conclusions have been reported by Stensaker et al. (2011) and Bendermacher et al. (2017), who found that quality assurance processes are more likely to influence educational practice when academic communities perceive them as developmental rather than bureaucratic.

Participation also generated outcomes beyond procedural involvement. Faculty engagement strengthened ownership of curriculum and assessment processes, while meaningful student involvement improved responsiveness to learner needs. These findings reinforce quality culture theory by demonstrating that sustainable quality enhancement depends on shared values, collective responsibility, and reflective practice rather than formal accountability mechanisms alone (Harvey & Green, 1993; Newton, 2002). Consistent with communities of practice perspectives (Wenger, 1998), collaborative participation created opportunities for dialogue, knowledge sharing, and collective learning that supported institutional improvement.

Overall, participation emerged not simply as a component of quality culture but as the mechanism through which quality culture develops and translates into educational improvement.

Leadership as the Enabling Condition for Participation and Improvement

A second major finding concerns the role of leadership in shaping the effectiveness of participatory IQA. Distributed and collaborative leadership consistently emerged as a key condition enabling stakeholder engagement and institutional improvement. Rather than concentrating responsibility within administrative hierarchies, successful institutions shared leadership across academic leaders, faculty members, students, and quality assurance units. This finding supports the growing body of higher education leadership literature emphasising distributed leadership as a catalyst for organisational learning, innovation, and quality enhancement (Bolden et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2012).

Leadership influenced participatory IQA through both governance arrangements and institutional climate. Transparent communication, inclusive decision-making, and mutual trust encouraged active engagement in quality processes, whereas managerial control and limited consultation weakened participation and commitment. These findings resonate with Bryman's (2007) synthesis of effective leadership in higher education, which highlights consultation, collegiality, and trust-building as critical factors influencing academic engagement and institutional effectiveness.

Leadership also supported academic development. Participation in peer review, curriculum committees, assessment moderation, and collaborative planning created opportunities for professional learning, pedagogical reflection, and knowledge exchange. These activities repositioned quality assurance as a

developmental process that strengthened teaching capability and innovation. Similar observations have been reported in the academic development literature, where collaborative inquiry and peer-supported reflection are recognised as important mechanisms for enhancing teaching quality and professional growth (Gibbs, 2013; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015).

Taken together, the findings suggest that leadership contributes to improvement indirectly by fostering participation, trust, and shared ownership, thereby enabling the development of a collaborative quality culture.

Student Participation as a Driver of Teaching-Learning Enhancement

The findings highlight the importance of student participation in linking quality assurance with teaching-learning enhancement. Institutions that engaged students as active contributors rather than passive recipients demonstrated greater curriculum responsiveness, instructional improvement, and alignment between educational provision and learner needs. This finding is consistent with contemporary student engagement scholarship, which increasingly positions students as partners in educational development rather than consumers of educational services (Healey et al., 2014; Bovill, 2020).

Meaningful participation extended beyond traditional feedback surveys. Students contributed to curriculum review, programme evaluation, quality committees, and institutional planning, providing valuable insights into learning experiences, assessment practices, and support needs. Such involvement reflects partnership-based approaches that recognise students as co-creators of learning environments and institutional improvement processes (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

However, the review also revealed tensions regarding the authenticity of student participation. In many institutions, involvement remained consultative rather than collaborative, limiting students' influence on substantive academic decisions. This suggests that the effectiveness of participatory IQA depends not only on participation structures but also on the extent of stakeholder influence. Arnstein's (1969) classic ladder of participation remains relevant in explaining how participation may range from symbolic consultation to genuine partnership and shared decision-making.

The findings therefore support a shift from student voice models towards student partnership approaches, where learners are recognised as contributors to educational improvement and institutional learning. Such a shift may strengthen both educational quality and institutional responsiveness by embedding learner perspectives within decision-making processes.

The Persistent Tension Between Accountability and Participation

One of the most significant findings concerns the tension between accountability-oriented quality assurance systems and authentic participatory practices. Across multiple contexts, managerial and compliance-driven approaches frequently constrained meaningful stakeholder engagement. This finding reflects longstanding critiques of quality assurance in higher education, which argue that audit cultures and performance management systems can undermine academic autonomy, collegiality, and innovation (Shore & Wright, 2000; Power, 1997).

The expansion of audits, accreditation requirements, rankings, performance indicators, and reporting obligations has increased emphasis on procedural accountability. While these mechanisms may strengthen transparency and legitimacy, excessive managerialism often weakened the collaborative foundations necessary for sustainable quality enhancement. Quality assurance processes frequently became dominated by documentation and compliance rather than reflective dialogue and improvement. Similar concerns have been raised by Newton (2002), Harvey and Williams (2010), and Kallio et al. (2020), who caution that quality assurance systems may lose developmental value when accountability becomes the dominant objective.

This tension was particularly evident among faculty members, who often perceived quality assurance as an administrative burden disconnected from pedagogical development. Student participation likewise became symbolic when feedback mechanisms lacked influence over institutional decision-making. These

findings reveal a persistent gap between participatory aspirations and institutional realities and support critical perspectives on performativity and managerialism in higher education (Ball, 2003; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011).

Importantly, the findings do not suggest abandoning accountability. Instead, sustainable improvement appears most likely when accountability systems are balanced with participatory practices that support dialogue, trust, academic autonomy, and shared responsibility. This balance reflects enhancement-led approaches to quality assurance that seek to integrate accountability with institutional learning and continuous improvement (European Standards and Guidelines [ESG], 2015).

Refining the Participatory Quality Culture Framework

A key contribution of this review is the refinement of the Participatory Quality Culture Framework. While the original framework conceptualised leadership, participation, quality culture, and teaching-learning enhancement as interconnected components, the findings suggest a more dynamic and recursive relationship among them.

The evidence indicates that distributed leadership enables meaningful stakeholder participation. Participation strengthens trust, shared responsibility, and collaboration, which contribute to the development of quality culture. Quality culture then acts as the mediating mechanism linking participation to continuous improvement and teaching-learning enhancement. Educational improvement outcomes, in turn, reinforce participation and quality culture by increasing stakeholder commitment and confidence in collaborative approaches. This interpretation extends existing quality culture models by clarifying the mechanisms through which participation translates into educational improvement (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Bendermacher et al., 2017).

These relationships are not linear. Participatory IQA operates as an institutional learning system characterised by feedback loops in which improvements in teaching, curriculum, assessment, and academic development strengthen engagement and support further improvement. This interpretation aligns with organisational learning theory, which emphasises cyclical processes of reflection, feedback, adaptation, and improvement (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Senge, 1990). At the same time, accountability pressures and resource constraints may disrupt these cycles by limiting opportunities for authentic participation.

The refined framework therefore explains not only what contributes to quality enhancement but also how these elements interact over time. It positions quality culture as the central mechanism linking participation to improvement while recognising leadership and contextual conditions as factors shaping these relationships.

Theoretical Contributions

This review contributes to higher education scholarship by integrating literature on quality culture, participatory governance, collaborative leadership, student engagement, and academic development. While these areas are often examined separately, the findings demonstrate how participatory IQA operates through interconnected institutional processes that support teaching-learning enhancement.

The review also repositions participatory IQA as an enhancement-oriented academic development practice rather than merely an administrative quality mechanism. When embedded within everyday academic work, participatory quality assurance supports curriculum innovation, assessment enhancement, faculty learning, and pedagogical development. This finding extends quality culture theory by demonstrating that participation functions not only as a governance principle but also as a pedagogical mechanism supporting institutional learning and educational improvement (Ehlers, 2009; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

More broadly, the findings advance a process-oriented understanding of quality assurance in which leadership, participation, quality culture, and educational enhancement are mutually reinforcing. This perspective bridges governance-oriented and pedagogically oriented approaches to quality assurance and contributes to ongoing debates regarding how universities can balance accountability with continuous improvement (Harvey & Williams, 2010; ESG, 2015).

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings have important implications for universities, quality assurance units, academic leaders, and policymakers. Universities should strengthen structures that enable meaningful participation by faculty members and students in curriculum review, assessment dialogue, and institutional planning. Such structures can enhance academic ownership, institutional trust, and educational improvement. Evidence from quality culture research suggests that stakeholder engagement is a critical predictor of successful quality enhancement initiatives (Bendermacher et al., 2017).

Quality assurance offices should adopt developmental approaches that prioritise reflective dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, and pedagogical enhancement rather than relying predominantly on compliance-oriented procedures. Academic leaders should similarly cultivate transparency, collegiality, and shared responsibility while supporting professional learning through peer review, collaborative inquiry, and pedagogical reflection. These practices are consistent with recommendations emerging from both academic development and quality enhancement literature (Gibbs, 2013; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015).

At the policy level, quality assurance frameworks should balance accountability requirements with institutional autonomy and developmental improvement. Policies that encourage participation, collaboration, and institutional learning are likely to be more effective in supporting sustainable quality cultures than systems focused primarily on monitoring and compliance. This recommendation aligns with international quality assurance frameworks that increasingly emphasise enhancement, stakeholder engagement, and continuous improvement (ESG, 2015; EUA, 2006).

Overall, strengthening educational quality requires investment not only in quality assurance systems but also in the relational and cultural conditions that enable meaningful participation and continuous improvement.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The review included only English-language publications and relied on four major academic databases, potentially limiting representation of some regional perspectives and institutional contexts. Variations in conceptual definitions, methodological approaches, and institutional environments also limited direct comparability across studies. Furthermore, interpretive thematic synthesis involves researcher judgement during coding and theme development, which may introduce analytical subjectivity despite systematic review procedures (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Future research should examine participatory IQA longitudinally to better understand how quality cultures evolve and how participatory practices influence institutional transformation. Comparative cross-national studies would further illuminate the influence of policy environments, governance structures, and organisational cultures on participatory quality assurance implementation.

Additional research on digital quality assurance systems, learning analytics, and technology-enabled participation structures may provide valuable insights as higher education increasingly operates within digitally mediated environments. Emerging scholarship suggests that digital platforms may create new opportunities for stakeholder engagement while simultaneously introducing challenges related to data governance, participation equity, and institutional accountability (Selwyn, 2019).

Further investigation into student partnership models and their influence on curriculum innovation, assessment practices, and institutional decision-making would also strengthen understanding of how participation contributes to sustainable educational enhancement. Overall, future research should continue exploring the relationships among leadership, participation, quality culture, and educational improvement while empirically testing and refining the Participatory Quality Culture Framework across diverse higher education contexts.

Conclusion

This study systematically reviewed international evidence on the contribution of participatory internal quality assurance (IQA) to teaching-learning enhancement in higher education. Drawing on a PRISMA-

guided systematic review and interpretive thematic synthesis of 72 studies, the review examined how stakeholder participation, leadership, quality culture, and academic development interact within participatory quality assurance systems. In doing so, it addressed a fragmented body of scholarship spanning quality assurance, participatory governance, student engagement, leadership, and academic development.

The findings demonstrate that participatory IQA contributes to teaching-learning enhancement when quality assurance is embedded within collaborative academic practice rather than implemented primarily as an accountability mechanism. Meaningful participation by faculty members, students, administrators, and academic leaders was associated with stronger curriculum responsiveness, pedagogical innovation, assessment enhancement, reflective teaching practice, and professional learning. Across diverse institutional contexts, participation emerged as a critical mechanism through which educational quality is strengthened and continuous improvement is sustained.

A key contribution of the review is the identification of quality culture as the mediating mechanism linking participation to educational enhancement. The synthesis suggests a dynamic process in which distributed leadership enables meaningful stakeholder engagement, stakeholder engagement fosters trust and shared responsibility, and these conditions support the development of collaborative quality cultures that sustain ongoing improvement. This finding refines the Participatory Quality Culture Framework by clarifying the relationships among leadership, participation, quality culture, and teaching-learning enhancement. Rather than operating as separate dimensions, these elements interact recursively within an institutional learning system that reinforces continuous improvement over time.

At the same time, the review highlights persistent tensions that constrain participatory quality assurance. Managerialism, compliance-oriented accountability systems, symbolic participation, workload pressures, and resource limitations frequently weakened authentic stakeholder engagement and reduced opportunities for reflective academic dialogue. These findings suggest that sustainable quality enhancement depends not on abandoning accountability but on balancing accountability requirements with institutional cultures that support trust, collegiality, dialogue, and academic autonomy.

The study contributes theoretically by repositioning participatory IQA as an enhancement-oriented process of academic development rather than merely an administrative quality mechanism. By integrating insights from quality culture theory, distributed leadership, participatory governance, and communities of practice, the review advances a more comprehensive explanation of how participatory quality assurance supports institutional learning, professional development, and educational improvement.

For universities, quality assurance units, academic leaders, and policymakers, the implications are clear. Efforts to improve teaching and learning should prioritise inclusive participation structures, collaborative leadership practices, and developmental approaches to quality assurance that strengthen professional learning, shared responsibility, and continuous improvement. Policies that encourage institutional learning and meaningful stakeholder engagement are likely to be more effective than approaches focused predominantly on compliance and monitoring.

Overall, this review demonstrates that participatory IQA is most effective when it functions as a collaborative institutional learning process rather than a procedural accountability exercise. When leadership, participation, and quality culture are aligned, quality assurance becomes a catalyst for sustainable teaching-learning enhancement and long-term educational improvement in higher education.

Declarations

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study because the research involved a systematic review of published literature and did not include human participants or personal data collection.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and ScienceDirect databases.

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