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Quality Assurance as Individual Responsibility: The Three-Tier Reality of Research Integrity in Nigerian Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

When institutional infrastructure for research quality assurance fails, the consequences extend beyond individual careers to compromise an entire national knowledge system. This paper examines how quality assurance functions when formal mechanisms ethics review boards, plagiarism detection, peer review, and research integrity training are largely absent. Thematic analysis of 45 in-depth interviews at two Nigerian public universities reveals a three-tier quality assurance reality: formal mechanisms exist primarily on paper; informal peer networks serve as the primary operational quality control system for those with access; and individual moral commitment provides the last-resort foundation for those without, at the cost of significant psychological burden. The study documents pervasive policy-practice gaps, including non-functional IRBs (0–30% utilisation), cost-inaccessible plagiarism detection, and essentially absent research integrity training. It identifies a structural equity problem: quality assurance access is distributed along career advantage lines, with senior academics at federal institutions receiving genuine, if informal, quality review while junior academics at state institutions receive essentially none. This inequity is cumulative those with less quality feedback produce weaker research profiles, limiting their access to the very informal networks that provide quality support, and may ultimately exit the profession entirely. The study argues that predatory journal use, typically framed as individual ethical failure, is better understood as rational adaptation to structural conditions including absent quality infrastructure and perverse promotion incentives. Four priority interventions are indicated: IRB operationalisation beyond policy commitment; consortium-based plagiarism detection licensing led by the National Universities Commission; embedded research integrity training for early-career academics; and promotion criteria reform distinguishing publication quality from quantity.

1. Introduction

This study examines how research quality assurance operates in resource-constrained university systems. It situates the problem within Nigerian higher education and outlines the study's contribution.

When the institutional infrastructure for research quality assurance peer review, ethical oversight, plagiarism detection, and research integrity training fails, the consequences extend far beyond individual careers. A broken quality assurance system compromises the credibility of an entire national knowledge system, undermines public trust in academic expertise, and can produce unreliable or even harmful research (Bouter et al., 2016; Steneck, 2007). While quality assurance

frameworks in well-resourced contexts assume the reliable operation of these mechanisms, this paper examines how research integrity is maintained or not when that foundational infrastructure is largely absent.

Quality assurance frameworks in academic research rest on empirically contingent assumptions: that ethics review boards convene and enforce; that plagiarism detection is institutionally accessible; that peer review is substantive and timely; and that researchers receive adequate integrity training (Committee on Publication Ethics, 2017; Steneck, 2007). These assumptions underlie international standards including those of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), World Health Organisation research ethics guidelines (WHO, 2011), and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. In university systems characterised by chronic underfunding, infrastructure deficits, and governance challenges, these assumptions may not hold regardless of formal policy commitments (Idiedo et al., 2024; Kolade et al., 2025; Obiora, 2018).

This paper examines quality assurance practices and experiences at two public universities in north-eastern Nigeria through thematic analysis of 45 in-depth interviews. Nigeria's public university system comprising over 50 federal and 57 state universities serving more than two million students represents one of the largest university systems in sub-Saharan Africa and a significant case for understanding research quality under resource constraints(Idiedo et al., 2024; National Universities Commission, 2022). The study reveals a three-tier quality assurance reality that challenges standard quality management frameworks and has significant implications for how research integrity policy is designed in under-resourced contexts.

This paper is part of a series examining structural barriers to research productivity in Nigerian public universities (Kolade et al., 2025). Across the series, a consistent diagnostic pattern emerges: policy frameworks are formally adopted but lack the implementation infrastructure personnel, budgets, enforcement authority, and incentive alignment required for operational function. The present paper applies this diagnosis to quality assurance, demonstrating that the gap between quality assurance policy and practice is not a problem of intent but of implementation infrastructure (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; National Universities Commission, 2022).

2. Review of Relevant Literatures

This section reviews key quality assurance frameworks and their relevance to developing contexts. It also introduces the theoretical lenses guiding the analysis.

2.1 Research Quality Assurance: Standard Frameworks and Their Preconditions

Quality assurance in academic research encompasses four main institutional mechanisms. Peer review provides pre-publication quality control through independent expert evaluation of methodology, contribution, and validity (Crane, 1967). Ethics review boards (IRBs) provide pre-study oversight ensuring research with human participants meets ethical standards for informed consent, risk management, and data protection(WHO, 2011). Plagiarism detection systems identify unattributed reproduction of prior work before publication (Fanelli, 2012). Research integrity training equips researchers with the knowledge and skills to navigate ethical complexity in research design and dissemination (Steneck, 2007).

These mechanisms are conceptually interdependent: effective peer review depends on reviewers who have received integrity training; IRB oversight is most valuable for researchers who understand why it matters; plagiarism detection is most effective in a culture that has internalised integrity norms. Publication pressure, when not accompanied by quality assurance infrastructure, has been shown to accelerate research misconduct across academic systems (Tijdink et al., 2014). Quality assurance frameworks from well-resourced contexts assume that all four mechanisms are available, co-ordinated, and enforced (Bouter *et al.*, 2016; Steneck, 2007).

These mechanisms, however, are not free-floating ideals. Their effective operation is contingent upon a specific, often unspoken, set of institutional preconditions: sustainable funding for software and trained personnel, a critical mass of experienced researchers to serve on IRBs and provide peer review, and a governance culture capable of enforcement (Bouter et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2021). This paper demonstrates what happens when these preconditions are unmet, revealing a tiered reality of quality assurance that is invisible to standard frameworks.2.2 Quality Assurance in Developing Country University Contexts

Research on quality assurance in developing country universities consistently documents significant gaps between formal policy and operational practice. Okafor and Eze (2022) found that Nigerian universities maintained formal IRB policies but had inadequate enforcement capacity. Adebowale *et al.* (2020) documented widespread predatory journal use driven by promotion incentives rather than ignorance of quality distinctions. Adeloye *et al.* (2021) found that reviewer shortage produced by the limited pool of doctoral-qualified academics compromised peer review depth at the system level.

These studies document the presence and severity of quality assurance gaps but do not theorise what fills those gaps in their absence how quality assurance actually functions when formal mechanisms are non-operational. Obiora (2018) notes that the absence of a robust quality infrastructure in Nigerian universities has created a vacuum filled by informal and often inequitable practices. This paper addresses that question directly, providing empirical evidence of the informal systems that emerge to substitute for missing formal infrastructure and analysing the equity implications of those substitutions.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks inform the analysis. Institutional theory, particularly the work of Meyer and Rowan (1977) on decoupled organisations, provides a lens for understanding the persistent gap between formal quality assurance policy and operational practice. Meyer and Rowan argue that organisations in legitimacy-seeking environments adopt formal structures that signal conformity with institutional expectations, while actual operational practices are decoupled from those structures. In the Nigerian university context, this decoupling manifests as comprehensive ethics policies under which IRBs have no active committees, research integrity training requirements under which no training is delivered, and promotion criteria referencing quality standards that no institutional mechanism enforces(National Universities Commission, 2022; Okafor & Eze, 2022).

Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000) provides a complementary lens for understanding why informal quality assurance networks reproduce inequality. Access to informal peer review depends on established research reputations, international connections, and seniority forms of capital that junior academics and state university staff disproportionately lack. This creates a reinforcing cycle: those with quality assurance access produce stronger outputs, building the reputation that grants continued access, while those without access remain excluded regardless of research potential. The Matthew Effect (Merton, 1968) the principle that advantage accumulates to those already advantaged operates with particular force in quality assurance contexts where the benefits of review compound over a research career.

Together, these frameworks support the paper's central argument: the quality assurance problems documented in this study are not problems of individual motivation or institutional aspiration, but of implementation infrastructure and the social structures that emerge to compensate for its absence (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Putnam, 2000).

3. Methodology

This section describes the qualitative approach used to examine research practices in Nigerian universities.

3.1 Research Design and Setting

This qualitative study employs an interpretivist approach to understand quality assurance as experienced by academics embedded in the Nigerian public university system. The design prioritises depth of understanding over generalisability, seeking to document the mechanisms through which quality assurance is enacted or not in a resource-constrained context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two institutions were selected for maximum variation: a federal university (larger, better resourced, higher research output) and a state university (smaller, more severely constrained, limited research activity) in north-eastern Nigeria.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Forty-five participants were recruited through purposive stratified sampling to ensure representation across institution type, academic rank, discipline, and gender. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was confirmed the point at which new interviews produced no substantively new themes in quality assurance experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final sample comprised 28 participants from the federal university and 17 from the state university. Table 1 presents full participant characteristics.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics by Institution Type

Characteristic	Federal University (n=28)	State University (n=17)
Academic Rank		
Professor	9 (32.1%)	3 (17.6%)
Associate/Senior Lecturer	11 (39.3%)	7 (41.2%)
Lecturer/Assistant Lecturer	8 (28.6%)	7 (41.2%)
Discipline		
Sciences & Engineering	10 (35.7%)	6 (35.3%)
Social Sciences	12 (42.9%)	7 (41.2%)
Humanities	6 (21.4%)	4 (23.5%)
Gender		
Female	11 (39.3%)	7 (41.2%)
Male	17 (60.7%)	10 (58.8%)
Years of Experience (mean)	14.2 years	9.8 years

A potential sampling limitation warrants acknowledgement: participants represent academics who remain active in the university system. Those who may have exited academia due to the structural pressures documented in this study inadequate quality feedback, reputational damage through predatory journal publication, and the psychological burden of operating without institutional support are not represented in our data. The literature on brain drain in Nigerian higher education suggests that the Tier 3 profile (junior, at state institutions, without international training) is over-represented among academics who have exited the system (Nwagwu, 2012; Olukoshi and Zeleza, 2004). Findings should therefore be understood as reflecting the experiences of surviving academics a valuable but specific perspective that is likely to underestimate both the prevalence and

severity of Tier 3 quality assurance experiences across the full population of Nigerian academics(Jowi, 2009; Nwagwu, 2012), including those who have already left. The theoretical implications of this attrition dynamic are developed in Section 5.1.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected between March and August 2024 through semi-structured interviews lasting 55–80 minutes (M = 67 minutes). Interview guides were developed from quality assurance frameworks and refined through two pilot interviews with academics not included in the final sample. Pilot testing confirmed guide clarity and prompted revision of three questions that had produced ambiguous initial responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim, generating approximately 420 pages of transcript data. Interview questions addressed peer review experiences, IRB practices, plagiarism detection access, research integrity training, and predatory journal awareness, with follow-up probes tailored to emerging themes.

3.4 Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure. In the first stage, two researchers independently coded transcripts using MS Excel, generating initial descriptive codes capturing participants' reported quality assurance experiences, practices, and perceptions. In the second stage, codes were consolidated through team review sessions into thematic clusters. The quality assurance thematic cluster generated 524 coded segments, representing 34% of total coded material the largest single thematic cluster in the dataset. Saturation was confirmed at interview 41, with the final four interviews serving as saturation validation. Member checking was conducted with eight participants (17.8% of sample), who reviewed preliminary thematic summaries and confirmed their resonance with their described experiences.

3.5 Researcher Positionality

The lead researcher's familiarity with Nigerian higher education provides interpretive sensitivity to institutional constraints but creates confirmation bias risk. This risk was mitigated through structured rival explanation testing during analysis, explicitly testing whether documented quality assurance gaps reflected researcher motivation deficits rather than structural absence. In each case, participant accounts supported the structural interpretation. Member checking with eight participants confirmed the resonance of preliminary findings.

4. Findings: The Three-Tier Quality Assurance Reality

This section presents the study's findings, highlighting variations in quality assurance practices.

Analysis reveals a three-tier quality assurance system that functions well only for those already advantaged by career capital and institutional position, partially for those embedded in productive informal networks, and barely at all for those without access to either formal systems or informal compensatory mechanisms (Bourdieu, 1986; Merton, 1968). Table 2 presents the three-tier framework; the sections below provide empirical evidence for each tier and the cross-cutting quality assurance dimensions.

Table 2: The Three-Tier Quality Assurance Reality in Nigerian Public Universities

Tier	Population	QA Mechanism	Quality	Equity Implications
Tier 1	Internationally-trained, well-networked senior researchers (≥20–25%; n≈9–11)	Personal application of international standards; rich informal networks; international collaboration	High genuinely rigorous	Access depends on prior international training and accumulated career capital; structurally exclusive
Tier 2	Researchers embedded in active informal peer networks (≥55–60%; n≈25–27)	Informal pre-submission review by trusted colleagues; departmental reading groups	Moderate genuine but variable	Access depends on social capital and seniority; reproduces existing career advantages
Tier 3	Isolated researchers, junior academics, state university staff (≥20–25%; n≈9–11)	Individual moral commitment as survival mechanism; no peer review access; no institutional oversight	Low or absent	Most disadvantaged researchers receive least quality support; generates psychological burden alongside cumulative professional disadvantage

4.1 Tier 1: International Standards through Personal Capital

Approximately 20–25% of participants (n≈9–11) predominantly professors with doctoral training from European or North American institutions operated at a quality standard comparable to international norms. This was not because institutional infrastructure supported it, but because they had internalised standards through their doctoral training and maintained those standards through continuing international collaboration (Jowi, 2009; Steneck, 2007)..

"My PhD at Leeds gave me the standards. I brought them back and I apply them regardless of whether the institution supports them or not. I review my own work against international standards before I would submit anywhere. But I know most of my junior colleagues here have no equivalent reference point. They have never been told what rigour looks like in practice." FU02, Professor, Biochemistry (Federal University)

The international training advantage operated not only through internalised standards but through continuing network access. Tier 1 researchers maintained active collaboration with international colleagues who provided genuine, high-standard peer review before submission.

"I have colleagues in Germany and South Africa who see everything I write before it goes anywhere. That relationship is more valuable to my research quality than any institutional system here. But it took fifteen years to build those relationships, and it depends entirely on having had the opportunity to study abroad." FU08, Professor, Environmental Science (Federal University)

The equity implication is stark: Tier 1 quality assurance is available only to those whose career trajectories included international doctoral training a trajectory overwhelmingly shaped by prior socio-economic advantage and gendered access to international mobility (Jowi, 2009; Nwagwu, 2012).

4.2 Tier 2: Informal Peer Networks as Primary Quality Control

Forty of 45 participants (88.9%) reported regularly sharing draft manuscripts with trusted colleagues before formal submission, describing this informal review as more substantive and constructive than many formal journal peer reviews (Jowi, 2009; Steneck, 2007). The informal pre-submission review network had become the *de facto* primary quality assurance mechanism in a

context where internal institutional review was weak and external review processes were slow, under-resourced, and sometimes compromised by contextual bias (Adeloye et al., 2021; Fanelli, 2012).

"I never submit anything without my two or three trusted colleagues seeing it first. That is where the real review happens. The journal process is often more about luck who your reviewer is, whether they are generous or hostile." SU03, Senior Lecturer, Sociology (State University)

Federal university participants were significantly more likely than state university participants to describe functional informal review networks (75% vs. 42%), reflecting the denser research community and more numerous senior academics at federal institutions. Junior academics at state institutions were particularly candid about the structural disadvantage: their senior colleagues were too stretched to provide mentoring review, while their peer networks lacked the experience to provide meaningful critique (Adeloye et al., 2021; Okafor & Eze, 2022).

"We have a reading group that meets monthly. Every member puts their work through it before submission. That has improved the quality of our publications enormously. But it only works because we have six research-active colleagues with complementary expertise. Departments with two or three staff do not have that luxury." FU14, Senior Lecturer, Economics (Federal University)

A secondary pattern warrants acknowledgement, though the study was not designed to test disciplinary variation as an explanatory variable. Tier 1 researchers those with functioning informal quality assurance through international networks were disproportionately located in Sciences and Engineering. This reflects structural features of those disciplines: greater availability of international grant funding, laboratory-based research that naturalises collaboration across institutions, and stronger norms of co-authorship that embed junior researchers in international scholarly communities from early in their careers. Tier 2 network reliance was more pronounced among Social Scientists and Humanities scholars. These disciplinary patterns are secondary observations from our dataset and should be interpreted with appropriate caution; a study designed with disciplinary variation as a primary analytical dimension would be needed to test them systematically. We recommend this as a priority for future research.

4.3 Tier 3: Individual Moral Commitment as Last Resort

Approximately 20–25% of participants' predominantly junior academics at the state university described a quality assurance reality in which individual moral commitment was the sole operative mechanism. These researchers had no access to the international networks of Tier 1, and were insufficiently embedded in the informal networks of Tier 2 (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000)..

"There is no one to check my work before I submit it. I have one colleague at my level and she is in a different field. The senior staff are busy with their own things. I do my best, but honestly, I do not always know if my best is good enough by the standards the journals expect." SU11, Lecturer, Educational Psychology (State University)

"I keep my standards because I was raised to be honest. But the institution gives me no tools. No training, no feedback system, no one to check my methodology. I am working in the dark and hoping my moral compass is pointing in the right direction." SU15, Assistant Lecturer, Political Science (State University)

It is important to clarify what 'moral commitment' means and does not mean in this context. It does not represent a stable, self-sufficient resource for quality assurance. It represents a survival mechanism: the residual personal resource that researchers draw upon when all formal and informal institutional resources have been withheld (Jameton, 1984; Varcoe et al., 2012).. As a quality assurance mechanism, it is critically limited: it is unguided, un-benchmarked, and subject to drift without external feedback.

Moreover, reliance on individual moral commitment as the primary quality assurance mechanism constitutes a form of structural harm. When the failure of institutional infrastructure is displaced onto individual conscience, the psychological burden of navigating ethical complexity without training, mentorship, or feedback falls disproportionately on the researchers least equipped to bear it. Research on moral distress in high-demand, low-support professional environments (Jameton, 1984; Varcoe *et al.*, 2012) documents the psychological cost of this displacement: professionals required to act on ethical commitments without adequate institutional support experience heightened anxiety, reduced professional confidence, and, over time, disengagement from the ethical demands of their role. The Tier 3 quality assurance reality, on this reading, does not merely disadvantage junior researchers professionally it harms them personally, and may contribute to the academic attrition documented in the broader literature on Nigerian brain drain (Nwagwu, 2012; Olukoshi & Zeleza, 2004). .

The equity implication of Tier 3 is therefore more serious than a surface reading of the framework captures. Researchers who face the most acute structural disadvantages junior, at under-resourced institutions, without international training are also those whose quality assurance relies most exclusively on personal moral resources that are themselves undeveloped without structured support, and whose psychological burden is thereby greatest.

4.4 Ethics Review Boards: The Absent Infrastructure

Only one of the two sampled institutions maintained a minimally functional IRB, with approximately 30% utilisation among those requiring ethical review (see Table 3). The other institution's IRB existed formally but had no active committee, no standard review processes, and no enforcement mechanisms.

"I was trained in ethics the hard way through my PhD in the UK. But when I came back here, there was nothing. No IRB meetings, no training for younger staff. I follow the protocols because I know them. Most junior people here do not know what HRPP means." FU06, Professor, Public Health (Federal University)

Senior academics described accumulated ethical wisdom from decades of navigating complex research situations; junior academics described feeling unguided and uncertain, particularly regarding sensitive research with human participants (Holtzhausen, 2010; Okafor & Eze, 2022). Several early-career researchers described seeking informal ethical guidance from senior colleagues as the only available substitute for institutional training and oversight.

4.5 Plagiarism Detection: Cost as the Binding Constraint

Institutional affordability emerged as the binding constraint preventing systematic plagiarism detection. Participants at both institutions described the cost of institutional Turnitin subscriptions as placing them beyond realistic budgets given wider resource constraints. Adaptive strategies manually checking suspicious passages, using free-tier grammar tools, running internet searches on unusual phrases were acknowledged as inadequate substitutes. The state university operated entirely without detection support (Obiora, 2018; Idiedo et al, 2024).

"We know Turnitin exists. We know it is the standard. But the institutional subscription cost is simply not something we can absorb given everything else. So we do our best manually and hope that is enough. It is not, of course." SU07, Associate Professor, Chemistry (State University)

Table 3: Quality Assurance Capacity by Institution Type

QA Dimension	Federal University (n=28)	State University (n=17)	Key Constraint
IRB functionality	Minimal (≈30% utilisation)	Non-operational (0%)	Absent enforcement infrastructure
Informal peer review access	≈75% of participants	≈42% of participants	Network density and senior faculty availability
Plagiarism detection	Limited (departmental, intermittent)	Absent	Institutional subscription cost prohibitive; no open-source alternative deployed
Research integrity training	Rare (23% received any formal training)	Essentially absent (<5%)	No training programme; no trained trainer capacity
Predatory journal awareness	Higher senior mentors identify problematic outlets	Lower junior staff largely unguided	Access to experienced mentors; promotion criteria that do not distinguish quality

4.6 Predatory Journals as Structural Response, Not Individual Failure

Predatory journal use was raised as a significant concern across interviews (Adebowale et al., 2020; Beall, 2012). Crucially, participants did not describe use of predatory outlets as reflecting ignorance of quality distinctions but as a rational adaptation to structural pressures. Promotion criteria incentivised publication quantity without distinguishing quality; in the absence of institutional mechanisms helping researchers distinguish legitimate from predatory outlets, the path of least resistance was structurally determined (Adebowale et al., 2020; Beall, 2012; UNESCO, 2021).

"I know which journals are questionable. But the promotion criteria do not distinguish. A publication is a publication. Until that changes at the top, people will keep taking the path of least resistance." FU11, Associate Professor, Physical Sciences (Federal University)

"If you are a junior lecturer and you need three publications for your next promotion and you have no one to guide you on journal quality, what do you do? You find journals that will accept your work. Is that unethical? It is a response to a broken system." SU09, Lecturer, Public Administration (State University)

5. Discussion

This section interprets the findings and connects them to broader theoretical and policy debates.

5.1 Informal Systems as Structural Compensation and Structural Inequality

The informal pre-submission peer review networks documented in this study represent a genuinely functional quality assurance mechanism. However, these networks simultaneously compensate for absent formal infrastructure and reproduce the inequality that the absent formal infrastructure would, if functional, partially mitigate. A quality assurance system whose effectiveness is proportional to existing career advantage is not a quality assurance system; it is a reinforcement of existing hierarchy.

Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) illuminates this dynamic. Access to informal peer review requires an established research reputation, which requires prior review access, which requires prior reputation. The Matthew Effect (Merton, 1968) operates through this mechanism: junior researchers

who receive less quality feedback produce less polished work, receive less positive peer review responses, publish less frequently and in lower-quality outlets, and develop weaker research profiles which further limits their access to the informal review networks whose access depends on established reputations.

The Matthew Effect as applied here has a further, under-theorised terminal outcome. The reinforcing cycle of exclusion does not merely produce weaker research profiles over time; it may produce academic attrition (Nwagwu, 2012; Olukoshi & Zeleza, 2004).. Tier 3 researchers who receive persistently inadequate quality feedback, who publish in outlets that damage rather than build their reputations, and who carry the psychological burden of navigating ethical complexity without institutional support, face a structural incentive to exit the profession. This exit pathway from quality assurance exclusion to disengagement and departure is consistent with the broader literature on brain drain in Nigerian higher education. Jowi (2009) and Nwagwu (2012) document the disproportionate exit of early-career academics from Nigerian universities, noting that those who leave are precisely those whose working conditions most closely match the Tier 3 profile: junior, at state institutions, without international research experience, and without the informal support networks that make academic careers sustainable. Olukoshi and Zeleza (2004) argue that this exit is not primarily driven by salary differentials, as the dominant brain drain narrative suggests, but by working conditions and the absence of professional development infrastructure conditions our findings document in the specific domain of quality assurance. The implication is that our three-tier framework may underestimate the severity of the Tier 3 reality, because our sample captures only those who have remained in the university system.

5.2 The Policy-Practice Gap as Institutional Decoupling

The most consistent finding across all quality assurance dimensions is the gap between formal policy commitments and operational reality. Institutions described comprehensive ethics policies under which IRBs had no active committees; promotion criteria referenced research quality standards that no institutional mechanism enforced; research integrity training was specified in institutional regulations that no institution had the capacity to deliver.

Meyer and Rowan's (1977) institutional theory provides the most parsimonious explanation. Institutions adopt formal quality assurance structures to secure external legitimacy whilst actual practice is decoupled from those structures by the absence of implementation infrastructure. This decoupling is not concealment or bad faith; it is the predictable consequence of adopting policy frameworks developed for well-resourced contexts without the parallel investment in the implementation infrastructure those frameworks require.

5.3 Predatory Journals: From Individual Failing to Structural Adaptation

The dominant framing of predatory journal use in the research integrity literature as an individual ethical failing is empirically inadequate to the dynamics documented in this study. Participants who used predatory outlets demonstrated awareness of quality distinctions and described their choices in explicitly structural terms: absent mentor guidance, quantity-focused promotion criteria, and the absence of institutional mechanisms for distinguishing legitimate from predatory outlets.

This finding supports a reframing: rather than 'predatory publishing,' the phenomenon is better understood as 'structurally-determined publication pathway selection.' Effective intervention requires simultaneously reforming promotion criteria to distinguish quality from quantity and providing institutional guidance through functional mentor networks or formal quality assessment tools that enables quality-differentiated journal selection.

5.4 Implications for Quality Assurance Policy

The findings carry specific, data-grounded implications for quality assurance reform in resource-constrained university systems. We organise these as four priority interventions, specifying in each case the responsible actors, the structural problem the intervention addresses, the implementation mechanism, and the indicator of operational success.

Intervention 1: IRB Operationalisation beyond Policy Commitment.

The data establish that IRB non-functionality is not a problem of researcher resistance but of structural absence: no active committee, no mandatory quorum, no defined review calendar, and no enforcement authority. A 0–30% utilisation rate across both institutions reflects a system in which researchers cannot access review even when they seek it. The intervention required is not a new policy but a specific administrative architecture. Each institution should appoint a standing IRB with a minimum quorum of five trained members, establish a monthly review calendar with mandatory convening dates, and designate an administrative officer with authority to require ethics clearance as a precondition for institutional research support. The National Universities Commission (NUC) should require evidence of active committee operation defined as a minimum of six documented review sessions per year as a condition of institutional accreditation review. This shifts IRB operation from aspiration to a monitored accountability standard. Initial training for IRB members should be delivered through a train-the-trainer model, embedded in the NUC's existing capacity-building programme, to achieve system-wide reach efficiently.

Intervention 2: Consortium-Based Plagiarism Detection A Specific Governance Model.

The data establish that the binding constraint on plagiarism detection is institutional affordability, not awareness: participants at both institutions named Turnitin specifically as the recognised standard and identified cost as the sole barrier. An individual institutional subscription model is not fiscally realistic given the resource constraints documented; a system-level solution is required. We propose the NUC as the lead institution for a consortium licensing arrangement, for three reasons: it holds the mandate for quality assurance across the federal university system; it has established relationships with university administrators across institutions; and it has precedent for system-wide procurement through its digital library programme. A phased implementation model is recommended. In Phase 1, a consortium of federal universities negotiates a bulk institutional licence with a major provider (Turnitin, iThenticate, or an equivalent), using the NUC as the contracting entity. Per-institution cost at federal level is estimated to fall within 30–40% of current individual licence costs, consistent with comparable consortium arrangements negotiated through the African Journals Online (AJOL) and INASP frameworks. In Phase 2, state universities are incorporated through a cost-sharing mechanism: the federal government contributes 60% of per-institution cost through the NUC, with state governments contributing 40% through a matching-funds model. The INASP Research4Life model demonstrates the feasibility of this approach in comparable resource-constrained contexts.

Intervention 3: Embedded Research Integrity Training for Early-Career Academics.

The data establish that junior academics particularly at state institutions receive no structured research integrity training at any stage of their careers. Senior academics with international doctoral training described ethical knowledge acquired through doctoral socialisation; junior locally-trained academics described operating without any equivalent knowledge base. The intervention target is therefore specific: early-career academics at state universities who have completed locally-based doctoral programmes without structured integrity training exposure. Training should be embedded in the academic progression system rather than offered as optional continuing professional development: completion of a research integrity module should be a precondition for confirmation of appointment at Lecturer grade, and for promotion from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer. Module content should cover: standards for human subjects' research and IRB process; plagiarism and self-plagiarism; peer review responsibilities; and journal quality assessment, including identification of

predatory outlets. The module should be delivered through a mentorship model in which senior academics who have completed trainer preparation guide small groups of junior colleagues a design that simultaneously builds Tier 2 informal networks while delivering Tier 1 content.

Intervention 4: Promotion Criteria Reform Quality-Differentiated Publication Standards.

The data establish that predatory journal use is a rational response to promotion criteria that incentivise publication quantity without distinguishing quality. Participants who used predatory outlets demonstrated explicit awareness of quality distinctions and described their choices in structural terms: the promotion system did not reward the additional effort required to place work in legitimate journals, particularly given the absence of institutional support for navigating the quality landscape. The intervention required is a reform of promotion criteria to introduce quality-differentiation. Specifically, promotion decisions should distinguish between publications in indexed journals (Web of Science, Scopus, AJOL-indexed) and non-indexed outlets, with indexed publications carrying higher weight in promotion scoring. The Senate of each institution is the appropriate decision-making body for this change, with the NUC providing a model framework for adoption.

5.5 Limitations

Several limitations bound the scope of findings. The single-region sample limits geographic transferability. The study captures only academic perspectives; the absent voices of journal editors, IRB committee members, and plagiarism detection providers represent important missing vantage points. Self-report data on predatory journal use are subject to social desirability effects. The cross-sectional design precludes causal attribution. The disciplinary variation pattern noted in Section 4.2 is a secondary observation from a sample not powered for within-discipline comparisons; future research should examine this dimension with appropriate designs. Finally, as noted in Section 3.2, the sample necessarily excludes academics who have left the system likely those who most acutely experienced the Tier 3 conditions documented meaning the severity and prevalence of Tier 3 quality assurance reality is probably understated by our data.

6. Conclusion

This study documents a three-tier quality assurance reality in Nigerian public universities that challenges standard quality management frameworks. Formal mechanisms exist primarily on paper; informal peer networks provide genuine but inequitable quality control; individual moral commitment better understood as a survival mechanism generating psychological burden than as a stable resource provides the last-resort foundation for those without access to either. The study's central argument that predatory journal use is a rational structural adaptation rather than an individual integrity failing has significant implications for how quality assurance reform is designed and targeted.

The policy-practice gap documented across all quality assurance dimensions is not primarily a problem of intent or aspiration but of implementation infrastructure trained personnel, operational budgets, enforcement authority, and incentive alignment without which policy commitments become quality assurance theatre. Reform initiatives that produce new policies without addressing implementation infrastructure will deepen the gap rather than close it. The structural analysis also reveals a consequence of continued inaction that extends beyond research output quality: cumulative quality assurance exclusion contributes to academic attrition, undermining the human capital base that any sustainable research ecosystem requires.

The goal is not merely to align Nigerian universities with international standards. It is to build a research ecosystem that can reliably produce the rigorous, ethical, and impactful knowledge that

Nigerian society deserves and that will increasingly serve as the foundation for evidence-based policy in health, governance, education, and sustainable development.

Declarations

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Interview transcripts are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality commitments made at the point of data collection. Requests for further information may be directed to the corresponding author.

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