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Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation of Quality Assurance Programs in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation has emerged as a normative and transformative approach that integrates institutional and societal values into the design, implementation, and use of monitoring and evaluation systems. Within higher education, quality assurance programmes are increasingly expected not only to demonstrate compliance and effectiveness but also to reflect values such as equity, accountability, integrity, inclusivity, and continuous improvement. This conceptual paper critically examines the definition, principles, practices, and processes of Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation as applied to higher education quality assurance programmes. Drawing on extant and contemporary literature in evaluation theory, quality assurance, and higher education governance, the paper interrogates conceptual ambiguities, theoretical underpinnings, contextual applications, and methodological limitations in current Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation scholarship. The paper further identifies key research gaps and proposes a refined conceptual framework to guide future empirical and applied research. The study contributes to the advancement of evaluation theory and practice by positioning Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation as a bridge between technocratic quality assurance models and value-driven institutional transformation in higher education.

Keywords: Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation, Quality Assurance Programmes, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Higher education systems globally are undergoing profound transformation driven by massification, internationalization, digitalization, marketization, and intensified demands for accountability. Universities are increasingly expected to demonstrate not only efficiency and effectiveness, but also relevance, equity, integrity, and social responsiveness (Rini, Sudadio & Muhyidin, 2025). These expectations have elevated the prominence of Quality Assurance (QA) mechanisms as central instruments for steering, regulating, and legitimizing higher education systems (Stensaker, 2018).

Traditionally, QA programmes in higher education have been underpinned by technocratic and compliance-oriented monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches. These approaches emphasize

predefined standards, performance indicators, audits, and accreditation outcomes, often privileging what is measurable over what is meaningful (Smith & Lopez-Herrera, 2025). While such systems have strengthened accountability and comparability, they have been widely criticized for promoting managerialism, performativity, and ritual compliance, sometimes at the expense of academic values, institutional diversity, and educational purpose (Baird & Lee, 2025).

In response to these critiques, scholars and practitioners have increasingly called for evaluation approaches that foreground values, ethics, learning, and stakeholder meaning-making. Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (VBME) has emerged within this discourse as a normative and developmental approach that explicitly integrates values into evaluation design, implementation, interpretation, and use (Patton, 2025; Schwandt, 2015). VBME shifts the evaluative focus from narrow performance measurement toward reflective judgement about what constitutes quality, success, and improvement in context.

Within higher education, VBME holds particular promise for reimagining quality assurance as a values-driven and learning-oriented process aligned with institutional missions and societal purposes.

Universities are inherently value-laden institutions, historically charged with advancing knowledge, fostering critical citizenship, promoting social justice, and contributing to sustainable development at local, national, and global levels (UNESCO, 2015). However, despite this alignment, VBME remains conceptually under-theorized and empirically under-applied within higher education quality assurance scholarship, which continues to be dominated by compliance-oriented and performance-based evaluation paradigms (Shore & Wright, 2015).

CONCEPTUALIZING VALUES-BASED MONITORING AND EVALUATION

At the core of VBME lies the concept of values. In evaluation theory, values are understood as beliefs, principles, or standards that guide judgments about what is good, desirable, or worthwhile (Schwandt, 2015). VBME differs from conventional approaches by making these value commitments explicit and central rather than implicit and taken for granted. In higher education, values are embedded in institutional missions, academic cultures, disciplinary norms, and societal expectations. Values such as care, freedom of thought and shape how quality is defined and pursued. However, these values are neither static nor universally shared; they are socially

constructed, contested, and influenced by power relations within and beyond institutions (Cloete, 2014).

Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation can be broadly defined as an approach to M&E that systematically integrates institutional, stakeholder, and societal values across the entire evaluation cycle, including planning, data collection, analysis, interpretation, reporting, and utilization of findings (Patton, 2025; Podems, 2014). Odhiambo-Abuya (2025) further explains that VBME is an M&E approach that extends beyond conventional indicators by examining the underlying values, ethical considerations, and guiding principles within policies, programmes, projects, and similar initiatives. Unlike traditional M&E, which focuses mainly on compliance with standards, performance indicators, and documentation, VB-M&E examines **how quality processes are carried out**, **whose interests they serve**, and **whether QA practices reflect the core values of the institution** (Bhatt, 2020). Odhiambo-Abuya (2025) postulates that VB-M&E offers an essential framework that helps fulfill commitments to real transformation in a world facing complex challenges.

In higher education quality assurance, VBME expands the scope of evaluation beyond compliance with minimum standards to include reflection on whether QA processes advance institutional missions, academic values, and societal development objectives (Eaton, 2025). This broader scope is particularly salient in Global South contexts, where higher education institutions are expected to play transformative roles in nation-building, social mobility, and sustainable development (Cloete, 2014).

A key limitation of existing VBME definitions is their limited analytical precision. Green and Skelton (2015) argued that values are often treated as consensual and benign, obscuring conflicts between competing values such as efficiency versus equity, accountability versus autonomy, or standardization versus diversity. In higher education QA, such tensions are pervasive and politically charged (Skolnik, 2025).

Furthermore, VBME definitions frequently underplay issues of power and authority. QA systems are shaped by power relations and political interests, with dominant actors such as governments, accreditation bodies, and institutional senior leadership often determining which values are prioritized and whose voices are influential in setting QA agendas (Stensaker & Harvey, 2024).

Without explicit strategies for negotiating value pluralism and power asymmetries, VBME risks reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than challenging them (Patton, 2025).

PRINCIPLES OF VALUES-BASED MONITORING AND EVALUATION

VBME is grounded in a set of core principles that position evaluation as not only a technical exercise but also an ethical, reflective, and socially responsive practice (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). These principles emphasize that quality and performance cannot be understood solely through quantitative indicators or procedural compliance; instead, they must be assessed in relation to institutional values, social responsibility, equity, and stakeholder perspectives. VBME principles guide institutions to adopt transparent, inclusive, context-sensitive, holistic, and systems-oriented approaches to evaluation, ensuring that M&E processes contribute to learning, accountability, ethical decision-making, and meaningful transformational change. VBME centers on principles including stakeholder

participation, Equity and social justice, transparency and accountability, Holistic thinking and systems thinking, and evidence-based decision-making.

Stakeholder Participation Principle

In higher education, stakeholder participation is a central principle of VBME, ensuring that QA processes are grounded not only in measurable outcomes but also in the values and priorities of the institution and its wider community (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In higher education, QA processes formally engage a broad range of stakeholders including students, academic and administrative staff, employers and industry partners, alumni, professional bodies and accreditation agencies, as well as external regulators and community stakeholders to ensure the relevance, accountability, and effectiveness of quality systems across institutional and sectoral levels (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2025).

Stakeholder participation shapes multiple stages of the QA process. Stakeholders contribute to the definition of quality and evaluation criteria, ensuring that dimensions such as equity, social responsiveness, relevance, and ethical integrity are recognized alongside efficiency and effectiveness (Masri & van der Walt, 2026). Elhakim (2025) highlights that stakeholders are also involved in formulating evaluation questions and selecting methods, allowing both quantitative indicators and qualitative insights to capture meaningful outcomes. Finally, stakeholders play a

key role in interpreting findings and guiding judgments, reflecting on trade-offs between competing values and providing contextually grounded recommendations for improvement (ENQA, 2025). While participatory approaches enhance legitimacy and utilization, participation is often constrained by institutional hierarchies, technical language, and unequal capacities (Elhakim, 2025). Student and community voices, in particular, may be marginalized or tokenized. The VBME literature offers limited guidance on managing these participation dilemmas within formal QA systems.

Equity and Social Justice

Equity and social justice are core principles of VBME because they ensure that evaluation frameworks address the **fairness of processes and the distribution of benefits,** rather than focusing exclusively on technical compliance and performance metrics (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). Further, argue that VBME foregrounds equity by requiring evaluators to assess how institutional policies, practices, and outcomes **affect diverse groups,** particularly those historically marginalized, and to examine whether these practices reduce rather than reinforce disparities. **Equity-focused QA** involves evaluating whether students from diverse socio-economic, cultural, or geographic backgrounds have equal access to academic programs, resources, and support services (Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), 2025). Further explains that it examines how admissions policies, scholarship programs, teaching methods, and student support initiatives address structural disparities. By integrating stakeholder perspectives, including those of marginalized students, academic staff, and community representatives, QA processes can identify barriers to inclusion and ensure that institutional practices foster **meaningful participation and success for all students (**Elhakim, 2025).

Social justice-oriented QA extends this evaluation to broader societal impacts (Luescher, 2025). It evaluates whether universities advance social development, uphold human rights, and prepare graduates to address inequality and social responsibility by examining how curricula, research outputs, and community engagement programs promote equity and respond to local and global social challenges (Asamoah, Ansong, Mackin, Agyekum & Eshun, 2025). According to Asamoah, et al., (2025), by embedding equity and social justice into QA, VBME transforms traditional quality assurance from a **compliance-oriented exercise into a reflective, ethical, and transformative process**. Institutions are thus able to measure not only their efficiency and

effectiveness but also their contribution to reducing disparities, enhancing inclusion, and advancing social good (CHEA, 2025).

Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability are core principles of VBME because they ensure that evaluation processes, decisions, and outcomes are open, understandable, and responsible to all relevant stakeholders (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In VBME, these principles go beyond procedural compliance to embed **ethical and value-driven practices** into QA, fostering trust, legitimacy, and continuous institutional improvement (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025).

Transparency in VBME means that the processes, methods, and criteria used in evaluation are clearly communicated to stakeholders, including students, faculty, administrators, professional bodies, regulators, and communities (Berkat 2026). It ensures that stakeholders understand how quality is defined, measured, and judged, and how evaluation findings inform institutional decisions. Transparent QA practices prevent misunderstandings, reduce suspicion, and encourage constructive engagement, particularly when trade-offs or contested decisions are involved (European Students' Union, 2025). Accountability emphasizes that institutions, evaluators, and decision-makers are responsible for their actions, decisions, and outcomes (Franco D'Souza, A., et al., 2025). In higher education QA, accountability requires demonstrating that policies, programs, and practices align with institutional missions, societal expectations, and ethical standards, and that stakeholders are actively informed about results and their implications (Berkat, 2026). VBME links accountability with values, ensuring that institutions are not only technically compliant but also answerable for ethical, equitable, and socially responsible outcomes (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025).

Embedding transparency and accountability in quality assurance through VBME involves several key actions which entails: Institutions communicate QA processes and criteria openly, including evaluation frameworks, performance indicators, and standards, to ensure that all stakeholders clearly understand expectations and methods; findings are reported inclusively, with evaluation results, both successes and areas requiring improvement, shared in accessible formats; Mechanisms for feedback and corrective action are established, allowing stakeholders to challenge findings, provide input, and influence improvement strategies; decisions are documented and

justified based on evidence and aligned with institutional and societal values, ensuring that QA processes are not only efficient but also ethical, equitable, and socially responsible (Berkat (2026).

Holistic and Systems Thinking

Holistic thinking and systems thinking are central principles of VBME because they shift the focus of evaluation from isolated metrics to the interconnected and value-laden realities of institutions and interventions (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). Unlike traditional M&E approaches that prioritize linear cause-effect relationships and technical compliance, VBME recognizes that real-world programs, projects, and organizations, including universities, are complex adaptive systems with multiple interacting components, feedback loops, and dynamic relationships (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025).

Holistic thinking ensures that evaluations consider the full spectrum of factors influencing outcomes, including institutional culture, stakeholder values, policy environments, and societal expectations (Daries, Hudson & Reddy, 2025).

According to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), (2021), this allows evaluators to assess not only whether objectives are met but also how and why outcomes emerge, taking into account both intended and unintended consequences. Systems thinking complements this by emphasizing the relationships and interdependencies among different parts of the system (Peretz, Wiek & Martin-Ramos, 2025). In higher education, changes in curricula, faculty development, governance, and student support are interconnected; a policy or intervention in one area can have ripple effects across the institution (Reynolds, Goode, Rivers & Tyler, 2023). Systems thinking helps evaluators identify trade-offs, leverage points, and emergent patterns, and encourages reflection on how institutional decisions align with overarching goals such as equity, social responsibility, and quality (Bravo, Cunha, Cardoso, Sarges & Rodrigues, 2025).

Together, these principles allow VBME to produce evaluations that are relevant, context-sensitive, and actionable, supporting continuous learning, ethical decision-making, and systemic improvements (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). According to Shepherd (2025), by embedding holistic and systems thinking, VBME moves QA beyond narrow compliance toward reflective, adaptive, and socially responsive evaluation practices.

Evidence-Based Decision Making Principle

Evidence-Based Decision Making (EBDM) is a central principle of VBME because it ensures that judgments, policies, and improvements are informed by credible and systematic information rather than opinion, tradition, or political convenience (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In higher education quality assurance programme, EBDM ensures that judgments about teaching, research, governance, and student support are grounded in credible and systematic information rather than assumption or institutional habit. Within VBME, evidence is understood broadly to include not only quantitative indicators such as graduation rates, accreditation results, and research outputs, but also qualitative data, student and staff experiences, peer reviews, community feedback, and contextual knowledge about institutional missions and societal roles (Salemans & Budding, 2022). This expanded conception of evidence aligns QA processes with the core academic values of integrity, relevance, equity, and social responsibility.

However, application of EBDM within VBME is not without limitations. A persistent challenge lies in balancing methodological rigor with relevance, particularly when values-based evidence contradicts dominant performance narratives (Faling, 2024). Traditional notions of evidence often privilege standardized, easily quantifiable data, which can underrepresent contextual and experiential knowledge that is critical for assessing equity, inclusiveness, and social responsiveness in higher education QA (Elhakim, 2025). Furthermore, QA program that emphasize conventional metrics risk overlooking qualitative insights from students and staff that could reveal deeper structural barriers to inclusion and quality improvement (Elhakim, 2025). In addition, resource constraints and limited evaluative capacity in some institutions make it difficult to collect and use rich, contextual evidence effectively, potentially reinforcing existing inequalities in QA practice rather than ameliorating them (OECD, 2025). Lastly, because evidence is never neutral but shaped by power dynamics and stakeholder influence, VBME must attend carefully to whose evidence is prioritized; otherwise, EBDM risks replicating technocratic or managerialist approaches that marginalize diverse perspectives and diminish the broader social purposes of higher education evaluation (Elhakim, 2025).

Adaptability and Continuous Improvement Principle

The principle of adaptability and continuous improvement is widely regarded as central to VBME (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025) because it positions evaluation as a learning-oriented, iterative, and ethically responsive process (Patton, 2018). In the context of higher education quality assurance,

this principle resonates strongly with the idea of enhancement-led QA, which emphasizes ongoing improvement rather than episodic compliance (Stensaker, 2018; Vukasovic, 2020). Conceptually, adaptability enables QA systems to respond to changing academic practices, student demographics, technological innovations, and societal expectations. It also aligns with VBME's normative commitment to reflexivity and ethical responsiveness.

However, in practice, the adaptability and continuous improvement principle faces significant structural and cultural constraints within higher education QA regimes. Many QA systems remain dominated by externally imposed standards, fixed indicators, and cyclical audit processes that privilege stability and comparability over flexibility and learning (Newton, 2012; Shore & Wright, 2015). This creates a tension between VBME's adaptive ideals and the bureaucratic realities of QA governance. As a result, "continuous improvement" is often reduced to incremental technical adjustments rather than deep institutional learning or values-driven transformation. Moreover, the principle of continuous improvement often remains conceptually vague in VBME literature. It is rarely specified "what kind" of improvement is sought, "whose values" define improvement, and "how" improvement is to be evidenced beyond performance indicators. Without explicit mechanisms for negotiating value conflicts and translating ethical commitments into evaluative criteria, adaptability may be co-opted into dominant managerial agendas, reinforcing rather than challenging technocratic QA cultures (Biesta, 2015; Podems, 2014).

VALUES-BASED MONITORING AND EVALUATION PRACTICES

M&E practices are structured processes used to continuously track the progress of a project and periodically assess its effectiveness and outcomes (Inisha & Elly, 2022; Kabonga, 2018). VBME emphasizes practices that embed developing a VBME Plan, developing a Values-Based Theory of Change, formulating VBME questions, creating VBME indicators, Values-Based Data Collection, analysis, and utilization of findings into QA processes (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). These practices seek to ensure that M&E not only measure effectiveness and efficiency but also interrogate fairness, inclusiveness, relevance, and moral accountability in institutional operations (Berkat, 2026). In doing so, VBME supports reflective learning, strengthens institutional legitimacy, and

fosters transformative quality assurance that contributes meaningfully to student success, community engagement, and broader societal good (Kelly, 2024).

Developing a Values-Based M&E Plan Practices

Developing a Values-Based M&E plan is foundational to the VBME approach, as it explicitly articulates how institutional, stakeholder, and societal values will guide evaluation purposes, scope, questions, methods, and utilization (Patton, 2018; Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022). In the context of higher education quality assurance, such plans have the potential to transform QA from a compliance-driven audit to a learning-oriented and ethically grounded process, enabling institutions to align evaluation with their mission, academic values, and societal contributions (Stensaker, 2018; Vukasovic, 2020).

Developing a Values-Based Theory of Change

A values-based Theory of Change (ToC) articulates the causal logic linking QA activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact, explicitly incorporating institutional and societal values (Rogers, 2008; Patton, 2018). In higher education, a values-based ToC could guide strategic QA planning, ensuring that accreditation processes, learning assessments, and governance reforms contribute to broader goals such as equity, academic integrity, and social responsiveness.

However, ToC development in higher education QA is constrained by **institutional complexity and competing mandates**. Universities operate as loosely coupled systems with diverse stakeholders, disciplines, and mission statements, making it difficult to establish a coherent causal model that accurately reflects shared values (Cloete, 2014; Stensaker, 2018). Furthermore, QA bodies often require standardization and comparability across programs, which can conflict with the contextual and value-sensitive nature of a VBME-informed ToC.

Finally, many QA practitioners lack expertise in articulating **value-sensitive causal pathways,** leading to ToCs that are either overly aspirational or disconnected from actionable QA activities. Without explicit integration of values into the assumptions, indicators, and feedback loops, ToC risks becoming a symbolic rather than a practical tool for adaptive, learning-oriented QA (Podems, 2014; Vukasovic, 2020).

Formulating Values-Based M&E Questions

Values-based M&E questions are designed to probe not only efficiency and effectiveness but also the alignment of QA processes with institutional values, social justice goals, and ethical standards

(Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022; Patton, 2018). According to Odhiambo-Abuya (2025), formulating values-based M&E questions is essential for ensuring that a program's outcomes are not only effective but also aligned with its core principles and ethical considerations, such as equity, integrity, and social

justice. Further highlights Values-based M&E questions are essential as they move evaluation beyond simple measurement, enabling assessment of relevance, ethical integrity, social outcomes, and long-term sustainability, while ensuring alignment with the actual needs and priorities of stakeholders.

Critically, in higher education QA, developing such questions faces two main challenges.

First, there is value pluralism: different stakeholders (administrators, faculty, students, communities) prioritize distinct outcomes, making it difficult to formulate questions that capture multiple perspectives without oversimplification (Biesta, 2015; Tikly, 2011). Second, QA processes often favor quantitative, audit-friendly questions that support compliance reporting, potentially marginalizing qualitative, value-oriented inquiries that reflect ethical and developmental dimensions (Newton, 2012; Shore & Wright, 2015). Therefore, without deliberate efforts to balance technical, ethical, and social considerations, values-based questions may either be ignored or diluted, limiting the VBME principle of reflective, purpose-driven evaluation.

Creating Values-Based M&E Indicators

Values-based M&E indicators are performance measures that specifically track progress toward outcomes defined by the deeply rooted values and aspirations of stakeholders (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). The creation of values-based M&E indicators is a central practice in VBME, as it operationalizes institutional, societal, and stakeholder values into measurable or observable constructs that guide evaluation (Patton, 2018; Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In higher education QA, indicators traditionally focus on metrics such as graduation rates, accreditation compliance, research outputs, and employment outcomes. While these indicators are useful for accountability, they often fail to capture ethical dimensions, social impact, inclusivity, or alignment with institutional missions.

By contrast, values-based indicators explicitly reflect the principles and goals of higher education (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). For example, indicators might track the extent to which curricula foster social responsibility, the inclusivity of student participation, transparency in governance, or

responsiveness to community needs (Cloete, 2014; **Chitera, 2025**). Such indicators allow QA systems to assess not only efficiency and compliance but also the ethical, developmental, and transformative dimensions of higher education.

However, operationalizing values into indicators presents several challenges. First, values such as equity, relevance, and integrity are inherently qualitative and context-specific, making it difficult to develop standardized measures that are both valid and reliable (Stensaker, 2018; Newton, 2012). Second, the higher education QA environment often emphasizes comparability and benchmarking across programs, which can lead evaluators to prioritize easily measurable outcomes over meaningful, value-aligned indicators (Shore & Wright, 2015). Third, institutional culture and capacity may limit the ability to collect and analyze data for complex, ethically oriented indicators. Many QA offices lack the methodological skills, time, or resources to implement participatory or qualitative data collection approaches that capture stakeholder experiences and ethical dimensions (Cloete, 2014; Podems, 2014).

Despite these challenges, the development of values-based indicators is critical to ensuring that QA activities are not merely performative exercises in compliance but instead promote reflective learning, institutional improvement, and societal accountability. Indicators that explicitly embed values enable institutions to track progress toward mission-aligned goals, facilitate stakeholder engagement, and foster adaptive decision-making. They also provide a mechanism for making ethical considerations tangible within QA systems, ensuring that evaluative judgments are both legitimate and meaningful (Patton, 2018; Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022).

Values-Based Data Collection

Values-based data collection is a fundamental practice of VBME (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025), as it determines how evidence is gathered to reflect not only performance but also the ethical, social, and developmental dimensions of higher education programs (Patton, 2018; Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022). Values-based data collection as a practice entails planning data gathering with a clear intent, considering the significance of the information for stakeholders, and employing methods that are ethical and equitable, especially when handling sensitive data or informing critical decisions. (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025).

In higher education QA, traditional data collection methods often focus heavily on quantitative indicators such as graduation rates, faculty-student ratios, and research outputs. While these provide measurable benchmarks for accountability, they frequently overlook qualitative and

experiential dimensions, such as student learning experiences, faculty engagement, inclusivity, ethical decision-making, and community impact (Newton, 2012; Cloete, 2014). Values-based data collection seeks to integrate these dimensions through a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, curriculum audits, peer reviews, and stakeholder consultations. This multi-method approach allows QA systems to capture both measurable outcomes and nuanced value-related insights.

Implementing values-based data collection in higher education QA is challenged by institutional, cultural, and methodological constraints. QA offices often face capacity limitations, including insufficient staff, expertise, and resources, which can lead to reliance on easily accessible but less meaningful quantitative data (Stensaker, 2018). Additionally, hierarchical university structures, fear of negative evaluation, and limited stakeholder engagement may hinder open, reflective, and participatory data collection, reducing the authenticity of value-focused assessments (Shore & Wright, 2015; Podems, 2014). Methodologically, translating abstract values such as equity, academic integrity, or social responsibility into reliable, valid, and context-sensitive instruments is complex, and without careful operationalization, data collection risks misrepresenting stakeholder experiences or failing to generate meaningful evaluative insights (Patton, 2018; Bamberger, Vaessen & Raimondo, 2016).

Despite these challenges, values-based data collection is critical for ensuring that higher education QA systems are not merely compliance-driven but ethically grounded, socially responsive, and learning-oriented. By systematically capturing evidence that reflects institutional values, stakeholder priorities, and societal impact, universities can use QA as a tool for reflective learning, adaptive management, and continuous improvement (Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022; Vukasovic, 2020).

Values-Based Data Analysis

Values-based data analysis is a pivotal practice in VBME (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025), as it moves beyond mere aggregation of metrics to the interpretation of evidence through the lens of institutional, stakeholder, and societal values (Patton, 2018; Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022). According to (Odhiambo-Abuya (2025), Values-based M&E data analysis is an approach that explicitly incorporates the core principles, ethical standards, and desired impact of a program or organization into the entire data analysis and interpretation process.

In higher education QA, data analysis is not only about determining compliance with accreditation standards or performance benchmarks but also about assessing whether programs, policies, and processes reflect ethical commitments, promote equity, foster social responsibility, and align with institutional missions (Stensaker, 2018; Vukasovic, 2020). Traditional QA approaches often emphasize statistical analysis of quantitative metrics, such as graduation rates, student-faculty ratios, and research outputs. While these metrics are essential for accountability and benchmarking, they rarely capture complex, value-laden dimensions like inclusivity, ethical teaching practices, or the societal relevance of academic programs (Newton, 2012; Tikly, 2011). Values-based data analysis explicitly integrates these qualitative and normative aspects, using both quantitative and qualitative data to produce a holistic understanding of program performance and institutional quality (Ahmed, Pereira & Jane, 2024).

Implementing values-based data analysis in higher education QA is constrained by conceptual, organizational, and capacity-related challenges. Translating abstract values such as integrity, social justice, and responsiveness into clear analytic frameworks is complex, and without careful operationalization, interpretations risk being subjective or inconsistent (Schwandt, 2015; Patton, 2018). Organizational hierarchies and power asymmetries further shape analysis, often privileging compliance or reputational concerns over ethical or developmental considerations, thereby marginalizing the perspectives of faculty, students, and community stakeholders (Biesta, 2015; Shore & Wright, 2015). Additionally, methodological capacity limitations, particularly in resource-constrained higher education contexts, can lead QA offices to rely on superficial or easily quantifiable metrics, undermining the reflective, participatory, and ethically grounded intent of values-based analysis (Cloete, 2014; Tikly, 2011).

Despite these challenges, values-based data analysis offers substantial benefits. It enables QA systems to generate evidence that is not only technically sound but also ethically and socially meaningful, supporting reflective learning, institutional improvement, and strategic decision-making (Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022; Patton, 2018). By foregrounding values in the interpretation of data, universities can ensure that QA contributes to holistic quality, aligns with institutional missions, and addresses the expectations of diverse stakeholders.

Values-Based Utilization of M&E Findings

Values-Based Utilization of M&E findings is a core practice of VBME, emphasizing the ethical, purposeful, and strategic use of evaluation evidence to inform decision-making, learning, and institutional improvement (Patton, 2018; Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022). Values-based utilization of M&E findings ensures that while the evidence provides objective insights, the organization's values guide the ethical and purposeful application of those insights (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In the context of higher education quality assurance (QA), this practice ensures that findings are not merely collected for compliance or reporting purposes but are actively employed to enhance teaching quality, governance, program relevance, and alignment with institutional missions and societal responsibilities.

Traditional QA utilization often prioritizes compliance with accreditation standards or benchmarked metrics, resulting in a narrow focus on technical or administrative outcomes (Stensaker, 2018; Newton, 2012). Values-based utilization, in contrast, directs attention to how findings reflect ethical commitments, social justice considerations, and stakeholder priorities. For example, data on inclusivity in student participation, alignment of curricula with societal needs, or transparency in decision-making can be used to guide strategic reforms, policy adjustments, and resource allocation, thereby fostering adaptive and learning-oriented QA systems (Cloete, 2014; Vukasovic, 2020).

Despite its critical role, values-based utilization of M&E findings in higher education faces multiple challenges. Institutional culture and power dynamics, including hierarchical decision-making, political pressures, and fear of reputational risk, can lead to selective use of findings, sidelining insights related to ethics or stakeholder well-being (Biesta, 2015; Shore & Wright, 2015). Capacity limitations, such as insufficient expertise in evidence-based decision-making, participatory interpretation, and adaptive management, further constrain effective utilization, particularly in resource-limited QA units or institutions in the Global South (Tikly, 2011; Cloete, 2014). Moreover, episodic application of findings, rather than their integration into sustained learning and institutional practice, undermines the transformative potential of VBME, limiting its impact to symbolic or compliance-driven exercises (Patton, 2018; Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022).

Nonetheless, effective values-based utilization is transformative. By ensuring that M&E findings inform ethical, socially responsive, and mission-aligned decision-making, universities can leverage QA as a tool for reflective learning, continuous improvement, and societal impact. It aligns QA processes with broader goals of transparency, accountability, and adaptive management, thereby bridging the gap between evaluation and meaningful institutional change (Stensaker, 2018; Vukasovic, 2020)

VALUES-BASED MONITORING AND EVALUATION PROCESSES

A VBME process systematically tracks progress and assesses success by explicitly anchoring evaluation activities in the intended values and objectives of an initiative, ensuring ethical responsiveness and stakeholder relevance throughout (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). It entails clearly articulating objectives and associated indicators, collecting baseline data to establish reference points, and conducting regular monitoring to observe trends and performance against those value-aligned measures (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). Periodic evaluations are then undertaken to examine effectiveness, efficiency, and broader impact, and the resulting insights are reported and used to guide decision-making, enhance performance, and demonstrate accountability to stakeholders (Naidoo, Aronsson & Hassnain, 2023).

Undertake Values Based M&E Stakeholder Analysis

Undertaking a values-based M&E (VBME) stakeholder analysis is a foundational step in the VBME process, as it identifies and prioritizes the individuals, groups, and institutions whose interests, values, and perspectives should shape the design, implementation, and utilization of monitoring and evaluation activities (Patton, 2018; Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022). The process ensures that all stakeholders-those impacted by or capable of influencing a project-are systematically identified, their perspectives understood, and their participation appropriately integrated throughout the project's lifecycle (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). A values-based M&E stakeholder analysis intentionally incorporates stakeholders' core values, priorities, and ethical considerations into the monitoring and evaluation process to enhance relevance and legitimacy (Naidoo, Aronsson & Hassnain, 2023).

In the context of higher education quality assurance (QA), this step ensures that evaluation processes are participatory, inclusive, and aligned with the ethical, educational, and social missions

of the institution (Elhakim, 2025). Stakeholders typically include students, faculty, administrative staff, alumni, regulatory agencies, employers, and community partners, all of whom influence and are affected by the quality and outcomes of higher education programs (Biesta, 2015; Cloete, 2014).

A values-based stakeholder analysis goes beyond mapping influence or interest; it explicitly considers the values, expectations, and ethical concerns of each group. For instance, students may prioritize equity, inclusivity, and learning experiences, while faculty may focus on academic freedom and research integrity. Employers and community partners may emphasize relevance, employability, and societal impact (Vukasovic, 2020). By incorporating these value perspectives into QA processes, universities can design evaluation frameworks that are not only technically robust but also socially legitimate and ethically grounded.

Values-based stakeholder analysis is crucial for embedding participatory, transparent, and ethically aligned QA practices. By systematically identifying stakeholder values and expectations at the outset of M&E, institutions can enhance the relevance and credibility of QA findings, foster trust among internal and external stakeholders, and ensure that subsequent monitoring, evaluation, and utilization activities are grounded in the ethical and mission-driven priorities of the institution (Kirkhart & Brisolara, 2022; Patton, 2018).

Establish Values Based Baselines

In M&E, values-based baselines refer to starting benchmarks that are defined and assessed in relation to the core values, principles, and worldviews of project stakeholders, rather than relying solely on externally imposed or purely technical indicators. reframes quality assurance in higher education from a purely technical exercise into a normative and ethical process (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In this approach, baselines are not neutral starting points but ethical reference standards that define what level of quality is socially acceptable and mission-aligned. They ensure that judgments about teaching, research, governance, and community engagement are grounded in both evidence and moral purpose (Serrano, 2025).

The process involves clarifying institutional and societal values, engaging stakeholders in defining what “quality” means, translating values into concrete QA criteria, and assessing current performance against these value-anchored standards (Elhakim, 2025). Through reflection and dialogue, baselines are validated to ensure they are fair, contextual, and inclusive (Berkat, 2026),

and as a result, values-based baselines become a compass for continuous improvement and accountability, enabling institutions to monitor not only whether performance improves, but whether change advances justice, trust, and the public good role of the university.

Develop Values Based M&E Framework

In VBME, developing a Values-Based M&E Framework is the stage where ethical commitments are systematically translated into a coherent structure for planning, monitoring, and evaluating quality (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In the context of higher education QA, Values-Based M&E framework serves as the blueprint that guides how institutions define, measure, interpret, and use evidence about teaching, research, governance, and community engagement (Serrano, 2025). Unlike traditional QA frameworks that prioritize technical indicators and compliance, a values-based framework ensures that monitoring, evaluation, and decision-making are guided not only by performance data but also by ethical principles and societal expectations. Core values such as equity, academic integrity, participation, inclusiveness, transparency, and social relevance form the foundation of the framework, ensuring that QA processes reflect both excellence and moral purpose (Banten, 2024).

The framework translates these values into concrete evaluation domains, criteria, and indicators across key QA areas, including teaching, research, governance, student support, and community engagement (Rini & Sudadio, 2025). Mixed methods-combining quantitative measures like graduation rates or research outputs with qualitative evidence such as stakeholder narratives, peer reviews, and community feedback-allow institutions to capture a holistic picture of quality. Participatory design is central to the framework, engaging students, faculty, administrators, external regulators, employers, and community representatives in defining what quality means, selecting indicators, and validating standards (Elhakim, 2025). This enhances the framework's legitimacy, contextual relevance, and inclusiveness.

Finally, a values-based M&E framework embeds reflection, learning, and adaptability, enabling higher education institutions to use evidence for continuous improvement and strategic decision-making (Rini & Sudadio, 2025). Feedback loops allow the institution to assess whether practices are not only effective but also fair, equitable, and socially responsible (Mtitu, 2025). By aligning performance monitoring with explicit ethical standards and societal expectations, the framework

transforms QA from a purely compliance-oriented process into a strategic, participatory, and morally grounded practice that strengthens accountability, trust, and the university's public good mission (Lamaro, Ndyomugenyi & Openjuru, 2025).

Develop Values Based M&E Criteria

Developing values based M&E criteria is a critical process in VBME (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). Developing values-based M&E criteria in higher education QA involves translating institutional and societal values into specific, measurable standards for monitoring and evaluation (Serrano, 2025). Unlike conventional QA frameworks that focus solely on technical outputs, these criteria integrate ethical commitments such as equity, fairness, participation, transparency, and social relevance, ensuring that assessments reflect both performance and moral purpose (Rini & Sudadio, 2025).

The process begins by identifying core values and mapping them to evaluation domains and sub-domains (Kihn & Igwe, 2026). Values like equity, integrity, and participation are operationalized into concrete criteria, including access to learning resources, research ethics compliance, or stakeholder involvement in governance (Rini & Sudadio, 2025). This ensures that all aspects of teaching, research, governance, student support, and community engagement are assessed holistically.

Criteria are then operationalized into measurable indicators, combining quantitative data such as, graduation rates, research outputs, with qualitative evidence including stakeholder feedback, peer reviews, student narratives (Serrano, 2025). Developed through participatory engagement with faculty, students, administrators, regulators, and community representatives, these criteria provide a reference for continuous improvement, reflection, and strategic decision-making, transforming QA into an ethically grounded, inclusive, and context-sensitive process (Kihn & Igwe, 2026).

Conduct Values Based Evaluations

Values-Based Evaluations is a M&E process that centers on fundamental human, community, and institutional values throughout the assessment (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). Conducting values-based evaluations in higher education QA involves applying institutional values and pre-defined criteria to assess teaching, research, governance, student support, and community engagement (Devos & Van Petegem, 2025). Unlike conventional evaluations focused solely on compliance or outputs, values-based evaluations integrate ethical principles such as equity, integrity,

participation, transparency, and social relevance, ensuring that assessments capture both performance and moral purpose (Rini & Sudadio, 2025; Kihn & Igwe, 2026).

The process begins with planning and engaging stakeholders to select appropriate indicators and methods (Elhakim, 2025). Evaluators use a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative metrics such as graduation rates, research outputs with qualitative evidence such as student and staff narratives, peer reviews, and community feedback (Mtitu, 2025). This approach ensures that institutional performance is evaluated holistically, accounting for both measurable outcomes and the alignment of practices with core values (Serrano, 2025).

Interpretation of findings involves deliberation with stakeholders to reflect on strengths, gaps, and implications for policy and practice (Elhakim, 2025). Feedback loops enable continuous improvement, ethical decision-making, and participatory learning. By embedding values into evaluation processes, higher education QA becomes a context-sensitive, ethically grounded, and socially responsive system, enhancing accountability, trust, and alignment with the institution's public mission (Kihn & Igwe, 2026; Mtitu, 2025).

Undertake Values Based Reporting of M&E Findings

In VBME, values-based reporting is the process of documenting, presenting, and communicating evaluation results in a manner that highlights both performance outcomes and alignment with institutional values (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). Unlike traditional QA reporting, which often emphasizes compliance metrics, rankings, or technical indicators, values-based reporting embeds ethical commitments such as equity, integrity, inclusiveness, transparency, and social responsibility. This ensures that reports do not merely present what was achieved, but also how the institution's practices align with its mission, societal expectations, and stakeholder values (**Chitera,** 2025).

The process begins with organizing and analyzing evaluation findings in relation to the values and criteria established during the VBME process. Quantitative metrics, such as graduation rates, research outputs, and governance indicators, are combined with qualitative evidence from stakeholder feedback, peer reviews, and community narratives (Rini & Sudadio, 2025). This mixed-methods reporting allows institutions to present a holistic view of quality that integrates measurable outcomes with the qualitative dimensions of moral and societal impact.

A key feature of values-based reporting is clarity, accessibility, and participatory dissemination. Reports are tailored for multiple audiences, including internal stakeholders (faculty, administration, students) and external actors (regulators, employers, community representatives), ensuring that the findings are understandable, actionable, and reflective of shared values (National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance, 2025). Additionally, reporting often includes interpretive commentary and recommendations that guide decision-making, continuous improvement, and accountability. By embedding values in M&E reporting, higher education institutions strengthen transparency, trust, and stakeholder engagement, and reinforce that quality assurance is not only about compliance but also about ethically informed, socially responsible performance (European Students' Union, 2025).

Promoting Values Based Utilization of M&E Results

In the VBME approach, values-based utilization of M&E results refers to the systematic use of evaluation evidence to inform institutional decision-making, guide strategic action, and enhance program effectiveness in ways that remain consistently aligned with core organizational and stakeholder values (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). A values-based approach positions M&E not as a narrow compliance activity, but as a purposeful mechanism for steering organizations toward outcomes that are ethical, meaningful, and sustainable (Kelly, 2025). In the context of higher education QA program, this shifts M&E from a compliance-driven activity to a learning-oriented and ethically grounded process. Utilization is guided not only by what is efficient or measurable, but by what is equitable, inclusive, transparent, and socially responsible (Kotschy, 2025). Promoting values-based utilization ensures that higher education QA is not just about meeting standards, but about advancing meaningful, ethical, and sustainable impact (Asamoah, Ansong, Mackin & Agyekum, 2025), it reinforces the idea that quality is not only technical performance, but also how well institutions fulfill their educational, social, and moral responsibilities.

The process begins by embedding values into decision-making structures. QA committees, academic boards, and management teams are encouraged to interpret M&E findings through a values lens-asking not only "What works?" but also "For whom does it work?" and "Does it advance our mission and public good role?" (Elhakim, 2025). Evidence from evaluations is used to revise curricula, improve teaching practices, strengthen research ethics, enhance student

support, and refine governance systems in ways that reflect core values such as academic integrity, participation, equity, and social relevance (Serrano, 2025).

A key strategy in promoting utilization is creating feedback loops and learning cultures **(**Strathmore University Business School, 2025). Findings are shared widely with faculty, students, administrators, and external stakeholders, and used as the basis for reflection, dialogue, and action planning (Elhakim, 2025). Instead of treating reports as end products, institutions treat them as tools for continuous improvement and ethical accountability. This ensures that M&E results directly inform strategic planning, resource allocation, policy reforms, and institutional self-renewal (Rini & Sudadio, 2025).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation offers a transformative approach to higher education quality assurance by embedding ethical, social, and institutional values into every stage of the evaluation cycle. Unlike conventional QA frameworks that primarily focus on technical compliance or performance metrics, VBME emphasizes the integration of core values such as equity, participation, academic integrity, transparency, and social relevance into the design, implementation, interpretation, and reporting of evaluation processes. This approach ensures that QA is not merely about measuring outputs or accreditation outcomes but about aligning institutional practices with normative commitments and societal expectations, thereby promoting a more holistic, ethical, and contextually grounded understanding of quality in higher education.

Despite its conceptual promise, VBME in higher education QA faces significant theoretical, methodological, and contextual gaps. Conceptually, the field lacks an integrated theoretical framework that reconciles the diverse perspectives of pragmatism, constructivism, critical theory, and systems thinking, which underpin its practice. Methodologically, there is limited guidance on operationalizing abstract values into measurable, reliable indicators, integrating mixed quantitative and qualitative evidence, and establishing structured analytic and decision-making protocols. Contextually, most VBME scholarship originates from development, social policy, and international aid sectors, with limited application to higher education, particularly in low- and

middle-income countries, where governance structures, funding models, and cultural norms vary widely and affect how values are interpreted and applied.

Addressing these gaps presents both challenges and opportunities for higher education institutions seeking to strengthen QA systems. Future research and practice should focus on developing integrated theoretical frameworks, context-sensitive methodological protocols, and empirically grounded guidance for translating values into indicators, evaluation tools, and reporting mechanisms. By doing so, VBME can move from a promising conceptual approach to a practically operational, ethically robust, and socially responsive framework that not only assesses quality but also promotes continuous improvement, accountability, and the broader public good mission of higher education institutions. Strengthened VBME frameworks have the potential to transform QA from a procedural compliance exercise into a strategic, participatory, and value-driven practice that meaningfully enhances institutional performance and societal impact.

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