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Paper

Quality Without Borders: Sustaining Joint Degrees Through Collaborative Assurance

Abstract

In an increasingly interconnected yet unstable global landscape, multi-national joint degrees have emerged as strategic tools for promoting academic mobility, mutual understanding, and institutional cooperation. However, the quality assurance (QA) of these programs remains fraught with challenges, ranging from regulatory misalignments and procedural inconsistencies to divergent institutional cultures. This paper proposes a comprehensive, principle-based QA framework to support the design, implementation, and sustainability of joint degrees across borders. Drawing upon international standards such as the European Standards and Guidelines, INQAHEE, and UNESCO's guidelines on cross-border higher education, this work develops a five-pillar model encompassing mutual recognition, collaborative curriculum design, shared assessment tools, a cross-border steering committee, and joint accreditation visits. These pillars are reinforced by three innovation enablers: digital QA platforms, hybrid evaluation methods, and student voice integration. The resulting framework is not a prescriptive checklist but a flexible, adaptive blueprint capable of bridging regulatory and cultural divides. It positions QA as a catalyst for innovation and trust rather than a bureaucratic constraint. The paper concludes with targeted recommendations for policymakers and institutions, calling for formalized cross-border QA agreements, investment in digital QA infrastructures, and mechanisms for student-centered engagement. Ultimately, it argues that sustained international cooperation in higher education depends on reconceptualizing QA as a shared, co-created responsibility grounded in transparency, equity, and continuous improvement.

Keywords: Joint Degrees, International Cooperation, Quality Assurance Framework, Cross-Border Higher Education, Mutual Recognition, Academic Mobility

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The internationalization of higher education has transformed the global academic landscape. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), out of 264 million students worldwide, 6.9 million are enrolled in programs outside their home countries, a number expected to double by 2035 (UNESCO 2025). Beyond individual aspirations for global employability, governments increasingly view internationalization as a pathway to soft power, talent mobility, and capacity building.

One of the most visible indicators of this trend is the emergence of multi-national joint degree programs. Unlike simple exchange agreements, these programs are co-designed, co-delivered, and jointly awarded by institutions operating under distinct national systems (Helms 2014). They offer students exposure to diverse academic environments and enable institutions to expand their global reach. Yet, this collaborative model also introduces new complexities, particularly in assuring quality and maintaining academic credibility across jurisdictions.

1.2 Problem Statement

The Quality Assurance (QA) landscape for joint degrees remains fragmented. Divergent accreditation cycles, legal frameworks, and reporting requirements make mutual recognition difficult. Furthermore, differences in academic culture, governance structures, and institutional autonomy complicate the harmonization of standards. These variations often lead to redundant accreditation procedures and inconsistencies in student experience. While the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes has advanced harmonization within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), its reach is limited to member states and lacks mechanisms for integration with non-European partners (EHEA 2014). A broader, adaptable QA framework is therefore essential for bridging these gaps and supporting sustainable international cooperation.

1.3 Purpose and Significance

This study seeks to develop a conceptual QA framework for multi-national joint degrees that transcends regional boundaries. The proposed model is grounded in leading international standards, emphasizing enhancement, transparency, and co-creation rather than mere compliance. By incorporating digital tools, hybrid evaluations, and student-centered feedback mechanisms, the framework will ensure flexibility, inclusivity, and technological advancement, and will offer a strategic lens for rethinking QA as an enabler of trust and innovation in global higher education.

2. Conceptual Foundations

2.1 Defining Joint Degrees and Collaborative Assurance

A joint degree represents an integrated academic collaboration where two or more institutions jointly design and deliver a curriculum culminating in a single, jointly awarded qualification (European Commission 2025). This distinguishes it from dual or double degrees, where separate diplomas are issued. The joint model demands alignment across all academic and administrative dimensions: curriculum, assessment, governance, and quality assurance, creating the need for harmonized oversight mechanisms (AQU Catalunya 2025). Collaborative assurance, in this context, refers to the co-construction of QA processes by partner institutions and external agencies. It entails joint site visits, aligned evaluation criteria, and shared responsibility for maintaining academic standards to ensure quality and mutual learning among institutions.

2.2 International Standards and Guidelines

The framework draws upon three cornerstone references. First, the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) provide a foundation for both internal and external QA, emphasizing continuous enhancement and stakeholder engagement (ENQA, ESU, EUA, URASHE 2015). Second, the INQAAHE International Standards and Guidelines (ISG) extend QA principles to global contexts, prioritizing relevance, adaptability, and stakeholder inclusivity (INQAAHE 2022). Third, UNESCO's Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications (UNESCO 2019) underscores the need for transparency and equitable recognition of cross-border credentials. Together, these standards articulate a vision of QA as a mechanism for both accountability and transformation.

2.3 Mutual Recognition and Accreditation Convergence

Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) (Hou 2012) and Regional Qualifications Frameworks, including the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and various National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) (Bolton et al. 2023), have played a pivotal role in promoting coherence, comparability, and harmonization among national Quality Assurance systems in higher education. However, outside Europe, joint degrees often face legitimacy challenges due to divergent legal definitions and accreditation mandates (Sangwa and Mutabazi 2025). Harmonization should therefore pursue convergence without uniformity- acknowledging contextual differences while ensuring equivalence in outcomes.

Sangwa and Mutabazi (2025) explored the global tension between harmonizing quality assurance (QA) standards to promote trust and mobility while preserving innovation, equity, and cultural diversity. Using an Institutional-Postcolonial-Policy-Paradox framework that combines Institutional Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Stone's Policy Paradox, they compared accreditation policies across North America, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia (Sangwa and Mutabazi 2025). Their analysis identified an "assurance–trust–mobility chain," showing that external QA validation enhances trust, reduces recognition barriers, and facilitates mobility, though unevenly across regions. Europe demonstrates widespread external evaluation, Southeast Asia partial regional engagement, North America domestic focus, and Sub-Saharan Africa minimal validation. The authors highlight three paradoxes: QA both enables and limits mobility, legitimizes yet marginalizes non-Western systems, and enforces compliance that can stifle innovation. They advocate for context-sensitive harmonization, where global frameworks serve as guiding ceilings and local interpretations provide adaptive floors, envisioning modular standards and digital credentials by 2035 (Sangwa and Mutabazi 2025).

3. Methodology and Framework Development Process

3.1 Data Sources

This study draws on and benchmarks with multiple international (such as INQAAHE Standards and Guidelines) and regional (such as ASEAN-QA Principles) sources to ensure a robust evidence base for framework development. A detailed description of all used resources is listed in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Benchmarking with Key QA References and Regional Frameworks.

Level	Source / Framework	Issuing Organization (Year)	Focus / Scope	Benchmarking Relevance to the Study
Global	European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)	(ENQA, ESU, EUA, URASHE 2015)	Defines principles for internal and external QA within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).	Provides structural foundation for continuous improvement, stakeholder engagement, and transparency.
Global	International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ISG)	(INQAAHE 2022)	Extends QA principles to global contexts, emphasizing adaptability, inclusivity, and relevance.	Ensures the framework's international applicability and cross-border alignment.

Global	Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications	(UNESCO 2019)	Establishes legally binding principles for fair, transparent recognition of qualifications across borders.	Embeds equity, trust, and mutual recognition as core values in the proposed framework.
Regional (Asia–Pacific)	ASEAN-QA Principles	(ASEAN 2025)	Provides regional guidelines for harmonizing competency certification and QA systems.	Informs regional adaptability and mutual recognition mechanisms across Asian higher education systems.
Regional (Arab States)	Benchmarking Academic Standards in the Arab Region	ANQAHE / (Al-Khalifa 2015)	Analyzes QA maturity and benchmarking practices in Arab higher education institutions.	Supports integration of sustainable development and cultural contextualization within the framework.

3.2 Framework Construction Process

3.2.1 Stage 1 – Diagnostic Mapping and Problem Definition

The initial stage of constructing the framework focused on identifying existing pain points (Robinson et al. 2013), overlaps, and systemic gaps across the participating institutions in the joint degree. **Table 2** summarizes the core focus, activities, and outcomes of the diagnostic stage that informed subsequent framework development.

Table 2. Summary of key objectives, activities, and gaps identified during Stage 1 of the framework construction process.

Focus Area	Description	Key Activities / Methods	Identified Pain Points and Gaps	Output / Implication
Objective	Identify systemic overlaps and deficiencies across QA systems in participating institutions.	Comparative audit of internal and external QA mechanisms, accreditation cycles, and documentation requirements.	Fragmented QA procedures, inconsistent review timelines, and limited cross-institutional comparability.	Clarified baseline discrepancies for harmonization.
Benchmarking Against Global Standards	Map institutional QA practices against recognized international frameworks.	Cross-referenced curriculum design, assessment methods, and student services with ESG	Misalignment with certain ESG* and ISG# indicators, varying levels of compliance with recognition principles.	Provided evidence-based alignment map with international norms.

		(2015), INQAAHE ISG (2023), and UNESCO Global Convention (2019).		
Systemic Misalignments	Identify operational or procedural inconsistencies hindering mutual recognition.	Review grading policies, self-study templates, and accreditation reporting formats.	Divergent grading systems, incompatible templates, and unequal documentation quality.	Informed development of standardized QA documentation and shared review protocols.
Synthesis and Analysis	Consolidate findings into an actionable diagnostic overview.	Developed a gap analysis matrix summarizing overlaps, omissions, and redundancies.	Limited interoperability between systems; duplication in data reporting; uneven digital readiness.	Produced the QA Systems Mapping Report, forming the foundation for framework design.

**The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) serve as a foundational reference for internal and external QA systems. The ESG are organized into three key parts:*

1. *Internal Quality Assurance (Part 1), emphasizing student-centered learning, fair assessment, and systematic course monitoring;*
2. *External Quality Assurance (Part 2), outlining expectations for reviews, transparency, and consistent evaluation criteria; and*
3. *Quality Assurance Agencies (Part 3), focusing on independence, accountability, and continuous improvement.*
   Within this study, these standards guided the design of institutional self-assessment tools, the logic of joint accreditation visits, and the mechanisms for continuous enhancement embedded in the proposed five-pillar model.

#The INQAAHE International Standards and Guidelines (ISG, 2023) extend the ESG's regionally rooted principles to a global level. They outline 11 overarching standards grouped under dimensions such as context and governance, resources, processes, and outcomes. The ISG highlights adaptability, stakeholder inclusivity, and cross-border recognition as essential for effective QA. In this research, ISG indicators informed the development of the Mutual Recognition and Cross-Border Steering Committee pillars, ensuring that the proposed framework not only complies with international expectations but also supports equivalence and mutual trust among QA agencies in different regions.

3.2.2 Stage 2 – Standards Alignment and Pillar Definition

Building on the diagnostic findings, the second stage established the conceptual backbone of the framework through five interrelated pillars (**refer to section 5.1**). The identified misalignments (**Table 2**) were translated into design priorities and cross-referenced with global QA standards to ensure both contextual relevance and international credibility.

Each pillar was conceptually structured using a logic model (McLaughlin and Jordan 1999), stating clear objectives, inputs, activities, and outcomes to ensure consistency and traceability. The detailed QA Pillar Framework Matrix, though not included here, is available as a supplementary analytical tool (**Table A1 in the Appendix**).

3.2.3 Stage 3 – Integrating Innovation Enablers

The third stage should introduce technological and participatory mechanisms to operationalize the five pillars effectively. Digital Quality Assurance platforms should be designed to host shared repositories, dashboards, and real-time progress tracking, enabling transparent data exchange among partner institutions. These platforms could integrate with existing institutional systems to streamline documentation, monitor milestones, and support evidence-based decision-making.

To ensure accessibility and flexibility, hybrid evaluation protocols should be developed that combine on-site and virtual review modalities, allowing broader expert participation and reducing logistical constraints. In parallel, mechanisms for student and faculty engagement should be incorporated, such as online consultations, feedback dashboards, and cross-institutional advisory sessions, to reinforce inclusivity and shared ownership of quality.

All digital and participatory components should be conceptualized within data protection and cybersecurity frameworks, ensuring ethical compliance and sustainability as the framework evolves. All digital components were aligned with data protection legislation, including the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Data Protection Board 2022; Bentotahewa et al. 2022), and national cybersecurity requirements.

3.2.4 Stage 4 – Pilot Implementation

To test feasibility and adaptability, the framework should be piloted in a controlled environment involving selected joint degree programs representing diverse regional contexts (e.g., EU–MENA partnerships). Implementation shall proceed incrementally, beginning with shared assessment tools and joint accreditation visits, followed by the gradual introduction of all five pillars. Training sessions shall be organized for QA officers, faculty, and students to promote a consistent understanding of procedures and expectations. A hybrid monitoring dashboard captured quantitative indicators, such as response times, document turnaround, and satisfaction rates, complemented by qualitative feedback from peer reviewers and stakeholders.

3.2.5 Stage 5 – Validation and Continuous Improvement

The final stage focuses on institutionalizing the framework through evidence-based validation and policy integration. The Cross-Border Steering Committee shall review pilot outcomes and approve refinements prior to external validation by independent QA experts and networks such as ENQA and INQAAHE. A continuous improvement cycle, grounded in the Plan–Do–Check–Act (PDCA) model (Naughton et al. 2024), shall be embedded to ensure responsiveness to evolving standards, including the emergence of AI-driven analytics and micro-credential evaluation. The validated framework, endorsed by all participating institutions, represents a living model of collaborative QA harmonization, balancing rigor with adaptability and offering a scalable template for transnational program assurance.

3.3 Governance and Accountability Model

To ensure governance and accountability, a Cross-Border Steering Committee (CBSC) shall be established as the permanent governance structure responsible for overseeing the implementation and alignment of the proposed framework. The CBSC will ensure equitable representation of all partners,

including faculty, students, quality assurance officers, and external reviewers, thereby promoting transparency and shared ownership. It will also review annual QA data, approve improvement action plans, and act as a dispute-resolution body to mediate regulatory or procedural conflicts that may arise during implementation. The committee's legitimacy shall be grounded in a formal memorandum of cooperation signed by all participating institutions and recognized by their respective QA agencies, ensuring that its decisions carry institutional and regulatory authority across all partner systems.

3.4 Success Indicators and Evaluation Metrics

To measure impact and sustainability, the following KPIs **(Table 3)** can be adopted. The KPIs are suggested based on the identified pain points in Table 2, their availability across different educational systems, and their ease in collecting their measures

Table 3. Key performance indicators for the proposed framework.

Domain	Indicator	Measurement
Trust & Recognition	Number of mutual recognition agreements formalized	Annual agency reports
Efficiency	Reduction in duplicated accreditation procedures	Baseline vs. post-framework comparison
Digitalization	Percentage of QA processes conducted on digital platforms	Dashboard analytics
Student Engagement	Frequency and depth of student participation in QA reviews	CBSC minutes
Quality Outcomes	Student satisfaction, employability, and completion rates	Program reports

A longitudinal review every three years should assess the framework's adaptability and contribution to international cooperation (University of North Carolina 2024).

4. Challenges in QA of Joint Degrees

Based on the analysis of the previous studies and related reports, **Figure 1** summarizes some of the main challenges that dominate the QA landscape for joint degrees that revolve around regulatory misalignments, cultural and institutional disparities, procedural inconsistencies, and threats to academic integrity and student experience.

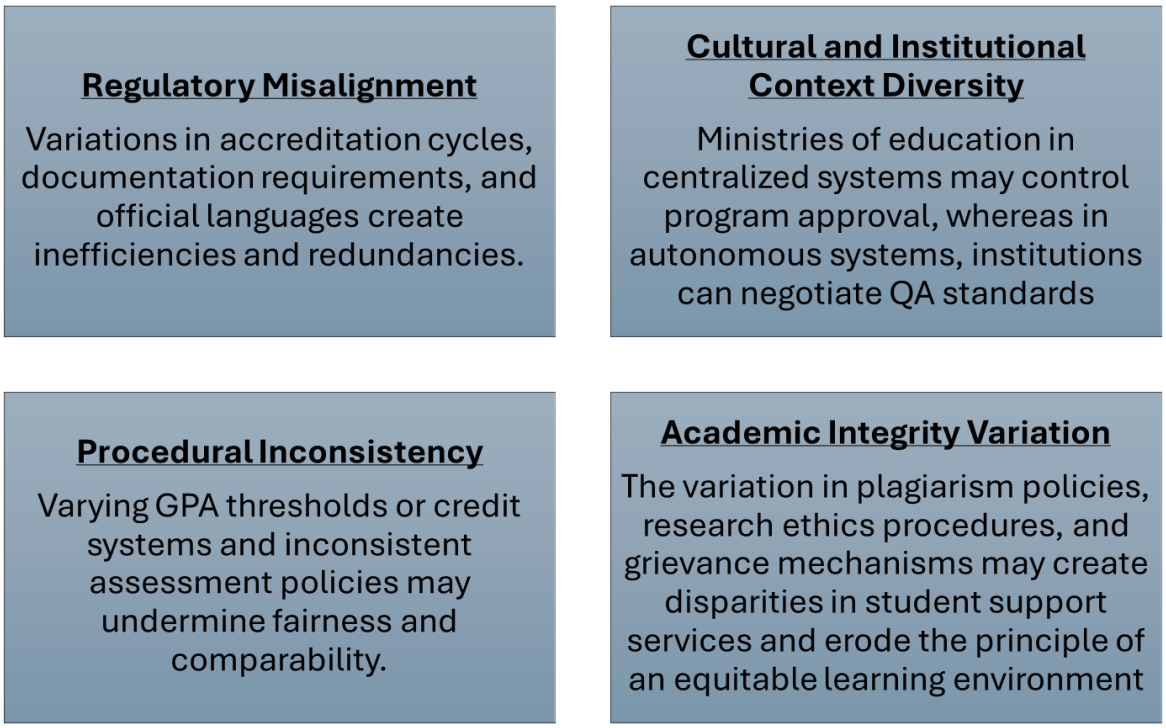

Figure 1. Some quality assurance challenges in joint degrees.

5. The Proposed QA Framework

5.1 The Five Pillars

The proposed QA framework rests on five interrelated pillars (**Figure 2**):

1. Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Standards. Partners formally acknowledge each other's QA procedures, aligning learning outcomes and assessment criteria with global reference frameworks. This mutual recognition establishes trust and eliminates redundant evaluations.

2. Collaborative Curriculum Design. Joint degrees thrive on co-created curricula that reflect multiple qualification frameworks. Shared design ensures curricular equivalence, academic integrity, and inclusion of cross-cultural competencies.

3. Shared Assessment and Evaluation Tools. Common rubrics, grading scales, and moderation mechanisms ensure fairness and comparability across institutions. Peer review of assessments by faculty from partner universities enhances transparency.

4. Cross-Border Steering Committee (CBSC). This governance body, comprising faculty, QA staff, students, and external experts, oversees implementation, monitors standards, and coordinates improvements, serving as a permanent platform for dialogue and accountability.

5. Joint Accreditation Visits. Joint site visits enable agencies to conduct unified reviews, producing a single report endorsed by all parties. Hybrid models, combining on-site and virtual participation, enhance efficiency and inclusivity. The outcomes of site visits shall feed into curriculum design updates for continuous improvement.

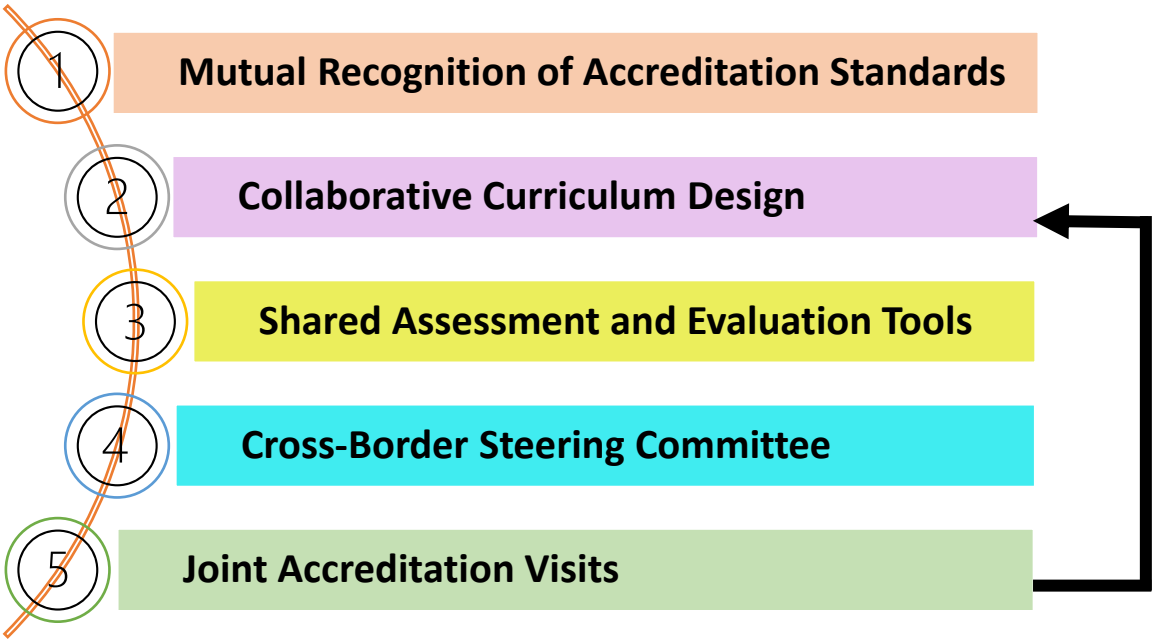

Figure 2. The Five Pillars of the Proposed Cross-Border Quality Assurance Framework for Joint Degrees.

5.2 Innovation Enablers

The five pillars are reinforced by three enablers that modernize and scale QA practices:

- Digital QA Platforms streamline document sharing, reporting, and analytics. They enable real-time monitoring and ensure transparency across borders.
- Hybrid Site Evaluations integrate in-person and virtual assessments, reducing logistical barriers and enabling broader expert participation.
- Student Voice Integration ensures inclusivity by embedding student feedback mechanisms into QA processes. Advisory boards and participatory evaluations amplify diverse perspectives.

5.3 Adaptability and Transferability

The framework is designed as a modular, context-sensitive tool. Institutions may implement specific pillars incrementally based on readiness and legal environment. Its adaptability ensures relevance across regulatory systems and cultural settings. Moreover, its continuous improvement orientation aligns with emerging trends such as AI-assisted QA analytics and micro-credential recognition.

While the framework conceptualizes five pillars as an integrated system, it does not prescribe their simultaneous implementation. The relative importance and sequencing of pillars may vary according to institutional maturity, regulatory context, and available resources. For example, some partnerships may begin with mutual recognition and joint accreditation visits before progressing to shared assessment or a formal cross-border steering committee. The framework thus supports incremental adoption and context-sensitive prioritization, ensuring that partial implementation can still yield measurable quality improvements without undermining overall coherence.

6. Discussion

The proposed framework redefines quality assurance as an enabler of collaboration and innovation. Four thematic insights emerge:

6.1 QA as an Instrument of Innovation

Traditional QA systems often emphasize compliance over creativity. By integrating joint curriculum design and shared evaluation mechanisms, this framework transforms QA into a proactive process that embeds quality at the design stage. This approach echoes the enhancement-led philosophy championed by ENQA (2024) and INQAAHE (2023), where QA drives institutional learning rather than constraining it.

6.2 Building Trust through Collaboration

Trust forms the cornerstone of sustainable cross-border partnerships. Mutual recognition and joint reviews institutionalize trust through shared governance and transparency. Such mechanisms reduce duplication and establish common ground between agencies and institutions, enabling a shift from supervision to stewardship.

6.3 Balancing External and Internal QA

By linking external (accreditation and recognition) and internal (curriculum and assessment) QA components, the framework creates a feedback loop of accountability. External reviews inform internal enhancement strategies, while internal evidence strengthens external evaluations. This integration ensures that QA remains both rigorous and responsive.

6.4 Digital Transformation and Student Empowerment

Digitalization reshapes QA by enhancing accessibility, efficiency, and inclusivity. Online platforms and hybrid visits reduce costs and carbon footprint, while analytics support evidence-based improvement. Equally vital is student empowerment; students are not passive recipients but co-creators of quality. Mechanisms for student voice institutionalize feedback and ensure relevance across cultural contexts.

7. Policy and Practice Recommendations

7.1 Formalizing Cross-Border QA Agreements

Governments and QA agencies should establish formal mutual recognition arrangements that harmonize accreditation cycles and validate a single review across jurisdictions. Regional bodies like ENQA or ASEAN-QA can act as conveners, fostering joint training and policy alignment.

7.2 Investing in Digital QA Tools and Training

Capacity building is crucial. Institutions must invest in secure digital infrastructures and train QA teams in data analytics, cybersecurity, and digital reporting. Pilot programs employing AI-driven QA dashboards could pioneer risk detection and predictive quality metrics.

7.3 Embedding Student-Centered Design

Joint student advisory boards should be institutionalized to ensure cross-cultural representation and equitable learning conditions. Transparent grievance mechanisms and QA dashboards enhance accountability and student trust.

7.4 Sustaining Joint Degrees Financially

Sustainability requires clear cost-sharing models for QA activities and digital platforms. Establishing alumni tracking systems and joint employability metrics ensures long-term evidence of program impact, strengthening both policy advocacy and institutional commitment.

8. Conclusion

Multi-national joint degrees symbolize the promise of borderless higher education, yet their success depends on coherent, collaborative QA mechanisms. The proposed five-pillar framework, anchored in mutual recognition, joint accreditation, co-created curricula, shared assessment, and cross-border governance, provides a roadmap for institutions seeking to sustain these partnerships. Supported by digital innovation and student engagement, it reframes QA as a shared process of trust-building and transformation.

The framework's value lies in its adaptability: it respects diversity while promoting convergence. Policymakers, QA agencies, and institutions are urged to operationalize this model through pilot programs, digital investment, and sustained dialogue. By moving beyond fragmented oversight toward collaborative stewardship, global higher education can transform quality assurance from a compliance requirement into a strategic instrument for stability, equity, and innovation.

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Appendix

Table A1. Logic Model Summary for the QA Pillar Framework.

Pillar	Objectives	Inputs	Activities	Expected Outcomes
Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Standards	Strengthen trust through aligned accreditation criteria and recognition of quality assurance decisions.	QA standards, bilateral memoranda of understanding, comparative framework analyses.	Cross-agency mapping, harmonization of outcomes, mutual validation exercises.	Reduced duplication of accreditation reviews, enhanced inter-agency credibility, and mutual trust.
Joint Accreditation Visits	Promote efficiency, transparency, and collaboration in external reviews.	Expert panels, digital QA tools, hybrid participation mechanisms.	Conduct joint on-site and virtual reviews, co-author evaluation reports.	Single integrated accreditation reports accepted by all partners; strengthened transparency.
Collaborative Curriculum Design	Ensure curricular equivalence, academic integrity, and inclusion of cross-cultural competencies.	Curriculum frameworks, faculty expertise, student feedback data.	Joint curriculum design workshops, peer moderation of course outcomes.	Harmonized learning outcomes and improved comparability across institutions.
Shared Assessment and Evaluation Tools	Enhance fairness, consistency, and comparability in student assessment.	Standardized rubrics, grading scales, moderation templates.	Calibration workshops, peer assessment reviews, cross-institutional data sharing.	Aligned grading practices, validated outcomes, and evidence-based QA reporting.
Cross-Border Steering Committee (CBSC)	Ensure continuous governance, accountability, and stakeholder engagement.	Partner agreements, QA officers, student and faculty representatives.	Annual QA reviews, dispute resolution meetings, monitoring of key indicators.	Institutionalized cooperation, policy alignment, and sustained QA culture across borders.

Source: Developed by the authors (2025).