2025 European Quality Assurance Forum

QA in times of crises – Ensuring stability,
autonomy and international cooperation in higher education

Hosted by Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary
12-14 November 2025

ISSN: 1375-3797

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His work centres on the development of responsive and contextually grounded quality assurance systems that balance regulatory compliance with strategic autonomy, while advancing academic integrity, innovation, and sectoral transformation. His cross-sectoral experience enables a nuanced understanding of governance opportunities and challenges within diverse higher education environments. Derrick holds a Bachelor of Arts, a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education, and a Master of Business Administration, and a Master of Education (with distinction).

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Short bio: Professor **Ruksana Osman** is the Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic at the University of the Witwatersrand. She previously served as Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Advancement, Human Resources and Transformation; Dean of the Faculty of Humanities; and Head of the School of Education, with extensive experience across institutional leadership, governance, and academic management. A Professor of Education, she has a strong research and teaching record in teacher education, higher education policy, pedagogy, and students' lived experiences of equity and access. Her work is widely recognised for advancing socially just approaches to learning and teaching in schools and universities. Professor Osman holds the UNESCO Chair in Teacher Education for Diversity and Development, through which she leads a global research network. She has published extensively in journals, books, and the public domain, and is co-editor of several notable volumes on higher education and pedagogy. She is an elected member of the Academy of Sciences of South Africa.

Paper

Title: Disruptive Quality in Higher Education: Cross-Border Quality Assurance Frameworks as Catalysts for Equity and Innovation

Abstract

Higher education Quality Assurance Systems worldwide are being reshaped by disruptions arising from pandemics, technological transformation, and shifting geopolitical and social contexts. Traditional quality assurance (QA) approaches anchored in compliance and standardisation have proven inadequate for such dynamic environments. This paper proposes a conceptual framework for "disruptive quality" in higher education, a framework that reconceptualises disruption as a transformative force driving innovation, fostering institutional resilience, and advancing equity in higher education.

Drawing on the South African context, with the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) as a case study, it examines how national and cross-border QA frameworks such as the Council on Higher Education's (CHE) Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) internationalisation policy, the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA), and the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) have responded to disruption. The paper argues that regulatory flexibility and reflexive institutional cultures enable higher education systems to transform challenges into opportunities for equitable innovation.

Key Words:

disruptive quality, higher education, quality assurance, cross-border collaboration, equity, South Africa

Introduction

Global higher education now operates in a landscape characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Crises such as COVID-19, rapid digitalisation, and socioeconomic instability have exposed the limitations of traditional QA regimes that privilege compliance and uniformity over contextual responsiveness (Bamber, 2021; Stensaker, 2022). Within this context, disruptive quality emerges as a framework for understanding quality not as a static set of standards but as a dynamic, adaptive, and socially responsive process. This paper situates disruptive quality within South Africa's evolving QA ecosystem, focusing on Wits University as a microcosm of national transformation. The South African higher education system is regulated by the CHE and guided by the DHET, including its Policy Framework for the Internationalisation of Higher Education (DHET, 2019). Wits' experience reveals how institutions can engage national and global QA frameworks to foster innovation and equity in times of disruption.

The discussion unfolds across four key themes:

1. Conceptualising disruptive quality as both theory and practice;
2. Analysing regulatory flexibility as a mechanism for innovation;
3. Exploring cross-border QA frameworks as catalysts for equity; and
4. Reflecting on Wits' institutional experiences and lessons for the sector.

Conceptual Framing: Disruption, Quality, and Innovation

The idea of disruptive quality draws from Christensen's (1997) theory of disruptive innovation, where transformation arises through novel practices that expand access and create new value systems.

Applied to higher education, this notion positions disruption as a positive force for renewal rather than as crisis. Conventional QA frameworks, while ensuring minimum standards, often entrench bureaucratic compliance and inhibit creativity (Harvey & Williams, 2020).

Recent scholarship reframes QA as a reflexive, learning-oriented process that evolves with changing institutional and societal needs (Harvey, 2022; Newton & Bamber, 2023). In the Global South, disruptive quality aligns with decolonial and equity-centered perspectives that call for QA systems acknowledging historical disparities and epistemic diversity (Leibowitz, 2021; Osman & Zitha, 2025). It positions QA officers as facilitators of transformation, encouraging experimentation, dialogue, and inclusion rather than mere enforcers of compliance (Harvey & Shah, 2021). Thus, disruptive quality functions as both ethos and method: it promotes contextual relevance, encourages collaboration across disciplines and borders, and turns disruption into a driver for sustainable innovation.

Purpose of the Disruptive Quality Framework

The Disruptive Quality Framework reimagines how higher education institutions (HEIs) conceptualise and enact quality assurance (QA) within environments characterised by continuous uncertainty and transformation. Informed by Christensen's (1997) Theory of Disruptive Innovation, it views disruption not as a destabilising force but as a catalyst for learning, adaptability, and expanded equity. Its primary purpose is to enable HEIs to anticipate and navigate complex technological, socio-political, and environmental shifts while safeguarding academic integrity, relevance, and inclusivity.

Rejecting static and compliance-driven notions of quality, the framework advances a dynamic and context-responsive understanding that evolves in alignment with institutional mission and diverse stakeholder needs. This orientation resonates with the Council on Higher Education's Quality Assurance Framework (CHE, 2021), which underscores accountability alongside continuous enhancement.

The Disruptive Quality Framework operationalises its purpose through six interrelated objectives that collectively position QA as a transformative and socially responsive endeavour. It supports *(a) flexible quality and regulatory arrangements* that facilitate innovation without compromising academic standards (CHE, 2024). It fosters *(b) adaptive mechanisms* that anticipate and address multiple forms of disruption through agile scenario planning and iterative feedback (Barnett, 2017). The framework promotes *(c) innovative modes of provision*, including alternative pedagogies and assessment models that strengthen access, relevance, and resilience (Stensaker & Leiber, 2015). It further advances *(d) inclusive leadership and governance practices* that foreground diversity, equity, and the amplification of marginalised voices across all institutional structures (McArthur, 2021). Through *(e) collaborative and networked governance*, it leverages cross-institutional partnerships and multidisciplinary curriculum design to address complex societal challenges and align institutional efforts toward common purposes (Brew, 2008; Bernstein, 2015; Jacobs & Frickel, 2009; Harvey & Newton, 2007). Finally, it emphasises *(f) responsiveness* to students, academics, industry, and communities by ensuring that QA processes remain dynamic, feedback-driven, and attuned to evolving societal expectations (CHE, 2024; Newton, 2020).

Disruptive Quality in the South African Context

South Africa's QA architecture, anchored in CHE's QAF, balances accountability with developmental intent. The framework seeks to uphold academic standards while enabling institutions to pursue enhancement-led quality practices. Complementing this, the DHET's (2019) Policy Framework for Internationalisation positions collaboration and joint degrees as key to global engagement and knowledge production. Wits exemplifies this dual orientation. Through its Quality and Academic Planning Office (QAPO), the university has strengthened its internal quality culture via systematic

programme reviews, curriculum renewal, and professional development initiatives. These efforts integrate national standards with international benchmarks, echoing the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG, 2025).

Moreover, Wits has advanced joint doctoral programmes and blended delivery models that illustrate how local institutions can embody disruptive quality. These initiatives demonstrate that innovation and compliance need not be mutually exclusive if reflexivity, dialogue, and institutional learning underpin QA processes.

Regulatory Flexibility and Innovation in Times of Disruption

Regulatory flexibility has become essential for sustaining higher education during crises. The CHE's (2020) decision to grant temporary concessions for the migration of contact programmes to online or blended provision during the pandemic exemplified adaptive QA in action. Initially a short-term response, this flexibility, extended through 2026 encouraged institutions to reimagine teaching and assessment modalities (Czerniewicz et al., 2021; Hodges et al., 2020).

Universities responded by investing in digital infrastructure, sophisticated learning management platforms, upskilling academics, and re-designing curricula for online and blended modes of provision. These shifts demonstrated that, when grounded in clear quality parameters, regulatory relaxation can generate innovation and resilience. Comparable practices emerged globally: U.S. universities introduced cybersecurity-aligned hybrid models (Fain, 2023), while Australian and Japanese institutions expanded modular and micro-credential frameworks to maintain learning continuity during environmental disruptions (UNESCO, 2022).

Such examples affirm that disruptive quality flourishes when policy frameworks accommodate experimentation and contextual adaptation. Strategic flexibility transforms QA from a gatekeeping mechanism into an enabler of long-term transformation, embedding innovation, inclusion, and sustainability in institutional practice (Zawacki-Richter, 2021).

Cross-Border Quality Assurance Framework as Catalyst for Equity

Cross-border QA frameworks offer mechanisms for collaboration, comparability, and shared learning. The African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA, 2018), the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF), and European models such as the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) and ESG collectively provide tools for peer review and mutual recognition (Materu & Makoni, 2023; Pavlin & Kozlowski, 2023).

For African institutions, engagement with these frameworks enhances capacity building but also surfaces asymmetries in resources and regulatory maturity. If uncritically adopted, such frameworks may reproduce colonial hierarchies in knowledge production (Osman & Zitha, 2025). However, when applied reflexively, they can promote epistemic plurality recognising multiple ways of knowing and valuing diverse conceptions of academic quality (Leibowitz, 2021).

The digital turn in higher education has expanded these opportunities. Virtual mobility, online joint degrees, and transnational partnerships require QA systems that transcend geography while ensuring academic integrity and fairness. Cross-border frameworks, therefore, serve as vehicles for embedding inclusive and socially responsible practices at scale, advancing the principles of disruptive quality across borders.

Policy and Practice Implications for South Africa

The Policy Framework for the Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa (DHET, 2019) establishes the parameters for transnational collaboration. It recognises four types of collaborative offerings, namely, joint, consecutive, co-badged, and dual degrees, each with specific conditions. Only joint, consecutive, and co-badged qualifications are permissible within South Africa; dual or double degrees are not.

In practice, regulatory ambiguity within the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF, 2013) complicates implementation, particularly concerning credit transfer, co-supervision, and award recognition. This gap necessitates institutional reflexivity: universities must interpret national policy through their own QA cultures to ensure innovation aligns with compliance. Wits exemplifies this balance through proactive engagement with international partners, capacity-building for staff, and alignment of local QA processes with global standards. Its approach illustrates that innovation within constraint is possible when institutional agility and regulatory negotiation coexist. At a regional level, frameworks such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Education and Training (1997), ASG-QA, and ACQF promote mobility, peer review, and recognition across the continent. Aligning these initiatives with national QA frameworks strengthens Africa's collective capacity for equitable internationalisation without compromising local priorities of access, redress, and transformation.

Institutional Reflections: Quality Disruptions at Wits

Wits' experience during and after COVID-19 provides tangible evidence of disruptive quality in practice. Following the expiry of the CHE's online teaching concession, the university's Senate Academic Planning and Development Committee opted to participate in a themed review on modes of provision, submitting a self-evaluation to the CHE in 2025. This proactive engagement demonstrates institutional willingness to shape regulatory evolution through evidence-based reflection. It positions universities in relation to regulatory bodies rather than surveillance bodies.

Programme Renewal and Dual Modes of Provision

Anticipating the end of temporary concessions, Wits introduced new programmes accredited for dual modes (contact and online). This transition required curriculum redesign, digital assessment policies, and enhanced staff training, highlighting how compliance can coexist with pedagogical innovation and responsiveness.

International Collaborations and Joint Doctoral Programmes: Challenges and Opportunities

Wits' collaborations with the University of Edinburgh and Erasmus University Rotterdam illustrate both the transformative potential and operational complexities of cross-border quality assurance (QA) in doctoral education. The Wits–Edinburgh Sustainable African Futures (WESAF) Joint Doctoral Programme demonstrates robust governance, hybrid delivery, and strengthened research capacity. Yet differences in degree structures and progression rules between South Africa and Europe complicated implementation (Harman, 2023), while linguistic and financial barriers limited participation by Francophone and Lusophone scholars, reinforcing persistent inequities in global higher education collaboration (Canagarajah, 2022; Royal Society, 2023).

Aligned with the African Union's Agenda 2063, WESAF fosters interconnected doctoral networks that promote knowledge sovereignty and African-led innovation. By centring African histories, cultures, and socio-economic contexts, it supports the Africanisation of doctoral education and more contextually grounded QA (Saidi & Mbhele, 2023). However, limited funding, supervisory capacity, and infrastructure continue to constrain impact. Douglas et al. (2025) warn that without strengthened pipelines and

intentional recruitment, such partnerships risk replicating entrenched hierarchies rather than transforming them.

The Wits–Erasmus Joint PhD Programme similarly produced reciprocal academic benefits (Knight, 2023; Marginson, 2022), yet administrative misalignment, tuition complexity, and inconsistencies in degree recognition underscored the necessity of regulatory harmonisation and stable leadership (Stella, 2023; de Wit & Altbach, 2021). These insights reinforce a core principle of the Disruptive Quality Framework: trust and shared values must be supported by adaptive QA systems capable of mediating policy divergence in dynamic cross-border contexts.

Overall, these collaborations demonstrate that well-designed joint doctoral models can enhance shared supervision, develop interdisciplinary networks, and catalyse QA innovation when guided by African priorities. Yet they also surface a broader continental tension between aspiration and operational reality, showing that disruptive quality emerges when reflexive practice and equitable regulatory reform intersect to advance resilience, responsiveness, and transformation.

Implications for the Higher Education Sector

While the DHET (2019) framework recognises the value of international collaboration for reputation, mobility, and knowledge exchange, it also highlights systemic risks. Terminological ambiguity (e.g., conflating “joint” and “double” degrees), lengthy approvals, and intellectual property concerns inhibit responsiveness to disruption and can delay strategic innovation.

A central challenge lies in strengthening doctoral pipelines that advance Africa’s innovation agenda. Agenda 2063 calls for enhanced capacity through regional cooperation and mobility, yet traditional institution-bound models limit access for talented students from under-resourced contexts, reproducing inequities in who produces knowledge (Douglas et al., 2025).

For South Africa, this has direct QA implications. Universities must move beyond compliance-driven practices toward inclusive QA approaches that identify, support, and empower diverse doctoral talent. Transparent selection, equitable funding, and supervisory structures recognising varied epistemologies are critical, aligning with the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) and African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA), which position equity and capacity building as quality imperatives.

In line with the Disruptive Quality Framework, navigating these pressures requires QA systems that are transparent, collaborative, learning-oriented, and adaptable. Embedding inclusivity as a foundational quality dimension, alongside strengthened professional development, inter-institutional dialogue, and agile regulation, enables alignment between policy ambition and implementation practice. Such responsiveness advances South Africa’s transformation agenda while contributing to continental goals to position doctoral education as a driver of sustainable development and epistemic justice.

Conclusion

Disruptive quality reframes the purpose of QA from mere compliance to generative transformation. As evidenced through South Africa’s experience and Wits’ institutional practices, regulatory flexibility and reflexivity are essential for innovation and resilience. Cross-border QA frameworks, when critically and contextually applied, offer mechanisms for equitable collaboration and mutual learning across diverse systems. The South African case demonstrates that disruption can be harnessed as an opportunity to advance quality, equity, and innovation simultaneously.

By embracing adaptive regulation, investing in digital transformation, and nurturing partnerships built on trust and shared values, institutions can move beyond stability toward sustainable transformation. The future of QA depends on redefining what counts as "quality" in higher education. A truly disruptive approach recognises that excellence is not achieved through uniformity but through diversity, responsiveness, and continuous reflection principles that position South African higher education as both a regional leader and a contributor to global knowledge ecosystems and it repositions the global academy as a collective knowledge producer advancing the world and its regions collaboratively and equitably.

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