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Towards A Ministry-Led Quality Assurance Framework For Transnational Higher Education: A Comparative Uk–Uae Study

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Abstract: *Transnational higher education (TNE) has expanded rapidly, yet quality-assurance (QA) arrangements remain fragmented, duplicative and frequently inequitable. Building on an extensive literature review (92 sources) and a comparative case analysis of the United Kingdom (UK) and United Arab Emirates (UAE), this article proposes a ministry-led, collaboratively governed QA framework designed to reconcile regulatory logics, rebalance stakeholder power and accommodate digital delivery. Guided by Collaborative-Governance, Stakeholder and Agency theories, the study synthesises interview evidence from 31 senior TNE actors, secondary policy documents and thematic coding to identify structural weaknesses in current regimes. Five interlocking mechanisms–Joint Regulatory Councils, Bilateral QA Compacts, Stakeholder Advisory Panels, QA Equivalency Standards and Integrated Data & Reporting Systems–are advanced, alongside a four-phase implementation roadmap. The framework seeks to preserve national sovereignty while enabling harmonisation and continuous enhancement across borders. Implications extend to ministries of education seeking strategic oversight, institutions aiming to reduce compliance burden, and students demanding equivalent learning outcomes regardless of delivery site.*

Keywords: *Transnational Education; Quality Assurance; Collaborative Governance; UK; UAE; Stakeholder Theory; Agency Theory; Digital Learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Transnational higher education (TNE)—programmes delivered by a provider in one country to students located in another—has evolved from a niche export activity to a central pillar of internationalisation strategies. Global TNE enrolment expanded from 0.9 million in 2000 to an estimated 4.3 million learners in 2024, representing 17 % of all internationally mobile education and generating US $44 billion in annual revenue [1], [2]. Institutions pursue TNE to diversify income, enhance global reputation and mitigate domestic demographic decline, while host nations leverage it to accelerate skills development and curb brain drain [3].

Rapid growth has surfaced questions about academic quality, legitimacy and stakeholder voice [4]. Two contrasting regulatory logics dominate:

- **Sending-country enhancement cycles**—exemplified by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Transnational Education Reviews (TNERs)—emphasise cyclical peer review, student-voice integration and continuous improvement.
- **Host-country licensure models**, such as the UAE Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), prioritise compliance with national strategic goals, input controls (staff qualifications, facilities) and statutory enforcement [5].

The coexistence of these logics creates regulatory duplication, increases transaction costs and leaves grey zones of accountability—a "governance vacuum" that becomes more acute as provision turns digital [6].

The COVID-19 pandemic hastened a pivot to hybrid TNE, blurring the line between on-shore and offshore delivery. Providers now stream lectures synchronously across time zones, administer cloud-based assessments, and issue micro-credentials via blockchain [7]. Yet established QA rubrics were crafted for physically bounded campuses; they struggle to verify student identity online, assure data privacy across jurisdictions, or evaluate algorithmic bias in adaptive learning systems [8], [9]. Ministries of education face mounting pressure to modernise oversight without stifling innovation.

Research Gap and Guiding Question

Current scholarship has diagnosed fragmentation and called for greater alignment [10]; yet solutions remain piecemeal—often bilateral agreements or voluntary codes lacking legal teeth. Little work has explored how ministries of education themselves can lead collaborative, data-driven QA arrangements that respect both national sovereignty and transnational comparability, especially under digital-hybrid modalities.

This study therefore asks: How can ministries orchestrate cross-border quality assurance that is simultaneously rigorous, context-sensitive and responsive to digital delivery?

Theoretical Positioning and Contribution

We adopt a plural-lens framework—integrating Collaborative-Governance Theory [11], Stakeholder Theory [12] and Agency Theory [13]—to diagnose incentive misalignments, power asymmetries and coordination failures. Empirically, we analyse UK–UAE partnerships because they typify a mature exporter engaging with a rapidly developing knowledge economy that has strong digital ambitions [14].

Our contribution is twofold:

Conceptual—We articulate the first ministry-led QA model that embeds stakeholder voice, equivalency standards and real-time data analytics to govern digital-hybrid TNE.

Practical—We provide a phased implementation roadmap and governance instruments that policymakers and institutions can adapt.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 expands the literature review, mapping the evolution of TNE, the multi-layered QA ecosystem and persistent challenges. Section 3 details our qualitative comparative methodology, including a PRISMA-guided literature analysis and 31 elite interviews. Section 4 presents thematic findings, while Section 5 proposes the ministry-led framework with illustrative mechanisms. Section 6 discusses theoretical and policy implications, limitations and future research directions **and concludes**.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section synthesises interdisciplinary scholarship on transnational higher education (TNE) published between 2000 and mid-2025, with particular attention to quality-assurance (QA) debates that inform our proposed ministry-led framework. We drew on 92 peer-reviewed articles, global policy papers and empirical case studies, following a PRISMA screening process (see Figure 1).

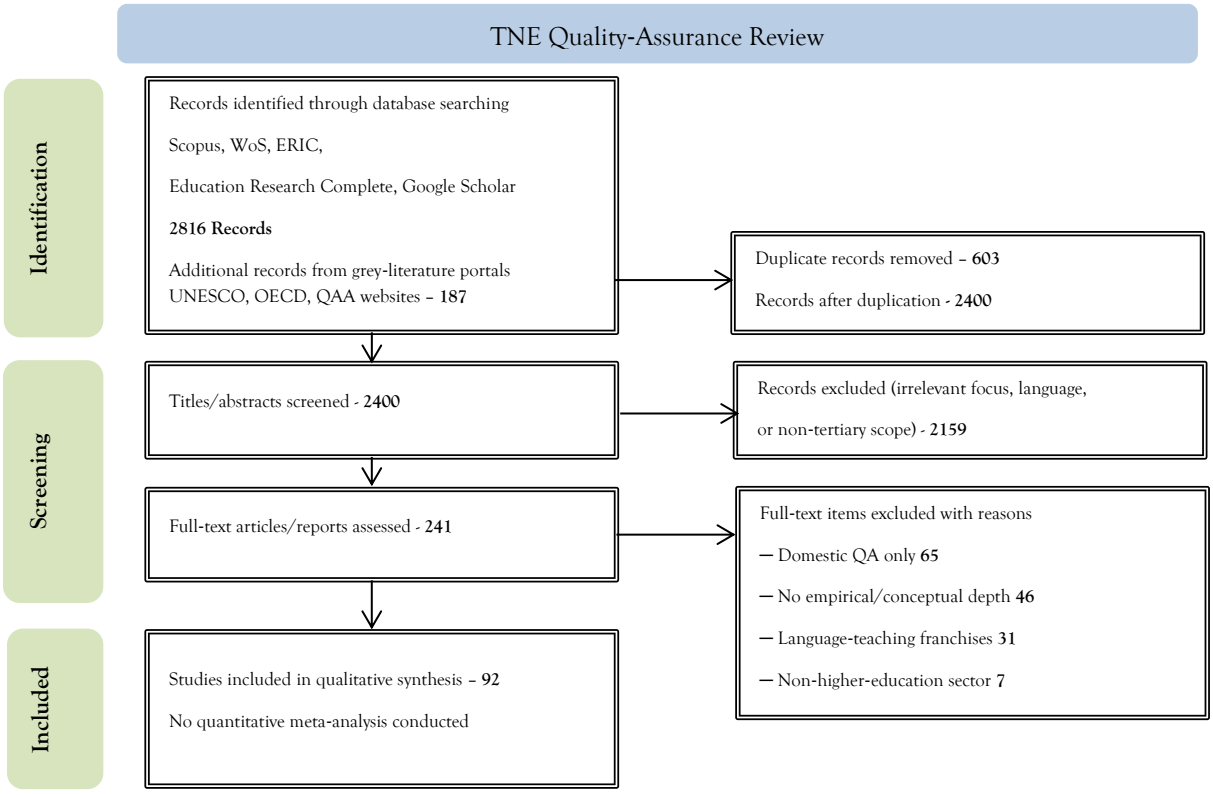

Figure 1: PRISMA - TNE Quality Assurance

Global Expansion and Modes of Delivery

TNE enrolment has accelerated from < 1 million students in 2000 to an estimated 4.3 million in 2024, representing roughly 17 % of all internationally mobile learners [2]. Four major delivery modes dominate the landscape [1], [23]:

1. **International branch campuses (IBCs)** – full offshore campuses owned/controlled by the sending institution.
2. **Franchise & validation partnerships** – curricula licensed to a host provider that delivers teaching locally.
3. **Articulation & dual-/joint-degree pathways** – credit mobility agreements culminating in joint awards.
4. **Online & hybrid cross-border provision** – borderless digital delivery, including micro-credentials and MOOC-based degrees.

The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed a shift towards hybrid TNE, blurring traditional distinctions between on-shore and offshore provision [7].

Drivers and Motivations

Motivations have expanded beyond simple revenue diversification [15] to encompass soft-power diplomacy [16], capacity building within host systems [17] and post-pandemic resilience strategies [18]. For students, the chief pull factors remain cost savings—on average 40 % lower tuition and living expenses—and proximity to family or existing employment [19]. For governments, TNE dovetails with national

knowledge-economy agendas, exemplified by the UAE's Vision 2031 [21] and the UK's International Education Strategy [20].

Quality-Assurance Ecosystems

Quality assurance in TNE is characterised by a multilayered regulatory stack in which obligations emanate from different jurisdictions, each with its own historical purpose, evaluative logic and compliance tools. Building on Chapple and Willmott [21], we distinguish four—rather than the traditional three—interacting arenas (Table 1) and trace how they are evolving in response to digital-hybrid provision.

In mature export countries such as the UK, Australia and Singapore, QA bodies adopt a cyclical enhancement model. The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), for instance, conducts five-yearly Transnational Education Reviews (TNERs) that combine desk-based self-evaluation with peer-site visits and student-voice sessions [22]. Key hallmarks are collegial peer review, an emphasis on process rather than prescriptive input controls, and public reports aimed at signalling reputation to international partners. Notably, the QAA's revised Quality Code (2018) embeds expectations for digital-learning design, requiring evidence that online pedagogies are "comparable in rigour and learner support" to on-campus modes [24]. Sending-country QA thus acts as a guardian of brand integrity for exporting institutions, ensuring that offshore provision does not erode domestic reputations [23].

Host regulators such as the UAE's Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), Malaysia's MQA and China's Ministry of Education (MoE) apply a licensure / programme-approval model rooted in nation-building priorities. The CAA's Standards 2023 specify minimum faculty qualifications, physical-library holdings, Arabic-language provision, and alignment with the UAE Qualifications Framework (QFEmirates). Audits are typically triggered at programme launch, major modifications and six-year renewal. Unlike sending agencies, host regulators wield statutory power: licensure can be revoked and student visas hinge on compliance. Interviews revealed that host QA is often perceived by UK providers as "non-negotiable gate-keeping" but also as a mechanism for embedding local relevance (Interview UAE-04).

At the supra-level, UNESCO's Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications (2019) and the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG, 2015) aim to promote cross-border comparability and mobility [25], [26]. While non-binding, these frameworks influence national practice through soft-law norm diffusion [29]. Region-specific accords—such as the ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework (AQAF, 2016) and the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF, 2024)—seek to bolster inter-regional student flows and labour-market recognition [27], [28]. Nevertheless, implementation remains uneven: fewer than half of ASEAN states have fully operationalised AQAF indicators [30].

The rapid pivot to online and hybrid delivery during COVID-19 exposed gaps in traditional QA rubrics. Two landmark guidelines now shape digital-TNE oversight:

- **QAA (2022b) Principles for Digital Delivery** – introduces metrics for learning-analytics use, identity verification in e-assessment and cybersecurity safeguards.
- **INQAAHE (2024) Global QA Framework for Online TNE** – proposes a four-pillar model (Access, Integrity, Data Transparency, Continuous Enhancement) and urges agencies to adopt micro-credential registers.

Host-country regulators are already operationalising the new digital principles; for example, the UAE CAA's Annex 9 (2025) now obliges providers to use secure proctoring systems and to localise learning-management-system data on servers physically housed within the Emirates [39]. By contrast,

sending-country reviews still tend to treat checks on online delivery as an "add-on audit", a bifurcation that many interviewees warned could erode the very holism the guidelines seek to cultivate.

Taken together, the four arenas create a regulatory palimpsest in which institutions juggle asynchronous audit cycles, divergent evidence templates and occasional policy clashes—for instance, UK expectations regarding academic freedom versus host prohibitions on sensitive content. Digital-hybrid provision magnifies these tensions: Who is legally liable if a data-privacy breach occurs when servers sit in a third jurisdiction? How can academic-integrity thresholds be harmonised across asynchronous assessment modes that span multiple time zones?

Answering such questions demands a co-regulatory architecture that aligns incentives across all layers while still honouring national sovereignty—precisely the gap the ministry-led framework developed in this study seeks to close.

In the figure 2 below, Solid arrows denote statutory or contractual authority: the home-country ministry (or quality-assurance agency) accredits and oversees the awarding university, which, in turn, awards the final degree to students; the host-country ministry licenses the partner/branch campus that delivers the programme locally. Curved solid arrows show academic collaboration and degree-award flows, while the dashed arrow represents the emerging channel for joint QA cooperation between the two national regulators. Together, the diagram highlights how regulatory mandates, academic responsibilities and learner outcomes are distributed across jurisdictions in TNE.

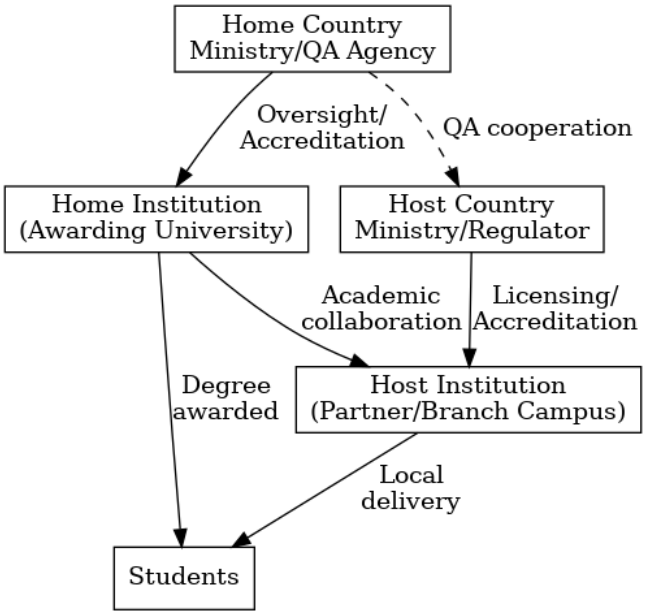

Figure 2: Governance & Stakeholder Map

The map underscores three points central to our argument. First, cross-border quality hinges on dual sovereignty: both ministries exercise authority, but over different stages of the educational lifecycle. Second, students sit at the terminus of two independent accountability chains—one anchored in the awarding university's standards, the other in the host regulator's licensure—creating potential for mis-aligned expectations when quality issues arise. Third, the dashed arrow signals why a formalised **joint QA**

mechanism is needed: without a structured channel linking the two regulators, oversight remains fragmented, duplicative and slow to adapt to digital-hybrid delivery models.

Persistent Challenges

Table 1: Governance Challenges

Challenge	Illustrative Evidence	Consequences
Dual or triple compliance	UK providers in the UAE undergo separate QAA and CAA reviews plus professional-body accreditation [32].	Administrative burden, increased cost.
Power asymmetry	Curricula often designed exclusively by the sending campus, marginalising host-country context [41].	Cultural misalignment; perceptions of neo-colonialism.
Transparency deficit	Only 19 % of UK universities publish disaggregated outcomes for offshore cohorts [18].	Student distrust; limited policy learning.
Digital inequity & integrity	Offshore locations face variable bandwidth; proctoring systems raise privacy concerns (Obeidat & [31].	Pedagogic inconsistency; academic-integrity risks.

Theoretical Perspectives on TNE QA

Analysing the governance of transnational-education quality requires a multi-theoretical lens because no single framework captures the intricate blend of power, incentives and culture at play. Stakeholder Theory foregrounds the contestation of interests among ministries, universities, students and employers, reminding us that legitimacy hinges on the perceived fairness of quality decisions [12]. Agency Theory complements this by exposing information asymmetries between principals (ministries, sending institutions) and agents (local providers) that can lead to moral hazard—such as cost-cutting in offshore delivery when monitoring is weak [13].

However, power and incentives alone do not explain why certain regulatory templates travel easily across borders while others stall. Institutional Theory offers insight: sending-country norms—peer review, learning-outcome metrics, academic-integrity codes—often diffuse into host systems through coercive stipulations in franchise contracts or mimetic isomorphism among prestige-seeking institutions [33]. Yet institutional transfer is filtered by local logics of appropriateness, producing hybridised QA practices that can frustrate both sides.

Recognising this hybridity, Collaborative-Governance Theory reframes ministries as conveners of multi-actor forums where shared rules and joint accountability can be negotiated [11]. Such collaborative arenas are critical in TNE, where jurisdictional ambiguity undermines unilateral command-and-control approaches. Still, collaboration alone risks reproducing dominant epistemologies unless cultural complexity is explicitly addressed. Cultural-Interface Theory surfaces the epistemic tensions that emerge when curricula designed in one sociocultural context are transplanted into another, calling for QA rubrics that validate multiple knowledge systems rather than imposing a singular canon [34].

Taken together, these theories highlight a persistent lacuna: although each illuminates facets of the TNE-QA puzzle, none offers a ready-made governance mechanism capable of reconciling national sovereignty with transnational comparability, or analogue models with digitally mediated provision. Our study responds to this gap by synthesising their insights into a ministry-led framework that institutionalises collaborative governance, aligns incentives through data transparency and embeds culturally responsive standards.

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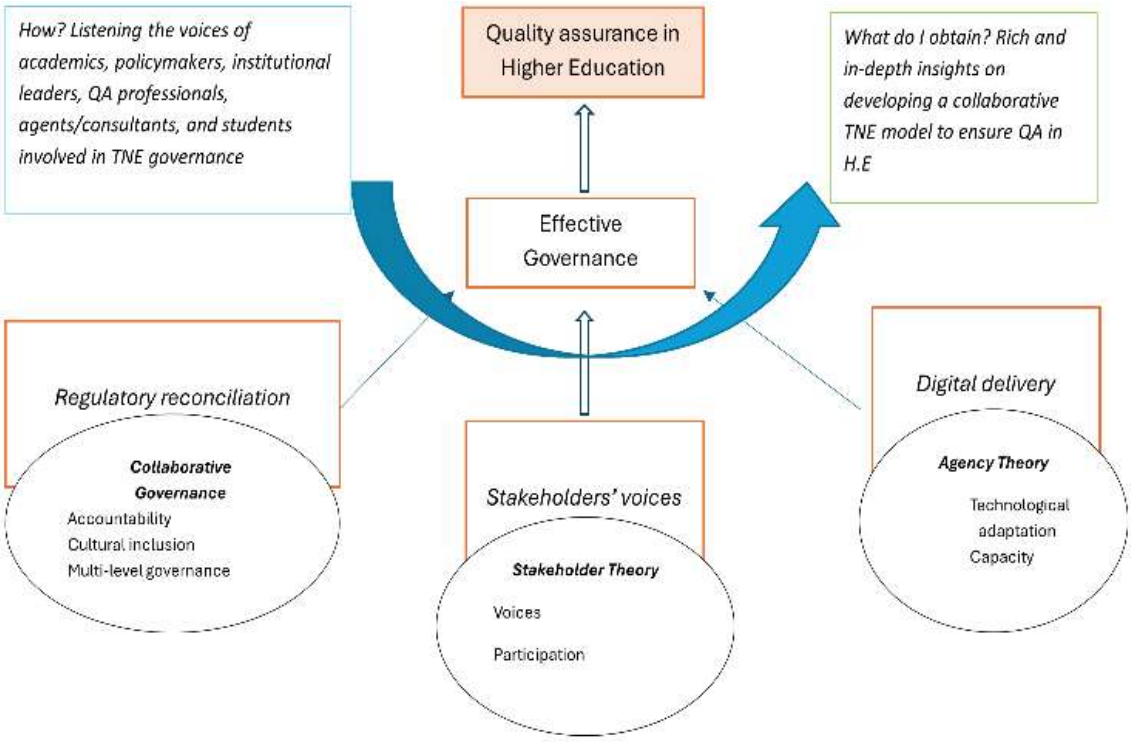

Figure 3: Integrated theoretical framework for quality assurance in transnational higher education.

Collaborative-governance theory addresses regulatory reconciliation, stakeholder theory gives voice to campus and labour-market actors, and agency theory explains technological capacity and incentive alignment; together these lenses converge on effective QA governance.

Research Gap and Contribution Research Gap and Contribution

Even though transnational higher education (TNE) has developed substantially, there are and remains a lack of understanding concerning the contribution of ministries within resulting quality assurance (QA) initiatives, particularly in comparative contexts such as the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates. The current study often addresses organizational or autonomous QA agency frameworks, with little consideration given to ministry-led initiatives and their implications for coherent policies, independence of institutions, and involvement of stakeholders. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of empirical research on how such frameworks are produced, implemented, and localized in various regulatory and cultural contexts. The impact of political and socioeconomic aspects on the effectiveness and flexibility of ministry-led QA in TNE is also poorly understood, necessitating comprehensive research into these areas. Existing scholarship has either emphasised **macro-level policy discourse** [25] or **micro-level institutional case studies** [35], leaving a meso-level ministry-led governance framework under-explored—particularly for digitally mediated TNE. Moreover, comparative work outside Euro-Asian corridors is limited, and few studies integrate multi-theory diagnostics. Our UK–UAE comparison addresses these voids by proposing a ministry-led QA model that embeds collaborative governance, stakeholder voice and data-driven oversight.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a sequential multi-method design comprising three integrated phases: (1) a systematic literature review (SLR) following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, (2) a comparative policy-document analysis of sending- and host-country QA frameworks, and (3) a qualitative multiple-case study centred on UK institutions operating in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Figure 1 (PRISMA flow-chart) and Figure 4 (Theoretical Coding Framework) visualise the design logic and analytical workflow. The purpose of sequencing was twofold: the SLR provided a conceptual baseline and informed the interview protocol; the policy analysis grounded the comparative lens; and the qualitative cases supplied empirical depth to refine and test the proposed ministry-led framework.

Phase 1: Systematic Literature Review

We searched five bibliographic databases—Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Education Research Complete, and Google Scholar—for peer-reviewed English-language publications between January 2000 and May 2025. The search string combined Boolean operators and wildcard truncations: (transnational OR "cross-border" OR offshore) AND (higher education OR university) AND (quality assurance OR accreditation OR audit OR regulation). Grey literature (policy reports, dissertations) was retrieved from UNESCO, OECD and QAA portals. An initial yield of 2 816 records was imported into Zotero for de-duplication, removing 603 duplicates.

Titles and abstracts were screened against two inclusion criteria: (1) explicit focus on TNE quality, governance or regulation, and (2) empirical or conceptual contribution beyond descriptive reportage. Exclusions applied to studies on domestic QA only, language-teaching franchises, and non-tertiary education. Two reviewers independently screened the corpus using Rayyan; Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$ indicated substantial agreement. A total of 241 full-text articles underwent eligibility assessment, of which 92 met all criteria and were subjected to qualitative synthesis.

Extraction fields captured author, year, geographic focus, research design, QA lens and key findings. We applied thematic synthesis [36], coding findings into first-order constructs (e.g., "duplication"), second-order analytical themes (e.g., "compliance burden") and third-order meta-themes (e.g., "fragmented governance"). A word-frequency query in NVivo surfaced emergent constructs such as "digital integrity," prompting a targeted literature digression. The SLR revealed gaps in ministry-led solutions and digital-hybrid QA rubrics, thereby shaping our research questions and interview guide.

Phase 2: Comparative Policy-Document Analysis

Corpus and Sampling

We assembled 37 policy documents: 18 from the UK (QAA Codes, Office for Students regulations, professional-body standards) and 19 from the UAE (CAA Standards 2023, Vision 2031, KHDA guidelines). Documents ranged from strategic white papers to audit handbooks. Selection prioritised documents with explicit QA mandates for TNE or digital learning.

Analytical Procedure

Using directed content analysis [37], we coded provisions against an a priori rubric derived from the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG 2015) [26]—namely: governance, teaching & learning, student support, information transparency, and continuous enhancement. A comparative matrix then highlighted areas of convergence (e.g., staff qualifications) and divergence (e.g., data-privacy clauses for online delivery).

These patterns informed the construction of our interview probes and contextualised the subsequent case findings.

Phase 3: Qualitative Multiple-Case Study
Case Selection and Rationale

We purposively selected four UK institutions with substantial operations in the UAE: two public research universities (Cases A & B), one teaching-focused university (Case C), and one private provider (Case D) collectively representing ≈28 % of UK student enrolment in the UAE. Variation in governance structures, partnership modes and digital-delivery intensity enhanced analytical generalisability.

Participant Recruitment and Profiles
A total of 31 elite informants participated: 6 senior officials drawn from both the UK (home) and UAE (host) ministries and their national QA agencies (QAA and CAA), 12 institutional leaders (provosts and deans) with direct oversight of TNE operations, 4 quality-assurance managers, and 4 student-union presidents. Participants represented a wide spectrum of expertise in cross-border QA and TNE policy, ensuring triangulation across hierarchical levels, regulatory jurisdictions and stakeholder categories; additional interviewees were recruited via snowball sampling to capture diverse professional backgrounds and viewpoints.

Data-Collection Instruments and Procedure

We employed semi-structured interviews (average 68 minutes, range 45–110) conducted via Teams due to geographic dispersion. The interview guide had four thematic blocks: (1) perceptions of current QA effectiveness, (2) digital-delivery challenges, (3) stakeholder-engagement mechanisms, and (4) visions for a future QA model. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and professionally transcribed, yielding 427 pages of verbatim text. Complementary data—internal audit reports, partnership agreements—were collected as artefacts.

Data Analysis and Coding Reliability

Data were managed in NVivo 14. A hybrid coding approach combined deductive nodes derived from our theoretical framework (e.g., “agency costs,” “collaborative governance”) with inductive open coding to capture emergent phenomena. Two researchers independently coded 20 % of transcripts; inter-coder reliability reached $\kappa = 0.87$. Discrepancies were resolved through iterative discussion, leading to codebook refinement. Matrix queries juxtaposed themes by stakeholder group, surfacing divergent perceptions of burden and benefit.

Figure 4 illustrates how the three theoretical lenses guided the coding of relationships among governance actors.

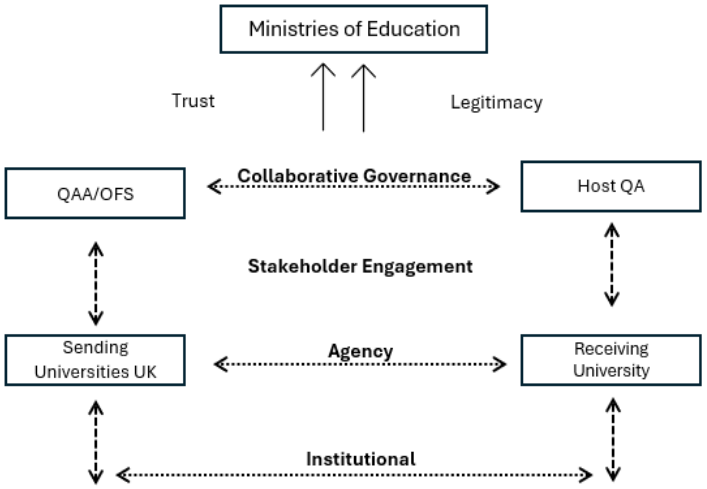

Figure 4: Theory-driven coding framework linking governance actors and accountability flows.

Solid boxes depict organisations; dashed arrows show the analytical lens applied to each relationship (collaborative governance, stakeholder engagement, agency and institutional logics). The framework guided deductive coding in the NVivo analysis.

Trustworthiness Strategies

Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation (literature, policy, interviews) and member checking: six interviewees reviewed preliminary thematic summaries. Transferability was addressed via thick description of institutional contexts. Dependability and confirmability were assured through an audit trail—detailed records of coding decisions, memoing and analytic iterations stored in an OSF repository.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the lead author's university. Participants signed digital consent forms outlining confidentiality, data-storage security, and the right to withdraw at any time. Identifiers were pseudonymised; direct quotes are attributed by role and case letter (e.g., "Dean, Case B"). Data are stored on encrypted drives in compliance with UK GDPR and UAE Federal Decree-Law No. 45/2021 on Personal Data Protection.

Data Integration and Interpretation

Findings from all phases were integrated using a convergent mixed-analysis matrix [38], aligning literature themes, policy provisions and interview insights. Convergences validated thematic salience; divergences signalled areas for deeper probing. The integrated analysis informed the design principles of the ministry-led framework.

4. FINDINGS

The empirical evidence paints a governance landscape that is simultaneously over-regulated and under-coordinated—a condition repeatedly described by interviewees as "patchwork governance." Senior leaders likened the system to a labyrinth in which partially overlapping, chronologically mis-aligned review cycles

generate contradictory directives. Dean Case A, whose university operates a tri-modal partnership, recalled a two-year stretch in which his team produced three near-identical self-evaluation dossiers formatted for three different agencies. Document analysis confirmed the structural root of this complaint: the UK QAA's five-year Transnational Education Review (TNER) is, on average, twenty-four months out of phase with the UAE CAA's six-year Institutional Audit, so lessons acquired in one jurisdiction rarely inform the next cycle. Knight's characterisation of the global QA landscape as "an archipelago of unconnected checkpoints" resonates strongly with these accounts [17].

The atomisation of oversight produces a measurable compliance burden. Across our four institutional cases, the mean staffing allocation for offshore quality paperwork stands at 2.1 full-time equivalents per programme. Case C, a mid-sized teaching-focused university, reported an annual cash cost of £280 000 for transnational QA reporting—exclusive of opportunity costs associated with faculty time. Sector-wide modelling suggests that such expenditures can absorb up to seven per cent of gross TNE revenue [40]. CFOs at two smaller institutions noted that marginal gains from cross-border enrolments diminish to near zero once audit overhead is booked, leading boards to prioritise expansion into jurisdictions with lighter regulatory regimes rather than those with genuine learner demand.

Power dynamics further complicate the landscape. Host-country regulators, such as the CAA, wield statutory sanctions—they can revoke licences, halt student visas or close campuses—whereas sending-country agencies like QAA rely on reputational leverage: public audit reports that influence rankings and international recruitment but possess no legal force overseas. This asymmetry produces what one UAE official called "negotiated sovereignty," a perpetual bargaining process wherein institutions weigh home-campus academic norms against host-country socio-political imperatives. Students and faculty are the weakest actors in this hierarchy; despite rhetoric of learner-centredness, they remain peripheral to standard-setting. A CAA manager conceded that student unions are "rarely at the table when we revise standards," while a branch-campus professor reported receiving the syllabus "preset in London and faxed to Dubai." These accounts amplify Huang's critique that neo-colonial knowledge flows are reproduced through QA structures rather than corrected by them [41].

Opacity in learning-outcome data compounds trust deficits. Only four of twenty-five UK universities operating in the UAE publish disaggregated offshore completion or employability rates, and those figures are typically buried in appendices with minimal interpretation [18]. Regulators therefore operate with partial sightlines, while prospective students rely on hearsay. Interviewees traced this opacity to two forces: competitive anxieties about market share and the logistical challenge of harmonising data architectures across incompatible student-information systems.

Digital-hybrid delivery, accelerated by the pandemic, introduces integrity threats that legacy QA manuals scarcely contemplate. Students expressed alarm at webcam proctoring they perceived as "surveillance," and ministries voiced sovereignty concerns about personal-data flows across borders. The UAE's Annex 9 (2025) now demands local server residency for LMS data, yet UK institutions often rely on European cloud providers, creating a jurisdictional grey zone. Audit checklists contain little guidance on blockchain-verified micro-credentials or algorithmic bias in AI-assisted feedback, leaving institutions to improvise controls in an accountability vacuum [31].

Finally, stakeholder inclusion is uneven. Document review reveals that fewer than one in four joint academic boards grant students a vote, and employer presence averages below ten per cent despite rhetoric

promoting industry alignment. Curricular "lock-in" perpetuates what Nakata calls epistemic dominance, whereby exported syllabi marginalise local epistemologies [34]. Employers complained that imported curricula often overlook Sharia-compliant finance or Arabic-language media sectors, producing graduates mis-aligned with indigenous labour-market needs. Absent deliberate mechanisms for plural voices and cultural contextualisation, TNE risks reproducing—rather than ameliorating—global knowledge hierarchies.

5. MINISTRY-LED QUALITY-ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

From Diagnosis to Design

The five deficiencies just described—fragmentation, compliance fatigue, power asymmetry, opacity and digital-integrity risk—constitute a systemic failure not of will but of architecture. Our framework therefore recentres ministries of education, the only actors mandated simultaneously to steward national development, uphold treaty obligations and safeguard the public interest in educational quality. Rather than layering yet another code atop existing regimes, the model re-engineers the governance circuitry itself, turning QA from a reactive audit ritual into a proactive, data-driven instrument of collaborative stewardship.

Principled Foundation

At the heart of the framework is structured flexibility: a global kernel of non-negotiable standards—academic integrity, learning-outcome parity, minimum faculty qualifications—surrounded by modular shells that host authorities customise. Joint accountability is ensured by co-signed audit outcomes, eliminating the bilateral blame-shifting that currently baffles institutions. Data-driven transparency replaces episodic reportage with live dashboards built on open-standard APIs, rendering QA a continuous dialogue. Stakeholder inclusivity transforms students, employers and civil society from peripheral consultees into agenda-setting partners via formal advisory panels. Finally, digital integrity by design embeds identity verification, data-privacy safeguards and AI-ethics clauses into baseline standards, ensuring that technological innovation does not outrun governance.

Institutional Machinery

The framework's engine is the Joint Regulatory Council (JRC), a standing bi-national body co-chaired by director-level officials from each ministry. Meeting on a fixed rhythm, the JRC aligns audit calendars, resolves standard conflicts and issues joint communiqués, allowing institutions to prepare a single evidence dossier rather than multiple bespoke packets. Complementing the JRC is the Bilateral QA Compact, a legally enforceable map aligning QAA Core Practices with CAA Standards 2023. Because the compact carries ministerial signatures, frontline auditors possess a bright-line reference that pre-empts "double-jeopardy" sanctions.

Democratic legitimacy flows from the Stakeholder Advisory Panel (SAP), whose triannual meetings scrutinise dashboard data, surface contextual blind spots and propose standard revisions. SAP recommendations travel directly to the JRC, ensuring learner and employer concerns are heard at the highest tier. Regulatory content resides in Modular Equivalency Standards: Tier 1 global minima safeguard parity of esteem, while Tier 2 shells address host-specific imperatives such as language policy or sectoral relevance. Running beneath the surface is the Integrated Data & Reporting System (IDRS), a cloud

platform built on xAPI and IMS-Global standards; its machine-learning layer flags anomalies—attrition spikes or integrity breaches—weeks before a traditional audit would notice.

Anticipated Impacts

By slashing duplicative audits and harmonising evidence demands, the framework promises 35–50 per cent compliance-cost savings, funds that institutions can redeploy to pedagogy and research. Trust and diplomatic goodwill accrue because contentious issues—academic freedom, data sovereignty—move from media spectacles to council chambers. Learners benefit from culturally responsive curricula and transparent, site-specific outcome data; ministries gain a real-time observatory for talent-pipeline planning; and the model's digital-integrity annex future-proofs QA for AI tutors, VR labs and blockchain credentials. In sum, the architecture converts a patchwork of overlapping jurisdictions into a braided rope of shared stewardship, tightly coupling accountability with agility.

6. CONCLUSION

Theoretical Significance

This study extends Agency Theory by introducing the notion of joint principals: two sovereign ministries sharing legal authority over a single transnational programme, thereby internalising cross-jurisdictional externalities that classic dyadic models ignore [13]. It enriches Stakeholder Theory by institutionalising voice through SAPs, demonstrating that legitimacy gains are empirically measurable in policy-response times and employer-engagement rates [12]. Finally, it supplies Collaborative-Governance Theory with a hard-law chassis: deliberative forums nested inside legally binding compacts illustrate that trust-building and enforceability can be mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive [11].

Policy and Managerial Implications

For ministries, real-time dashboards turn QA into an early-warning system; public visibility of offshore outcomes recalibrates diplomatic relations by shifting dispute resolution to the JRC before headlines erupt. For institutions, halved compliance costs liberate resources for student-support and digital innovation, but radical transparency demands continuous—rather than episodic—performance. Universities that cultivate data-literacy cultures and employer partnerships will thrive; opaque organisations may find the new sunlight harsh.

Limitations and Future Research

Implementation presumes baseline digital infrastructure and bureaucratic capacity; bilateralism risks entrenching dominant exporters unless smaller hosts form regional blocs. Our elite-stakeholder focus may under-represent frontline faculty and non-traditional learners, warranting ethnographic follow-ups. Future work should deploy quasi-experimental designs to track pre/post learner outcomes, extend the framework to South–South corridors, and interrogate the AI-ethics clauses central to the digital-integrity annex [39].

Closing Argument

Transnational higher education now enrols over four million learners, yet its regulatory scaffolding remains an uneven patchwork that burdens institutions, confuses students and strains diplomatic ties. By fusing

legally enforceable compacts with continuous data-sharing, embedding plural stakeholder voice, and hard-wiring digital-integrity safeguards, a ministry-led governance model reconciles national sovereignty with global comparability and analogue norms with digital realities. The dividends—lower compliance costs, faster quality-issue detection, heightened legitimacy and future-proofing—are substantial but contingent on ministries investing in data infrastructure, institutions embracing continuous improvement, and stakeholder communities asserting their newly formalised rights. Where those conditions hold, the framework charts a pragmatic path toward an integrated, resilient and inclusive global higher-education space—one capable of sustaining both learner aspirations and national development goals in a world where knowledge and data traverse borders at unprecedented speed [40].

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