

Voices from the student frontlines: quality management realities and policy–practice gaps in Ethiopian public higher education: a qualitative thematic analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate lived realities of quality management practices and policy–practice gaps in Ethiopian public higher education, centering student council members’ perspectives to examine how institutional quality frameworks translate into practice and align with national and global quality assurance frameworks.

Design/methodology/approach – Adopting a qualitative thematic analysis design, the study used three semistructured focus group discussions with 21 purposively selected student council members across three public research universities. Findings were triangulated by systematically analyzing national policies, legislative proclamations, institutional manuals and international quality-related documents.

Findings – Analysis revealed six interrelated themes: declining instructor commitment, inadequate resources, weak monitoring, unprofessional conduct, diminished student well-being and superficial compliance. Findings indicate that quality management is largely compliance-driven and weakly implemented, prioritizing numerical outputs over pedagogical effectiveness. This “output-driven” focus fosters a decoupling of policy from reality, where symbolic compliance masks systemic erosion. Structural barriers, including political interference and departmental leadership gaps, further widen the divide between formal mandates and student-encountered realities.

Research limitations/implications – Focusing on selected public universities and student perspectives, it provides empirical evidence of systemic quality challenges and policy–practice decoupling.

Practical implications – Evidence-based actions to bridge policy–practice gaps through process-oriented evaluations, leadership accountability, integrated student feedback, resource enforcement and enhanced pedagogical monitoring.

Social implications – Improved quality management supports equity, inclusion and better graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students.



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Originality/value – This study foregrounds student voices, offering a rare bottom-up critique of Global South quality management while advancing neo-institutional theory by exposing how symbolic institutionalization and structural contradictions widen policy–practice gaps.

Keywords Student voice, Quality management realities, Policy–practice gap, Ethiopian higher education, Qualitative thematic analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The pursuit of quality in higher education has become a defining global imperative, reinforced by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education (UN, 2015, 2025; UNESCO, 2024). In this context, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly required to demonstrate accountability, effectiveness and continuous improvement in teaching, research and governance (Manuel *et al.*, 2025; Mwenda, 2026; Ponomarenko *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, quality management practices (QMPs) have emerged as a dominant institutional paradigm, encompassing systematic, data-informed processes designed to enhance organizational performance and educational outcomes (Ganguly, 2015; Gulden *et al.*, 2020). For developing countries, these practices are not merely technical tools but strategic mechanisms for ensuring institutional legitimacy, socioeconomic development and global competitiveness (Ibidunni *et al.*, 2023). However, as the performance of HEIs is increasingly scrutinized through global rankings, a tension has emerged between substantive quality improvement and the bureaucratic “performance” (Asif and Searcy, 2014; Komotar, 2020; Laarmo *et al.*, 2025; Mohammed *et al.*, 2016).

Despite their global diffusion, a critical tension persists between the formal adoption of quality management frameworks and their practical enactment within universities. Much of the existing literature remains rooted in industrial models of quality, offering limited insight into how quality is socially constructed, negotiated and experienced within higher education contexts (Donald *et al.*, 2015; Sciarelli *et al.*, 2020; Utkirov, 2024). This limitation is especially pronounced in developing regions, where rapid massification has often outpaced institutional capacity, resulting in a disjuncture between expansion and meaningful quality assurance (Mve, 2021; World Bank, 2017). Furthermore, prevailing quality models frequently exhibit a narrow, compliance-oriented focus, privileging external audits and quantifiable teaching outputs over the continuous, internally-driven improvement processes essential for sustainable institutional vitality (Ponomarenko *et al.*, 2022; Yahiaoui *et al.*, 2022).

In the Ethiopian context, these global challenges are further intensified by interrelated structural, institutional and methodological constraints. Over the past two decades, the higher education system has expanded rapidly under frameworks such as the Growth and Transformation Plan and the Education Sector Development Programme (FDRE, 2016; MoE, 2015), becoming a mass system of over 50 public universities. Yet, this expansion masks a paradoxical decline in student participation. Between 2022 and 2024, only 3%–5% of Grade 12 candidates met minimum university entry requirements, leaving many institutions operating below capacity with a shrinking, underprepared applicant pool (Feyera *et al.*, 2026; Goshu, 2024). This trend has left many universities operating below capacity while simultaneously facing mounting concerns regarding educational quality and institutional effectiveness.

Despite reformatory efforts such as Proclamation No. 1152/2019 [Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) (2019)] (FDRE, 2019) and updated guidelines from the Education and Training Authority (ETA, 2020, 2023, 2025), quality management remains largely compliance-oriented. Empirical studies demonstrate that quality assurance (QA)

practices are characterized by top-down implementation, limited stakeholder engagement and a focus on bureaucratic accountability rather than continuous improvement (Tadesse, 2015; Tadesse *et al.*, 2018a, 2018b; Tamrat, 2020). Tsegaye (2024) characterized the system as being in an “infancy stage,” prioritizing input domains while neglecting the output domain. A critical structural disconnect further complicates the landscape; research by Debelo and Teferi (2024) indicates that while QA offices exist at university levels, there is a total absence of dedicated quality units at the departmental level – the primary site where teaching and learning are operationalized. Existing studies largely focus on external quality assurance frameworks rather than the internal processes through which quality practices are enacted at departmental and classroom levels (Geda, 2014; Kahsay, 2012; Tadesse *et al.*, 2018a, 2018b; Tedla and Mekuria, 2022; Wariyo, 2020).

These localized failures reflect a broader national crisis. Despite an expansion to over 50 public universities, scholars such as Tamrat (2020) and Feyera *et al.*, (2026) argued that rapid growth has outpaced the development of functional Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) mechanisms. This systemic fragility has been further intensified by a “readiness crisis,” with recent data (Goshu, 2024) indicating a steep decline in high school pass rates. Consequently, departments are tasked with overseeing stagnant quality frameworks while contending with a shrinking, increasingly underprepared student population.

Despite these structural pressures, there remains a notable scarcity of qualitative research capturing the lived experiences of key stakeholders, particularly students, in relation to quality management practices and policy–practice gaps (Tadesse, 2015; Tadesse *et al.*, 2018b, 2018a; Tamrat, 2020). This represents an important epistemic gap, as students directly experience the outcomes of institutional policies yet their perspectives remain largely absent from scholarly discussions of quality reform.

To address this gap, the present study focuses on the lived experiences of student council members who serve as frontline institutional actors situated between student communities and university governance structures. Using qualitative thematic analysis of focus group discussions and triangulation with policy documents, the study explores how student representatives perceive, interpret and respond to quality management practices within their institutions across multiple domains including teaching and learning quality, institutional resources, governance practices, student well-being, equity concerns and evaluation systems.

The study is conceptually informed by neo institutional theory, particularly the notions of decoupling and institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), which explain how organizations may adopt formal policy frameworks to maintain legitimacy while everyday practices remain only loosely aligned with these structures. Within this perspective, student representatives provide valuable insights into how institutional policies are enacted, negotiated and sometimes resisted in practice. Within this framework, student representatives are positioned as “frontline actors” whose experiences illuminate how institutional policies are enacted, negotiated or resisted in practice.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1. How do student council members articulate the lived realities of quality management, specifically regarding teaching standards, infrastructure deficits and institutional support?
- RQ2. How do these representatives interpret translation of national quality management policies into institutional practices and routines?

RQ3. What patterns of alignment or divergence emerge between policy frameworks and the lived institutional realities of quality management practices experienced by students?

Aligned with the RQs, this study pursues three objectives: first, to explore how student council members articulate lived realities of quality management regarding teaching standards, infrastructure deficits and institutional support; second, to analyze how these representatives interpret the translation of national quality policies into institutional practices and routines; and third, to identify alignment and divergence patterns between formal policy frameworks and students' experienced policy–practice gaps, yielding globally relevant, student-centered insights into QA implementation.

Literature review

Global perspectives on student voice in quality management

Global scholarship positions student voice at the center of quality management, reflecting a shift toward student-as-partner models (Moyo and Boti, 2020; [Stensaker and Matear, 2025](#)). Yet, in many Global South contexts, quality practices remain compliance-driven, creating disjunctures between formal cultures and lived experiences ([Haile et al., 2025](#); [Strydom and Loots, 2020](#)). Participatory frameworks position students as co-creators in governance, enhancing responsiveness ([Mzimela and Moyo, 2026](#); [Stensaker and Matear, 2025](#); [Strydom and Loots, 2020](#)). Nonetheless, meaningful engagement remains uneven and weakly institutionalized across African higher education ([Haile et al., 2025](#); Moyo and Boti, 2020; [Strydom and Loots, 2020](#)).

Neo-institutional perspectives on policy–practice gaps in quality management

Neo-institutional theory attributes policy–practice gaps in quality management to decoupling and isomorphic mimicry, where institutions adopt formal policies for legitimacy without transforming core practices ([DiMaggio and Powell, 1983](#); Meyer and Rowan, 1977). This results in symbolic compliance rather than substantive improvement ([Bromley and Powell, 2012](#); [Harvey and Green, 1993](#)). In Ethiopian and broader African contexts, quality mandates often prioritize form over pedagogical function ([Heinrich et al., 2025](#); [Tamrat, 2020](#)). Consequently, uncoupled rhetorical commitments erode trust, necessitating an examination of student experiences to understand true system performance ([Shoukat et al., 2024](#); [Wang, 2025](#)).

Policy–practice dynamics in Ethiopian higher education quality management

Driven by global accountability shifts, Ethiopia has transitioned to the Education and Training Authority's ADRI model, which emphasizes Approach, Deployment, Results and Improvement to foster cyclical accountability ([FDRE, 2019](#); [Melka, 2025](#)). However, a persistent “readiness crisis” creates significant policy–practice gaps ([Debelo and Teferi, 2024](#)). Resource constraints and bureaucratic structures often prioritize measurable outputs, such as exit examinations, over pedagogical substance ([Tsegaye, 2024](#)). Furthermore, weak leadership and fragmented systems continue to impede the development of a robust institutional quality culture ([Mandefro et al., 2025, 2026](#); [Tsegaye, 2024](#)).

Empirical evidence on quality management gaps in Ethiopian public universities

Global scholarship frames student participation as a strategic pillar of quality governance, though implementation remains uneven ([Stensaker and Matear, 2025](#)). In Ethiopia, “decoupling” between policy and practice persists; systemic coordination and resource deficits severely inhibit internal quality assurance ([Debelo and Teferi, 2024](#)). While departmental leadership remains the

nexus for enactment, bureaucratic inertia marginalizes student experiences (Mandefro *et al.*, 2025, 2026; Tareke *et al.*, 2024). These trajectories necessitate exploring student frontline perspectives to illuminate lived realities and bridge the policy–practice chasm (Adamu, 2024; Tsegaye, 2024).

Methodology

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative thematic analysis (TA) design, offering a flexible yet systematic approach for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021). The approach was selected to capture and interpret shared student council experiences of quality management and policy–practice gaps in Ethiopian public research universities. It aligns with the use of focus group discussions and document analysis, enabling rigorous and transparent analytical procedures. Thematic analysis supports the systematic identification of recurring meanings across participants’ accounts, ensuring coherent interpretation of collective experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

Sampling and participants

A purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) was used to recruit student council members from three Ethiopian public research universities (U1, U2, U3). Inclusion required at least one academic year of council service, ensuring direct exposure to institutional quality management processes. Participants were selected for their dual roles as students and representatives mediating student–administration interfaces. Twenty-one participants were organized into three FGDs of seven members each, consistent with qualitative group-based inquiry standards (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Thematic saturation was achieved by the third FGD, indicating sufficient depth and redundancy (Guest *et al.*, 2006; Saunders *et al.*, 2018). Table 1 details participant demographics, including disciplinary affiliation and council roles, using anonymized IDs.

Data collection methods

Focus group discussions. Data were generated through semistructured FGDs following Krueger and Casey’s (2015) guidelines, enabling interactive dialogue in neutral settings. FGDs were prioritized to harness group dynamics and surface shared and contested perspectives on quality management (Nyumba *et al.*, 2018). Sessions with purposively selected student council members lasted 60–90 min and were conducted in Amharic, audio-recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. The lead researcher facilitated discussions in a non-hierarchical manner. To ensure conceptual equivalence, transcripts were translated into English and then back-translated into Amharic by independent bilingual experts to verify accuracy.

Document analysis. Document analysis was conducted to strengthen interpretive validity and triangulate student narratives (Bowen, 2009). Key regulatory and international quality-related documents, including policies, proclamations, ETA audit guidelines, institutional manuals and reports from UNESCO, OECD and the World Bank, were purposively analyzed. Policy intentions were systematically compared with FGD themes to identify policy–practice gaps and divergences (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2021) six-phase thematic analysis framework. First, transcripts were read for familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated via Atlas.ti 7.5.18 and manual techniques. Third, codes were organized into potential themes, then reviewed and refined against the data set. After defining and naming themes, findings were

Table 1. Participant demographics

ID	Univ. Code	Discipline	Year	Gender	Role in council
P1	U1	Engineering and technology	4	M	President
P2	U1	Engineering and technology	4	M	Acad. Coord.
P3	U1	Meteorology and hydrology	3	F	Facilities coord.
P4	U1	Agricultural sciences	3	M	Finance head
P5	U1	Internal medicine	4	F	Gender affairs coord.
P6	U1	Applied sciences	3	M	Special needs coord.
P7	U1	Law	3	F	Communication coord.
P8	U2	Business and economics	3	M	Facilities coordinator
P9	U2	Law	4	F	Acad. Coord.
P10	U2	Social sciences	4	M	Special needs coord.
P11	U2	Internal medicine	4	M	Communication coord.
P12	U2	Engineering and technology	4	F	Finance head
P13	U2	Applied sciences	3	F	Gender affairs coord.
P14	U2	Governance	4	M	President
P15	U3	Law	4	F	Gender affairs coord.
P16	U3	engineering and technology	3	M	President
P17	U3	Business and economics	3	M	Facilities coord.
P18	U3	Education and behavioral science	4	M	Acad. Coord
P19	U3	Applied sciences	3	M	Finance head
P20	U3	Internal medicine	4	M	Special needs coord.
P21	U3	Social sciences	4	F	Communication coord.

Note(s): U1, U2, U3 denote the three Ethiopian public research universities. All participant identifiers (P1–P21) have been anonymized to maintain confidentiality. M = Male; F = Female Coord. = Coordinator; Acad. = Academic

synthesized into an analytical narrative supported by anonymized quotations, ensuring rigorous interpretation (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). This process integrated student narratives with latent policy–practice gaps (Dawadi, 2020). Table 2 summarizes the phases (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Adhering to Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria, rigor was ensured through member-checking, triangulation, and thick descriptions (Birt *et al.*, 2016; Urry *et al.*, 2024). Dependability and confirmability were maintained via systematic audit trails (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Reflexive memos monitored researcher positionality, ensuring findings authentically represent student “frontline” realities (Finlay, 2015; Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

Table 2. Thematic analysis phases (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Phase	Description of the process
(1) Familiarization	Reading/re-reading transcripts and noting initial impressions
(2) Coding	Systematic line-by-line coding of meaningful features using Atlas.ti 7.5.18 and manual techniques
(3) Generating themes	Collating codes into potential themes and gathering relevant data
(4) Reviewing themes	Refining themes against coded extracts and the entire data set
(5) Defining themes	Ongoing analysis to name themes and define their scope
(6) Reporting	Findings were synthesized into narrative, using representative quotes to illustrate themes and subthemes, linked to research questions and literature

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Jimma University, Institutional Review Board of the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences (Ref. No.: CEBS/RP-1413 / 23; Date: 27/10/2023). Written informed consent ensured voluntary participation and withdrawal rights. Data were de-identified and securely stored on password-protected devices (Israel, 2015; [Pottthoff et al., 2023](#); [Taquette et al., 2022](#); [Yin, 2018](#)).

Results

This study examined students' perceptions of quality management realities and policy–practice gaps in Ethiopian public higher education. Thematic analysis of focus group data from 21 participants identified six superordinate themes, each with two or three sub-themes. [Table 3](#) presents an overview of the thematic structure.

Superordinate theme 1: Diminishing quality of teaching and learning

Participants consistently attested that the quality of teaching and learning has eroded, from which the following sub-themes emerged.

Sub-theme 1.1: Declining instructor commitment and motivation

Participants attributed declining instructor commitment to low salaries, weak incentives and the proliferation of “side hustles,” framing rushed, superficial teaching as a survival strategy rather than professional duty. A Law student (P7) remarked: “Many instructors have become negligent and lack motivation to teach properly; instead, they rush to personal income-generating activities” (P7, Law, Female). A Social Sciences student (P10) added: “Low salaries force instructors into side work, which prevents them from teaching properly and affects educational quality” (P10, Social Sciences, Male). This extended to reduced emotional engagement: An

Table 3. Summary of superordinate themes and sub-themes

Superordinate theme	Sub-themes
1. Diminishing quality of teaching and learning	1.1 Declining instructor commitment and motivation 1.2 Teaching as course completion rather than student understanding 1.3 Deficits in pedagogical competence
2. Inadequate learning resources and infrastructure	2.1 Laboratory shortages and non-functional facilities 2.2 Library, ICT and E-learning constraints
3. Weak quality management and monitoring practices	3.1 Hierarchical disparities in managerial commitment 3.2 The shadow of external constraints
4. Student motivation, well-being and external pressures	4.1 Deteriorating student motivation and uncertain futures 4.2 Gaps in student welfare and basic service delivery
5. Equity, inclusion and ethical concerns	5.1 Challenges faced by students with disabilities 5.2 Unprofessional conduct behind the academic veil
6. Output-oriented evaluation as superficial quality assurance	6.1 The exit exam, {paradox} 6.2 Superficial quality assurance

Agricultural Science student (P4) noted: “Teachers lack motivation because of the incentives they receive, and their commitment to teaching has declined” (P4, Agricultural Sciences, Male). An Internal Medicine student (P5) confirmed: “Most teachers are negligent and show little interest in teaching” (P5, Internal Medicine, Female).

Participants thus framed inadequate compensation as a structural quality assurance failure, eroding teaching effectiveness and the integrity of quality management.

Sub-theme 1.2: Teaching as course completion rather than student understanding

Students consistently described teaching that prioritized syllabus coverage over meaningful learning. P21 noted: “Some instructors rush three to four chapters in one lecture hour” (P21, Female, Social Sciences). Similarly, another stated: “They focus on finishing the course, not on whether we understood” (P3, Female, Meteorology and Hydrology). An Education student added that instructors were “hastily reading slides” (P18, Male). Concerns about assessment integrity also emerged, with P1 reporting that assessment questions were copied directly from Google or handouts (P1, Male, Engineering and Technology). Together, these accounts reveal a dominant “tick-box” approach to course completion, where coverage and routine assessment override genuine understanding and academic integrity.

Sub-theme 1.3: Deficits in pedagogical competence

Participants identified a systemic gap between academic qualifications and pedagogical effectiveness. A Meteorology student (P3) stated: “Teachers are recruited for strong academic grades above 3.75, but many lack the pedagogical skills needed to share knowledge effectively” (P3, Meteorology and Hydrology, Female). A Governance student (P14) added: “Some instructors know the subject, but their teaching methodology is not suitable for students” (P14, Governance, Male).

Participants highlighted the theory–practice divide: “Some teachers manage theory but struggle with practical instruction” (P11, Male, Medicine; P12, Female, Engineering). Criticism focused on delivery: P20 (Male, Medicine) noted lecturers merely “copying and speaking from slides,” while P16 (Male, Engineering) cited “weak pedagogical and laboratory skills.” These accounts reveal structural weaknesses in staff development, where academic credentials lack corresponding pedagogical capacity, undermining institutional QA and overall teaching effectiveness.

Superordinate theme 2: Inadequate learning resources and infrastructure

Despite policies framing infrastructure as foundational to quality, participants reported a mismatch between rhetoric and reality.

Sub-theme 2.1: Laboratory shortages and non-functional facilities: the paralyzed laboratory paradox

Participants described a “paralyzed laboratory paradox” where facilities are nominally equipped but functionally inactive. P11 (Medicine, Male) noted that laboratories “contain costly equipment but remain unusable” due to missing basic supplies or unrepaired faults. Similarly, P13 (Applied Sciences, Female) observed that “expensive laboratories lack proper installation and maintenance,” leaving them non-functional for long periods.

These deficiencies severely constrain practical learning; P14 (Governance, Male) reported that “due to shortages, only one student performs experiments while others merely observe.” From a quality management perspective, these non-functional labs reflect procedural compliance

over substantive quality, limiting theory–practice integration and compromising graduate competencies. Quality Education for All

Sub-theme 2.2: Library, ICT and E-learning constraints

Students reported inadequate libraries, poor internet access, and dysfunctional e-learning platforms. An Internal Medicine student (P11) explained: “During exam periods, students queue for the library, and the e-library accommodates only a few users” (P11, Medicine, Male). A Law student (P15), highlighting low awareness, noted: “Most students I know don’t even know about the e-library” (P15, Law, Female).

Constrained ICT infrastructure further limits use: A Governance student (P14) observed: “Wi-Fi exists, but electricity and connectivity problems prevent meaningful use” (P14, Governance, Male). An Engineering and Technology student (P16) pointed to accessibility gaps: “Library computers for blind students are outdated, and exam software is incompatible with assistive technologies” (P16, Engineering, Male). Together, these deficiencies reveal systemic quality management failures in resource provision, utilization and equity, underscoring a persistent disconnect between national QA standards and actual implementation.

Superordinate theme 3: Weak quality management and monitoring practices

Participants identified fragmented leadership, political interference and weak oversight as drivers of systemic quality failures.

Sub-theme 3.1: Hierarchical disparities in managerial commitment

Participants described a clear “commitment gap,” with uneven engagement across institutional levels. A Meteorology and Hydrology student (P3) remarked: “Top management shows some commitment, but it weakens at lower levels” (P3, Meteorology and Hydrology, Female). Similarly, an Applied Sciences student observed: “Lower-level managers do not strictly monitor teaching” (P13, Applied Sciences, Female). At the departmental level, leadership passivity further undermined accountability.

An Internal Medicine student noted: “Departments allow lecturers to act freely, without performance monitoring” (P20, Internal Medicine, Male). Participants described this as a hierarchical “step-down” effect. An Agricultural Sciences student explained: “Commitment decreases from top to bottom and appears superficial” (P4, Agricultural Sciences, Male). This pattern disrupts the “check” and “act” stages of the Plan–Do–Check–Act cycle, weakening internal quality assurance and ultimately compromising teaching and learning outcomes.

Sub-theme 3.2: The shadow of external constraints

Despite formal policy commitments granting institutional autonomy, participants consistently attributed declining university performance to political instability, fiscal constraints and external interference. An Applied Sciences student (P19) stated: “The Ministry of Education often talks about quality, but this remains limited to policy documents [...] the support provided is meaningless” (P19, Applied Sciences, Male). Another participant affirmed this view, noting: “Instead of prioritising quality management by monitoring policy implementation, the government focuses more on political and security issues, which diverts attention from educational quality” (P18, Education and Behavioral Sciences, Male).

Financial neglect further constrained institutional effectiveness: An Applied Sciences student (P13) explained that “the budget allocated by the Ministry of Finance remains insufficient, constraining effective teaching and learning” (P13, Applied Sciences, Female).

Beyond resources, political interference disrupted academic processes, as a Business and Economics student reported that “classes and libraries are often closed during political meetings, and recurring police disturbances interrupt learning activities” (P17, Business and Economics, Female).

Participants also highlighted instability’s impact on engagement: “Ongoing political instability discourages students from engaging fully in their studies; under more stable conditions, alternative academic and employment pathways could be pursued” (P4, Agricultural Sciences, Male). Furthermore, using campuses for “week-long political trainings [...] [disrupts] teaching and learning and weakens quality assurance mechanisms” (P21, Social Sciences, Male), ultimately rendering internal quality frameworks ineffective.

Superordinate theme 4: Student motivation, well-being and external pressures

This theme highlights how declining motivation and unmet welfare needs weaken quality assurance in Ethiopian public universities.

Sub-theme 4.1: Deteriorating student motivation and uncertain futures

Participants described declining motivation as a central challenge shaped by unemployment and weak labour-market alignment. An Agricultural Sciences student (P4) stated: “Uncertain futures caused by high unemployment and limited job opportunities reduce student motivation and weaken quality management practices” (P4, Agricultural Sciences, Male). A Law student (P7) added: “When I see a graduate with a 3.9 GPA sitting at home, my interest in learning decreases” (P7, Law, Female). Students in Agricultural Sciences (P4, Male) and Business and Economics (P8, Male) similarly stressed that academic excellence no longer guarantees economic security, thereby diminishing the perceived value of education. These accounts frame learning as a risky investment, where governance failures undermine student confidence, learning outcomes and quality management realities.

Sub-theme 4.2: Gaps in student welfare and basic service delivery

Poor welfare services further divert focus from learning. P6 (Applied Sciences, Male) observed that “limited per-student funding fails to meet basic needs,” while under-equipped clinics “force students to seek off-campus care” (P12, Engineering, Female). Additionally, P16 (Engineering, Male) cited “unhygienic dormitories and poor maintenance,” signaling that neglected infrastructure severely compromises the student experience.

Superordinate theme 5: Equity, inclusion and ethical concerns

This theme shows systemic inequities and ethical lapses undermine learner-centered pedagogy in quality management frameworks.

Sub-theme 5.1: Challenges faced by students with disabilities

Participants highlighted systemic neglect of students with disabilities. Physical inaccessibility was evident, as “Classrooms on upper floors without ramps or elevators exclude mobility impaired students” (P6, Applied Sciences, Male). Technological barriers were also highlighted, with “Exam software and PowerPoint presentations incompatible with screen readers” disadvantaging visually impaired students (P14, Governance, Male), alongside “absence of Braille materials” and reliance on peers during examinations (P11, Internal Medicine, Male).

Similarly, exam software incompatibility was seen as “violating fair testing and accessibility guidelines” (P15, Law, Male). A social sciences student (P10, Male) further stated: “Untrained support staff, like proctors, lack training for special needs, leading to ‘ad-hoc accommodations;’

that threaten the overall quality of teaching, learning, and assessment standards” (P10, Social Sciences, Male). Together, these accounts reveal systemic exclusion within institutional quality frameworks.

Sub-theme 5.2: Unprofessional conduct behind the academic veil

Participants described pervasive unprofessional conduct that undermines quality teaching, learning and quality management systems. A Law student (P9, Female) noted that “some lecturers terrorize students,” which “divert[s] students’ attention” and limits active engagement. This is compounded by pedagogical negligence, as instructors often “enter class without knowing the course,” leading students to question “meaningless learning” (P10, Social Sciences, Male; P19, Applied Sciences, Male).

Furthermore, chronic tardiness, including arriving “10–30 min late” and “rushing several chapters,” disrupts curriculum implementation (P12, Engineering, Female; P18, Education, Male). Beyond instructional deficiencies, participants reported ethical concerns such as favoritism and “excessive workloads without guidance” (P18, Education, Male; P19, Applied Sciences, Male). More critically, a Law student (P7) and a Governance student (P14) stated that “although rarely discussed openly, sexual harassment [...] makes female students fearful about grading and forces them to leave the class during teaching and learning sessions” (P7, Law, Male; P14, Governance, Male).

These accounts demonstrate that unprofessional conduct systematically compromises students’ learning, well-being and trust, weakening quality management systems.

Superordinate theme 6: Output-oriented evaluation as superficial quality assurance

Student narratives reveal a sustained critique of prevailing quality assurance practices, characterizing them as output oriented, compliance driven and pedagogically superficial

Sub-theme 6.1: The exit exam paradox

Participants critiqued the dominance of exit examination pass rates as the primary indicator of educational quality in university performance rankings. An Applied Sciences student argued that quality is narrowly “judged only by output,” with universities labeled successful “based on exit exam pass rates alone” (P19, Applied Sciences, Male). Similarly, a Social Sciences participant posited that “failing because of a single exit exam may reflect system problems rather than student competence” (P21, Female, Social Sciences).

Pedagogically, students noted that these assessments “constrain teaching practices” (P8, Business and Economics, Male) and “prioritise test performance over deep learning” (P9, Law, Female), effectively stifling “creative and critical thinking.”

Practical and psychological concerns were equally prominent; participants from Engineering and Technology (P1, Male) and Law (P15, Female) highlighted that exit exams fail to “adequately assess [...] skill-based performance” in a “single attempt.” Furthermore, the psychological burden of “personal worries and anxieties” (P10, Social Sciences, Male) undermines performance. Collectively, these narratives reveal a profound misalignment between high-stakes assessment practices and quality assurance principles in higher education.

Sub-theme 6.2: Superficial quality assurance

Participants described QA as “superficial compliance,” where documentation overshadows real improvement. An Engineering student (P1, Male) noted: “Most quality assurance activities seem focused on paperwork. We don’t see real improvements.” A Law student (P15, Female) added: “Course evaluations [...] feel like formality, not meaningful feedback.”

An Engineering student (P2, Male) observed that “pass rates and reports don’t always reflect what we actually learn.”

An Applied Science student (P13, Male) stated: “There are many policies but, at classroom level they are not practiced or monitored effectively.” Social Sciences (P10, Male) and Engineering (P2, Male) students explained that evaluations are “tick-box” exercises, with concerns “buried under data summaries that always show ‘satisfactory’ results.” A Business student (P16, Male) added: “No one ever acts on them. It is just a tick-box exercise.”

Regarding assessments, a Law student (P7, Female) and Governance student (P14, Male) observed: “Even model exams are often taken from Google rather than being teacher-made.” An Engineering student (P16, Male) argued the system prioritizes pass rates over competency, producing “low quality graduates,” while an Agricultural Science student (P4, Male) described exit exam tutorials as “tick-box exercises focused on documentation.” Collectively, these accounts reveal a disconnect between QA rhetoric and students’ lived academic realities.

Discussion

This study explores student perceptions of quality management and policy-practice gaps in Ethiopian higher education. Using neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), it analyzes themes through coercive, mimetic and normative pressures. Regulations (FDRE, 2019; ETA, 2025) often prioritize bureaucratic compliance over innovation (Tamrat, 2020). Consequently, “institutional decoupling” occurs: universities maintain ceremonial conformity to secure legitimacy while frontline teaching remains largely untransformed (Harvey, 2024; Tadesse *et al.*, 2018a, 2018b; Tamrat, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

Superordinate theme 1: Diminishing quality of teaching and learning

Findings reveal a profound disconnect between Ethiopia’s national quality policies and classroom realities. Despite mandates in ESDP V and VI (MoE, 2018, 2021) and Proclamation No. 1152 / 2019 (FDRE, 2019), pedagogical excellence is often bypassed. This normative decoupling mirrors global concerns that “paper-based” compliance fails to improve substantive learning (UNESCO, 2016; World Bank, 2017).

Declining instructor commitment and motivation

Instructor motivation is eroding due to economic precariousness, shifting focus from pedagogical depth to “survival-oriented” teaching. Student accounts highlight “side hustles” and rushed course completion as coping mechanisms within Ethiopia’s resource-constrained context (Mogaji *et al.*, 2025). This aligns with Tsegaye’s (2024) view that Ethiopian QA is in an “infancy stage,” failing to address staff welfare. Furthermore, the transition to the Education and Training Authority reforms (ETA, 2025) reinforces symbolic compliance; despite reforms, QA mechanisms continue to prioritize documentation over substantive pedagogical improvement (Melka, 2025), leaving frontline gaps unaddressed.

Structural failures and professional erosion

Student reflections frame declining instructor commitment as a systemic QA failure rather than individual weakness. Reduced funding (MoFED) undermines workload management and instructional standards (ETA, 2025; MoE, 2023). As economic survival overrides professional norms, misaligned incentives erode instructional attentiveness (Deuren *et al.*, 2016), ultimately weakening the credibility and transformative potential of Ethiopian public higher education.

Superordinate theme 2: Inadequate learning resources and infrastructure

The findings reveal a marked discrepancy between Ethiopia's national QA mandates and students' learning environments. Through institutional theory and mimetic isomorphism, the "paradox of paralyzed laboratories" shows universities imitating prestigious institutions by acquiring advanced equipment to signal compliance (ETA, 2025). However, weak systems, shortages and poor maintenance render facilities nonfunctional, reflecting normative decoupling between symbolic compliance and actual educational practice.

The paradox of paralyzed laboratories and symbolic compliance

The paradox of paralyzed laboratories and symbolic compliance is evident in student accounts of costly equipment remaining unused while practical learning stalls due to missing basic materials such as gloves and chemicals, reflecting systemic resource management failure. This aligns with Tena and Motuma (2025), who note infrastructural deficiencies undermine Ethiopian higher education despite investments. From a QA perspective, non-functional laboratories prioritize procedural compliance over substantive quality (Tadesse *et al.*, 2018a, 2018b; Tareke *et al.*, 2024), revealing a disconnect between mandated functional labs (ETA, 2025) and observable graduate competencies.

Laboratory shortages and nonfunctional facilities

Laboratory shortages and nonfunctional facilities in libraries, ICT and e-learning reflect uneven enforcement of Ministry of Education policies (MoE, 2023). Although national frameworks promote digital transformation aligned with SDG 4 (UN, 2015), weak monitoring allows institutions to claim readiness while students experience unreliable connectivity and outdated assistive technologies. This supports Ferede *et al.* (2022), who noted limited contextual adaptation of ICT initiatives. Unused smart classrooms and inaccessible platforms indicate tools are acquired for symbolic legitimacy rather than pedagogical effectiveness.

A significant equity gap persists, particularly affecting students in peripheral campuses and those with disabilities. Incompatibility of exam software with assistive technologies for visually impaired students reflects failure in inclusive quality management. While such infrastructural challenges are common in emerging economies (Mogaji *et al.*, 2025), in Ethiopia they are intensified by chronic underfunding, constraining basic technological provision. Ultimately, these limitations reveal structural inability to translate policy commitments into equitable, high-quality learning environments.

Superordinate theme 3: Weak quality management and monitoring practices

Findings reveal a systemic failure to operationalize national frameworks, reflecting vertical decoupling and symbolic compliance. Despite strong regulations (Proclamation No. 1152/2019; ETA, 2025), political and administrative expediency frequently allow these mechanisms to be bypassed.

Hierarchical disparities in managerial commitment

Institutional leadership commitment remains largely rhetorical, weakening across hierarchies and undermining departmental accountability. This disruption of quality cycles, such as the Plan–Do–Check–Act process, mirrors global challenges identified by Martin and Parikh (2017) and Rahman and Nasrin (2024). Consequently, QA mechanisms become procedural rather than transformative, reinforcing institutional decoupling and allowing inconsistent teaching practices to persist (Deuren *et al.*, 2016). Fragmented leadership and weak accountability degrade service delivery (Bogale and Hussien, 2025). Bureaucratization

prioritizes formal monitoring over mentorship (Guil *et al.*, 2026), leaving internal quality assurance ineffective and stifled by minimal engagement (Semela, 2011; Tamrat, 2020).

The shadow of external constraints: political and fiscal interference

The study further reveals how quality management is overshadowed by external political and financial pressures. The “shadow of external constraints” illustrates how coercive pressures – particularly political interference, financial limitations and national instability – paradoxically undermine quality objectives. Despite policy commitments to institutional autonomy (Proclamation No. 1294/2023; FDRE, 2023), universities remain vulnerable to external demands that disrupt academic activities and divert resources. This reflects broader critiques that higher education expansion and governance in Ethiopia are shaped by political priorities rather than quality imperatives (Akalu, 2014; Tadesse *et al.*, 2018a).

Moreover, chronic underfunding, including insufficient per-student allocations, contradicts Higher Education Proclamation No. 1152 / 2019 and undermines OECD and UNESCO (UNESCO, 2022a, 2022b) quality provision standards. Persistent funding gaps hinder infrastructure and staff development, creating crisis management conditions (Tadesse *et al.*, 2018; Tena and Motuma, 2025), leaving QA goals unfulfilled. Ultimately, the intersection of political instability and budgetary constraints creates an environment where policy remains “limited to documents,” leaving the student frontline unsupported and the national QA goals unfulfilled.

Superordinate theme 4: Student motivation, well-being and external pressures

Findings reveal a significant disconnect between Ethiopia’s quality management aspirations and students’ socioeconomic and psychological realities. While UNESCO (2016) emphasizes inclusive, quality learning, declining motivation and unmet welfare needs undermine effectiveness. From a neo-institutional perspective, universities face coercive pressures to prioritize massification over quality and market relevance. This dynamic reinforces a “credentialing trap,” leaving graduates without the competencies necessary for an increasingly uncertain and competitive employment landscape (Herut *et al.*, 2023; UNESCO, 2016).

Deteriorating student motivation and uncertain futures

Students increasingly perceive higher education as a “risky investment” due to unemployment and poor labor market alignment, contradicting SDG 4 (UNESCO IESALC, 2021; OECD, 2019; OECD, 2025). Political instability further hinders Proclamation No. 1152 / 2019 (FDRE, 2019). Consequently, QA systems prioritize symbolic compliance over meaningful learning, undermining skill development and graduate employability (Tadesse, 2015; Tadesse *et al.*, 2018b).

Gaps in student welfare and basic service delivery

Global quality scholarship asserts that assurance must encompass welfare dimensions like health and nutrition (Martin and Parikh, 2017). However, Ethiopian higher education exhibits a persistent policy–practice gap where inadequate facilities and nutrition force students into “survival mode,” contradicting UNESCO’s (2022a, 2022b, 2025) holistic standards. Despite national policies (MoE, 2020) linking welfare to equity, chronic underfunding perpetuates “crisis management.” Neglecting these conditions renders quality goals rhetorical and undermines the “nucleolus” of internal quality assurance (UNESCO, 2025).

Superordinate theme 5: Equity, inclusion and ethical concerns

Findings reveal a significant divergence between Ethiopia's normative policies and operational realities. While the Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2016) and SDG 4 (UN, 2015) advocate for safe, inclusive and ethical environments, systemic neglect and unprofessionalism undermine these aspirations. From a neo-institutional perspective, this indicates a failure of coercive and normative pressures; policies are ratified for international legitimacy, yet a lack of internal enforcement allows institutions to bypass mandates with relative impunity, widening the policy–practice gap.

Systemic neglect of students with disabilities

Despite ratifying international and national disability frameworks (ETA, 2020, 2023; FDRE, 2019; MoE, 2020, 2023), weak enforcement allows institutions to favor symbolic compliance over substantive inclusion. Consistent with Oliso and Alemu (2023) and Tena and Motuma (2025), inaccessible environments and limited staff preparedness undermine equitable participation. This contradicts UNESCO (2016) standards, confirming that QA systems often prioritize visible compliance over meaningful accessibility (Tsegaye, 2024).

Unprofessional conduct and the breakdown of ethics

Findings expose a breakdown in academic professionalism where “terrorizing students” and intimidation contradict Proclamation No. 1152 / 2019 (FDRE, 2019). Instructor unpreparedness and favoritism align with Dibaba's (2020) findings on weak ethical enforcement. Crucially, ineffective sexual harassment reporting represents a grave governance failure and systemic lack of accountability (Bogale and Hussien, 2025). This ethical vacuum erodes psychological safety, leaving national quality goals unfulfilled until QA frameworks address instructor conduct.

Superordinate theme 6: Output-oriented evaluation as superficial quality assurance

Findings reveal tensions between Ethiopia's holistic aspirations and output-driven realities. While UNESCO (2022a, 2022b) advocated transformative learning, institutions favor superficial compliance, using quantifiable outputs to mask systemic weaknesses and unchanged pedagogy.

The exit exam paradox

The “exit exam paradox” exemplifies systemic conformity in equating educational quality with pass rates, privileging a measurable yet pedagogically narrow metric. This output fixation contradicts Higher Education Proclamation No. 1152/2019, which mandates integrated teaching–learning effectiveness and graduate competence (FDRE, 2019). (FDRE, 2019). Student narratives indicate this emphasis incentivizes “teaching to the test” and “tick-box” tutorials, privileging rote memorization over critical and creative thinking advocated by UNESCO (2020). Supporting this, Ayenew and Yohannes (2022) and Teshome (2024) reported contested validity of exit examinations. Consequently, reducing institutional success to pass rates obscures systemic learning gaps and misrepresents graduates' workplace readiness.

Superficial compliance and the policy–practice gap

Findings depict prevailing QA practices as “superficial compliance,” evidenced by underutilized infrastructure like dormant smart classrooms. This reveals a misalignment between symbolic investment and pedagogical reality (Tadesse *et al.*, 2018b). From a neo-institutional perspective, this reflects decoupling, where universities adopt formal structures for legitimacy while neglecting the core of teaching. Reliance on “tick-box” documentation prioritizes ceremonial conformity over National Higher Education Policy (MoE, 2020)

mandates, producing graduates lacking market-relevant skills and necessitating process-oriented, authentic quality frameworks.

Implications and recommendations

Theoretical implications

Findings depict prevailing QA practices as “superficial compliance,” evidenced by underutilized infrastructure like dormant smart classrooms. This reveals a misalignment between symbolic investment and pedagogical reality (Tadesse *et al.*, 2018b). From a neo-institutional perspective, this reflects decoupling, where universities adopt formal structures for legitimacy while neglecting the core of teaching. Reliance on “tick-box” documentation prioritizes ceremonial conformity over National Higher Education Policy (MoE, 2020) mandates, producing graduates lacking market-relevant skills and necessitating process-oriented, authentic quality frameworks.

Social implications

Findings highlight how policy–practice gaps perpetuate unequal access to quality instruction and resources. Centering frontline experiences underscores the need for inclusive, participatory quality assurance reflecting diverse student voices. Addressing institutional contradictions through equitable resource allocation and strengthened accountability is vital. These socially responsive reforms ensure quality outcomes promote social justice, benefiting all learners within the Ethiopian context.

Practical and policy implications

Findings provide evidence-based implications for bridging policy–practice gaps in Ethiopian higher education. The Ministry of Education and ETA should shift from output metrics toward process-oriented evaluations of teaching quality and student support, backed by stronger enforcement. Universities must institutionalize leadership accountability, integrate transparent student feedback and prioritize pedagogical development. Finally, researchers should advance context-sensitive QA models and participatory monitoring to ensure frontline effectiveness, transforming quality management from a rhetorical exercise into a substantive reality.

Conclusion

This study examined quality management realities and policy–practice gaps in Ethiopian public higher education from the student perspective using qualitative thematic analysis. Grounded in neo institutional theory, the findings indicate ceremonial conformity and institutional decoupling, where formal quality assurance structures secure legitimacy while pedagogical practices remain largely unchanged. Across the six superordinate themes, national quality assurance intentions are consistently misaligned with classroom realities. Quality management is frequently reduced to a symbolic tick box exercise that prioritizes output-driven metrics, such as exit exam pass rates, over process integrity, effective resource utilization and student welfare. In practice, pedagogical quality is constrained by limited instructor commitment, insufficient learning support, underutilized instructional resources and monitoring systems that do not effectively promote continuous improvement. Student welfare concerns, including inequities and limited responsiveness to diverse learning needs, further weaken the impact of quality assurance reforms.

Addressing these challenges requires a shift from bureaucratic oversight to process-oriented and participatory quality frameworks. The Ministry of Education and the Education and Training Authority should strengthen accountability and incentivize pedagogical innovation, while universities must prioritize internal quality assurance as a transformative

process. Centering student voices is essential to advancing meaningful reform and achieving the goals of SDG 4 and the Education 2030 Agenda. Quality Education for All

Limitations and future research directions

Findings are based only on student perspectives; future research should include faculty and administrator voices. The study was conducted in three public universities; findings may not be generalizable to private institutions or other regions. The cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point; longitudinal research could track QA reforms. Future research should examine micro dynamics of decoupling and conduct comparative studies across Global South countries.

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