Quality, Accountability, and Democracy in Higher Education: Standards for Sustainable Future

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Abstract: Higher education is the central pillar for knowledge, equity, and democratic governance, yet it faces significant challenges from global dynamics, rapid technological change, and rising social inequalities. Quality, transparency, and accountability are important for institutional integrity and larger societal goals. While ISO standards, national accreditation bodies, e.g., ARACIS, and organisations such as EAPAA strive to enhance educational quality, the effectiveness of these frameworks in strengthening governance and promoting inclusiveness, as well as in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4-Quality Education, 10-Reduced Inequalities, and 11-Sustainable Cities and Communities), requires further examination. By connecting quality assurance practices to the SDGs, we will present how these frameworks can drive equity, sustainability, and community development.

The research's significance lies in its exploration of the social and democratic implications of technical standards. The comparative analysis focuses on three key frameworks — ISO 21001:2025 presents a process-driven management model concentrated on stakeholder satisfaction, continuous improvement, and accountability, ARACIS provides a nationally anchored system prioritising academic integrity, curriculum relevance, and institutional transparency, and EAPAA focuses on ethical governance and public responsibility within the sphere of public administration education — all within the context of the aforementioned SDGs. Within the study, we will review policy documents and accreditation criteria to identify shared principles and divergences among these systems. A comparative matrix is developed to analyse dimensions such as governance structure, quality management, ethical responsibility, inclusiveness, and alignment with the SDGs. Thematic content analysis is used to uncover patterns and collaborations among the three frameworks, linking quality assurance mechanisms to principles of responsible management and democratic governance.

Conclusions will emphasise the differences and how these frameworks converge to principles of transparency, stakeholder engagement, and continuous development. By integrating ISO's management processes with ARACIS's focus on academic integrity and EAPAA's commitment to ethical governance, institutions can significantly enhance their credibility, accountability, and openness. This holistic integration not only upholds democratic values but also fosters responsible management, advancing global commitments to sustainable, high-quality, and equitable education.