THE EXPERIENCES OF INDEPENDENT RURAL SCHOOL MANAGEMENT OF THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS OF UMALUSI IN LIMPOPO PROVINCE

By

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my parents, Mrs Muofhe Phuluwa-Magadze and the late Mr Wilson Madauvhi Magadze, in recognition of their invaluable contribution in laying the foundation for my success.

I further acknowledge, with sincere gratitude, the unwavering support, care, and encouragement of my wife, Mrs Grace Mphedziseni Magadze, throughout the completion of this study.

This work is also dedicated to my son, Tshanduko Magadze, with the hope that it will serve as an enduring example of commitment to excellence.

DECLARATION OF THE RESEARCHER

I, Tshililo Thomas Magadze, student number 53440048, solemnly declare that the thesis, *The experiences of independent rural school management of the accreditation process of Umalusi in Limpopo Province, South Africa,* is submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy at the University of South Africa, is my own original work, and has not previously been submitted to any institution of higher learning. All the sources cited or quoted in this research study are indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references with a comprehensive list of references.



08 June 2026

Signature

Date

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how independent rural school management in Limpopo Province experiences and makes sense of Umalusi's accreditation process, a statutory quality assurance requirement for independent providers offering qualifications on the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF) in terms of the GENFETQA Act (No. 58 of 2001, as amended). While accreditation is framed as both a regulatory safeguard and a developmental mechanism, the study argues that the standardised application of a uniform evaluation instrument across highly unequal schooling contexts raises questions of contextual responsiveness and equity. The research is theoretically grounded in Normalisation Process Theory (NPT) to analyse how accreditation is understood (coherence), enacted through leadership and staff involvement (engagement), operationalised through the allocation of work and resources (collective action) and appraised for its effects (reflexive monitoring). Adopting an interpretivist paradigm and an instrumental case study design, the study purposively selected six independent rural schools in Limpopo Province and collected data through semi-structured interviews with principals and School Management Team members, complemented by document analysis of accreditation-related records and policy instruments. The findings indicate that rural independent schools value accreditation for institutional legitimacy, certification credibility and signalling quality, yet experience it as administratively intensive and structurally demanding. Schools reported that accreditation can strengthen governance routines, documentation practices and internal monitoring, but also generate compliance pressure that competes with teaching and learning priorities. Key challenges include financial precarity, resource and infrastructure constraints, geographical isolation and persistent difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitably qualified and SACE-registered teachers, factors that undermine schools' capacity to meet staffing and provisioning standards regardless of commitment and effort. The study concludes that accreditation's developmental potential in rural settings is contingent on more differentiated, context-aware implementation and support, It recommends that quality assurance practice better balance standardisation with equity by recognising uneven capacity, improving guidance and developmental assistance and reducing burdens that disproportionately affect rural independent schools.

Keywords: Umalusi; accreditation; independent schools; rural education; quality assurance; Limpopo; Normalisation Process Theory (NPT); educational leadership and management, qualification, equity

MANWELEDZO

Ngudo iyi i ṱolisisa nḓila ine vhulanguli ha zwikolo zwo ḓiimisaho nga zwoṱhe zwa mahayani kha Vundu ḽa Limpopo ha tshenzhela na u pfesesa ngayo maitele a Umalusi a u ṱanganedzwa, ane a vha ṱhoḓea ya mulayo ya ndondolo ya khwaḽithi kha vhaṋetshedzi vho ḓiimisaho nga vhoṱhe vhane vha ṋetshedza ndalukanyo kha Ṱhoḓea ya Ndalukanyo ya Pfunzo na Vhugudisi Zwayo na Zwa Nṱha (GFETQSF), u ya nga Mulayo wa GENFETQA (No. 58 wa 2001, sa zwe wa khwiniswa). Naho u ṱanganedzwa hu tshi vhonwa sa tshishumiswa tsha ndaulo tsha tsireledzo na maitele a mveledziso, ngudo iyi i amba uri u shumiswa ha tshishumiswa tshithihi tsha u linga kha nyimele dza zwikolo dzi sa lingani nga maanḓa zwi takusa mbudziso nga ha u dzhiela nzhele nyimele na ndinganyelo. Nga muhumbulo, ṱhoḓisiso iyi yo ḓitika nga Normalisation Process Theory (NPT) u sengulusa nḓila ine u ṱanganedzwa ha pfeseswa ngayo (coherence), ha shumiswa ngayo nga vhurangaphanḓa na u dzhenelela ha vhashumi (engagement), ha tshimbidzwa ngayo nga u kovhiwa ha mushumo na zwiko (collective action), na u sedzuluswa ngayo malugana na mvelelo dzaho (reflexive monitoring). Ngudo yo shumisa pharadigimu ya ṱhalutshedzo na pulane ya ngudo ya tsumbo ya instrumental case study, ya khetha nga ndivho zwikolo zwa rathi zwo ḓiimisaho nga zwoṱhe zwa mahayani Vunduni ḽa Limpopo, nahone ya kuvhanganya data nga nyambedzano dza mbudziso dzo dzudzanywaho nga nḓila i si ya tshoṱhe na vhaḓivhaho ṱhoho dza zwikolo na miraḓo ya Tshigwada tsha Vhulanguli ha Tshikolo. Hezwi zwo tikedzwa nga u senguluswa ha maṅwalo a re na vhushaka na u ṱanganedzwa na zwishumiswa zwa mbekanyamaitele. Mawanwa a sumbedza uri zwikolo zwa mahayani zwo ḓiimisaho nga zwoṱhe zwi dzhiela nṱha u ṱanganedzwa nga ṅwambo wa u ṋea tshiimiswa vhukuma ha mulayo, u khwaṱhisedza u fulufhedzea ha zwitifikheithi, na u sumbedza khwaḽithi; fhedzi zwi dovha zwa tshenzhela maitele aya sa ane a ṱoḓa mushumo munzhi wa ndaulo na zwivhumbeo zwo khwaṱhaho. Zwikolo zwo vhiga uri u ṱanganedzwa hu nga khwaṱhisa maitele a vhuvhusi, maitele a u rekhoda maṅwalo, na u lavhelesa ha ngomu; fhedzi hu nga dovha ha vhangela mutsiko wa u tevhedza milayo une wa ṱaṱisana na zwipikwa zwa u funza na u guda. Thaidzo khulwane dzi katela u sa khwaṱha ha masheleni, mikano ya zwiko na themamveledziso, u vha kule ha fhethu, na thaidzo dzine dza bvela phanḓa dza u wana na u vhulunga vhadededzi vha re na ndalukanyo dzo teaho na vho ṅwaliswaho na SACE. Zwithu izwi zwi fhungudza vhukoni ha zwikolo ha u swikelela zwilinganyo

zwa vhashumi na u n̓etshedzwa ha zwishumiswa, hu sa londwi u d̓ikumedzela na nungo dzazwo. Ngudo iyi i phetha nga uri vhukoni ha u ṭ̓anganedzwa ha u bveledzisa zwikolo zwa mahayani vhu d̓itika nga u shumiswa ho fhambanaho, hu dzhielaho nzhele nyimele, na thikhedzo yo teaho. I themendela uri maitele a ndondolo ya khwal̓ithi a linganyise khwine u vha na zwilinganyo zwi fanaho na ndinganyelo, nga u ṭ̓hogomela vhukoni vhu sa lingani, u khwinisa nyeletshedzo na thuso ya mveledziso, na u fhungudza mihwalo ine ya kwama nga maand̓a zwikolo zwa mahayani zwo d̓iimisaho nga zwoṭ̓he.

Maipfi a ndeme: Umalusi; u ṭ̓anganedzwa; zwikolo zwo d̓iimisaho nga zwoṭ̓he; pfunzo ya mahayani; ndondolo ya khwal̓ithi; Limpopo; Normalisation Process Theory (NPT); vhurangaphand̓a na vhulanguli ha pfunzo; ndalukanyo; ndinganyelo

KHUTŠOFATŠO

Thesis ye e nyakišiša ka fao bolaodi bja dikolo tše di ikemetšego tša dinagamagaeng ka Profenseng ya Limpopo bo itemogelago le go kwešiša tshepedišo ya Umalusi ya tumelelo ya semmušo, yeo e lego ny requirement ya semolao ya netefatšo ya boleng go baabi ba ikemetšego bao ba abago mangwalo a thuto ao a lego ka fase ga Tlhako-potlana ya Mangwalo a Thuto ya Kakaretšo le Thuto le Tlhahlo ya Tšwelopele (GFETQSF), go ya ka Molao wa GENFETQA (Nomoro ya 58 ya 2001, bjalo ka ge o fetotšwe). Le ge tumelelo ya semmušo e hlaloša bjalo ka mokgwa wa tšhireletšo ya taolo gammogo le sedirišwa sa tlhabollo, nyakišišo e bolela gore tirišo ye e lekantšwego ya sedirišwa se tee sa tekolo maemong a dikolo ao a sa lekalekanego kudu e rotoša dipotšišo mabapi le go arabela maemo a tikologo le tekatekano. Nyakišišo e theilwe ka kgopolo godimo ga Teori ya Tshepedišo ya go Tlwaeletša (Normalisation Process Theory—NPT) go sekaseka ka fao tumelelo ya semmušo e kwešišwago ka gona (coherence), e phethagatšwago ka boetapele le go tšea karolo ga bašomi (engagement), e tsenywago tirišong ka kabo ya mošomo le methopo (collective action), le go lekanyetšwa mabapi le ditlamorago tša yona (reflexive monitoring). Ka go amogela paradigma ya botlhalosi le moralo wa nyakišišo ya taba e tee wa sedirišwa, nyakišišo e kgethile ka boomo dikolo tše tshela tše di ikemetšego tša dinagamagaeng ka Profenseng ya Limpopo gomme ya kgoboketša tshedimošo ka dipoledišano tše di rulagantšwego ka seripa le dihlogo tša dikolo le maloko a Dihlopha tša Bolaodi bja Sekolo, e tlaleleditšwe ka tshekatsheko ya ditokomane tša direkhoto tše di amanago le tumelelo ya semmušo le didirišwa tša pholisi. Dikutollo di bontšha gore dikolo tše di ikemetšego tša dinagamagaeng di tšeela tumelelo ya semmušo godimo ka gobane e fa setheo semolao, e tiišetša botshepegi bja ditifikeiti le go bontšha boleng; le ge go le bjalo, di e itemogela e le yeo e nyakago kudu mošomo wa taolo le dinyakwa tše boima tša sebopego. Dikolo di begile gore tumelelo ya semmušo e ka maatlafatša ditshepedišo tša pušo, mekgwa ya go boloka ditokomane le tekolo ya ka gare, eupša gape e ka baka kgateletšo ya kobamelo yeo e phadišanago le ditlapele tša go ruta le go ithuta. Ditlhohlo tše bohlokwa di akaretša go se tsepame ga ditšhelete, dithibelo tša methopo le mananeokgoparara, go ba kgole ga mafelo, gammogo le mathata ao a tšwelago pele a go thwala le go boloka barutiši bao ba nago le mangwalo a maleba e bile ba ngwadišitšwe le SACE. Dintlha tše di fokodiša bokgoni bja dikolo bja go fihlelela maemo a bašomi le a kabo ya methopo, go sa šetšwe

boikgafo le maiteko a tšona. Nyakišišo e phetha ka gore bokgoni bja tlhabollo bja tumelelo ya semmušo maemong a dinagamagaeng bo ithekgile ka phethagatšo le thekgo tše di fapantšhitšwego kudu le tšeo di lemogago maemo a tikologo. E šišinya gore tiragatšo ya netefatšo ya boleng e lekalekanye bokaone maemo a go swana le tekatekano ka go lemoga go se lekalekane ga bokgoni, go kaonafatša tlhahlo le thušo ya tlhabollo, gammogo le go fokotša merwalo yeo e amago dikolo tše di ikemetšego tša dinagamagaeng ka tsela ye e sa lekalekanego.

Mantšu a bohlokwa: Umalusi; tumelelo ya semmušo; dikolo tše di ikemetšego; thuto ya dinagamagaeng; netefatšo ya boleng; Limpopo; Teori ya Tshepedišo ya go Tlwaeletša (NPT); boetapele le bolaodi bja thuto; lengwalo la thuto; tekatekano

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ACC	Accreditation Committee of Council
APA	American Psychological Association
BPS	British Psychological Society
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CHE	Council for Higher Education
CHEA	Council for Higher Education Accreditation
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ERO	Education Review Office
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
GENFETQA	General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance
GFET	General and Further Education and Training
GFETQSF	General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HoD	Head of Department
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
LTSM	Learning and Teaching Support Materials
NAAC	National Assessment and Accreditation Council
NCS	National Curriculum Statement
NHREC	National Health Research Ethics Council
NPT	Normalisation Process Theory
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSC	National Senior Certificate (
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PED	Provincial Education Department
QASO	Quality Assurance and Standards Officer
QC	Quality Council
QP	Quality Promotion
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SACE	South African Council for Educators
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SASA	South African Schools Act
SGB	School Governing Body
SMT	School Management Team
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey
TCPS 2	Tri-Council Policy Statement
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
US	United States

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION, RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHOD

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Within the contemporary South African education system, the accreditation of independent schools is a statutory requirement governed by the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance (GENFETQA) Act No. 58 of 2001, as amended, and operationalised through the quality assurance mandate of Umalusi, the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training. In terms of this legislative framework, all independent schools offering qualifications registered on the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF) are required to obtain accreditation from Umalusi. Accreditation decisions are formally reported to the relevant Provincial Education Departments, reinforcing the state's oversight role in ensuring quality and credibility across the independent schooling sector (Fowler, 2023; Le et al., 2026).

Accreditation functions as both a regulatory and developmental mechanism aimed at safeguarding minimum quality standards while promoting continuous institutional improvement. Umalusi's accreditation framework evaluates independent schools against nationally standardised criteria, including leadership and management, school ethos, teaching and learning and learner performance. Although framed as a quality enhancement process, accreditation is implemented through a uniform evaluation instrument that applies identically to independent schools across urban and rural contexts (Mith & Zalez, 2025). This standardised approach reflects policy commitments to comparability and accountability, yet it simultaneously raises concerns about contextual responsiveness within highly unequal schooling environments.

Rural independent schools operate within materially constrained contexts characterised by financial precarity, infrastructural inadequacies and persistent challenges in attracting and retaining professionally qualified teachers. Recent empirical research indicates that rural schools continue to experience limited access to teaching and learning resources, overcrowded or unsafe classrooms and weak technological infrastructure, all of which have direct implications for teaching quality

and learner outcomes (Jere et al., 2025; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025). These structural constraints intersect sharply with accreditation requirements, such as staffing qualifications, curriculum implementation and resource availability, thereby intensifying the compliance burden placed on rural independent schools.

To meet Umalusi's accreditation criteria, independent schools must demonstrate financial viability, stable governance structures and a suitably qualified teaching workforce, including compliance with South African Council for Educators (SACE) registration requirements. However, recent studies suggest that rural schools face disproportionate difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, particularly in scarce subjects, due to geographic isolation, limited amenities and reduced institutional capacity (Muremela et al., 2023). These persistent challenges directly affect schools' ability to satisfy accreditation standards despite sustained management effort and compliance intent.

Notwithstanding these contextual challenges, management teams of independent schools are legally obligated to comply fully with accreditation requirements, regardless of geographical location or prevailing economic conditions. Contemporary education policy discourse emphasises that equitable access to quality education remains a critical driver of social and economic development in South Africa. Recent scholars underscore that while accreditation seeks to promote quality and accountability, the uniform application of accreditation instruments risks entrenching inequality by privileging schools with greater material and human capital (Umalusi, 2023b; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025). For rural independent schools, accreditation may therefore function less as a supportive quality assurance mechanism and more as a high-stakes regulatory process that shapes institutional sustainability and access to education in already marginalised communities.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION TO THE RESEARCH STUDY

Quality assurance in education is a central mechanism through which the South African state seeks to promote accountability, standardisation and continuous improvement across the schooling system. Within this framework, the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance (GENFETQA) Act No. 58 of 2001, as amended, mandates that all independent schools offering qualifications registered on the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework

(GFETQSF), obtain accreditation from a recognised quality council, namely Umalusi. Accreditation is thus not merely a regulatory requirement, but a governance instrument intended to safeguard the credibility, comparability and quality of educational provision across diverse schooling contexts.

Umalusi's accreditation model is underpinned by a standardised evaluation instrument that assesses independent schools against uniform criteria, including leadership and management, school ethos, teaching and learning and learner performance. While this model reflects an assumption of institutional equivalence and comparability, it simultaneously raises critical questions about contextual responsiveness. Independent schools in rural areas, particularly in provinces such as Limpopo, operate within materially and structurally constrained environments marked by limited financial viability, infrastructural inadequacies and persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining professionally qualified educators. These contextual realities directly intersect with accreditation requirements, especially those related to staffing qualifications, resource availability and learner performance outcomes (Kayyali, 2024).

The application of a uniform accreditation instrument across heterogeneous schooling contexts reflects a broader tension within quality assurance systems between standardisation and equity. Although accreditation is positioned as a developmental and improvement-oriented process, its implementation may function in practice as a compliance-driven mechanism that privileges schools with greater material and human capital (Gaston, 2023). For rural independent schools, compliance with accreditation standards may therefore represent not only an administrative burden but also a structural risk to institutional sustainability and educational access for marginalised communities. Despite the centrality of accreditation in the governance of independent schooling, limited empirical research has examined how rural independent schools experience, interpret and respond to the accreditation process. Existing policy discourse tends to foreground regulatory compliance and outcome measures, with insufficient attention to the lived experiences of school leaders who must navigate accreditation within contexts of scarcity and constraint (Little, 2019). This lack of context-sensitive insight obscures how accreditation shapes teaching, learning and management practices in rural

independent schools, and whether it meaningfully contributes to educational quality in such settings.

Against this background, the present study is oriented towards an in-depth exploration of the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo as they undergo the Umalusi accreditation process. By foregrounding the experiences of school principals and School Management Team (SMT) members, the study seeks to generate a nuanced understanding of how accreditation is enacted, negotiated and experienced at the institutional level. In doing so, the research aims to contribute to scholarly debates on quality assurance, equity and contextual justice in education, while also providing empirically grounded insights that may inform more differentiated and context-responsive accreditation practices within South Africa's education system.

Internationally, accreditation is used to promote educational quality, accountability and continuous improvement, although approaches vary across national contexts. Systems range from decentralised models in the United States to state-regulated frameworks in Europe and Asia, with their effectiveness shaped by governance, institutional capacity and integration with broader quality assurance processes (Ncube, 2015; Denkler, 2021; Perveen et al., 2021; Weiming et al., 2024).

In Africa, recent evidence underscores that accreditation and quality assurance systems are able to serve as powerful tools for educational improvement when supported by adequate funding, effective monitoring structures and institutional buy-in. Without sustained investment, particularly in rural and underserved contexts, quality assurance efforts risk reinforcing existing inequalities between institutions rather than reducing them (Sumida & Kawata, 2024; Zickafoose et al., 2024).

1.3 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The accreditation of independent schools constitutes a key regulatory mechanism through which the South African education system seeks to assure quality, promote accountability and safeguard the credibility of qualifications offered outside the public schooling sector (GENFETQA Act, 2001; Umalusi, 2018a). While the legislative framework governing accreditation is clearly articulated, the implementation of accreditation processes, particularly through the application of standardised instruments across diverse schooling contexts, raises critical concerns relating to

equity, contextual responsiveness and educational justice. This study is therefore justified by both conceptual and empirical gaps in existing literature on quality assurance in independent schooling.

From a policy perspective, the application of a uniform accreditation framework to independent schools operating under profoundly disparate socio-economic conditions warrants sustained critical scrutiny. Independent rural schools, particularly those located in economically marginalised provinces such as Limpopo, continue to operate within structurally constrained environments characterised by limited financial viability, inadequate infrastructure and persistent challenges in attracting and retaining professionally qualified educators. Recent empirical evidence indicates that rural schooling contexts remain disproportionately affected by resource scarcity, infrastructural backlogs and staffing shortages, all of which directly influence schools' ability to meet externally imposed quality assurance standards (Jere et al., 2025; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025).

Despite these contextual realities, independent rural schools are assessed using the same accreditation criteria and evaluation instruments as their urban and better-resourced counterparts. Umalusi's current accreditation framework emphasises standardisation and comparability across the independent schooling sector, with limited formal differentiation based on geographic location or resource endowment (Umalusi, 2022a; Umalusi, 2023b). The rationale for this study, therefore, lies in critically examining whether the uniform application of accreditation criteria advances the stated developmental intentions of accreditation policy or whether it inadvertently reproduces structural inequality by privileging institutions with greater material, infrastructural and human capital.

From a scholarly perspective, there remains a notable lack of recent empirical research that foregrounds the institution-level experiences and sense-making practices of rural independent schools within South Africa's external quality assurance regime. Contemporary literature and evaluation reports continue to privilege system-level indicators, accreditation outcomes and procedural compliance, with limited attention given to how school leaders and management teams experience, interpret and operationalise accreditation requirements within resource-constrained contexts (Umalusi, 2023b; DBE, 2024). As a result, the everyday organisational work required to implement accreditation standards and its

implications for teaching, learning and leadership in rural independent schools, remains under-examined. By centring the experiences of school principals and SMT members, this study responds directly to this gap and contributes empirically grounded, context-sensitive insights into how accreditation processes shape institutional practice in rural independent schooling environments.

This study is further informed by contemporary scholars that conceptualise quality assurance as a governance mechanism embedded within broader structures of regulation, accountability and power, rather than as a neutral or purely technical process. Recent analyses of quality assurance in South African education systems highlight that externally imposed standards often operate through hierarchical compliance logics that may marginalise contextual knowledge and local professional judgement, particularly in under-resourced institutions (CHE, 2021; Eaton, 2021a). In settings characterised by material scarcity and organisational vulnerability, accreditation requirements may therefore function less as instruments of developmental support and more as regulatory mechanisms that discipline institutional behaviour and constrain strategic autonomy. Investigating how rural independent schools negotiate, adapt to and at times, resist these dynamics, is essential for critically assessing the legitimacy and developmental claims of accreditation as a tool for educational improvement.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study have the potential to inform the design of more differentiated, context-aware accreditation practices. Recent policy reviews and evaluation frameworks increasingly acknowledge the need for quality assurance models that balance accountability with institutional capacity development and contextual responsiveness (CHE, 2021; DBE, 2024). By generating empirically grounded evidence on the lived realities of rural independent schools undergoing accreditation, this study offers insights that may assist policymakers, quality councils and education stakeholders in refining accreditation frameworks to better align standardisation imperatives with equity considerations. In so doing, the study contributes not only to academic debate but also to ongoing policy discussions aimed at strengthening the fairness, credibility and developmental impact of quality assurance within South Africa’s education system.

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Quality assurance and accreditation regulate and legitimise educational provision (OECD, 2021b; UNESCO, 2022). In South Africa, independent schools offering qualifications on the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework must undergo Umalusi accreditation in terms of the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act No. 58 of 2001, as amended. Although accreditation promotes accountability and minimum quality standards, applying uniform requirements within an unequal education system raises concerns about equity and contextual responsiveness (UNESCO, 2022).

The study was prompted by the difficult conditions under which independent rural schools in Limpopo seek accreditation. Limited finances, inadequate infrastructure, weak institutional capacity and difficulties attracting qualified teachers affect teaching, learner outcomes and compliance (Jere et al., 2025; Muremela et al., 2023). Yet these schools are assessed through the same framework as better-resourced urban schools, despite significant geographic and structural inequalities (OECD, 2021b; Fowler, 2023).

Accreditation may therefore become compliance-driven rather than developmental, with requirements for staffing, infrastructure, governance and performance placing disproportionate burdens on rural schools (Muremela et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2022). For example, meeting the requirement that at least 80% of teachers be professionally qualified and registered may be difficult where qualified teachers are scarce (Langeveldt et al., 2023).

Limited empirical research has examined how principals and school management teams in independent rural schools experience and respond to Umalusi accreditation. Existing discourse emphasises outcomes and procedural compliance, providing insufficient evidence on the process's effects on teaching, learning, leadership, management and institutional sustainability (OECD, 2021b).

The central problem is the absence of a context-sensitive understanding of rural independent schools' experiences of accreditation. The study seeks to identify implementation barriers and determine accreditation's effects on teaching, learning and school management. Its findings may inform equitable, developmental and

context-responsive accreditation practices that maintain accountability while supporting quality improvement and institutional sustainability.

The study is therefore guided by the question: *What are the experiences of independent rural school management in Limpopo of the Umalusi accreditation process?*

To enable a systematic exploration of the main research question, the following sub-questions were developed:

1. How is the Umalusi accreditation process applied to independent schools?
2. How does the accreditation process influence teaching and learning in independent rural schools?
3. What impact does the accreditation process have on the effective management of independent schools?
4. How do school managers perceive the value and significance of accreditation in improving educational quality?
5. How do school management teams participate in implementing and responding to the accreditation process?

1.5 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of this study was to explore the experiences of independent rural school management in Limpopo in relation to the Umalusi accreditation process. Specifically, the study investigated key factors influencing effective teaching and learning following schools' engagement with the accreditation process. It further examined the suitability of the accreditation instrument for use across diverse contexts, including both rural and urban independent schools. To realise this aim, the following objectives were addressed:

1. To describe the Umalusi accreditation process as applied to independent schools;
2. To critically analyse the influence of the accreditation process on teaching and learning in independent rural schools;
3. To investigate the impact of the accreditation process on the effective management of independent schools;

4. To examine the importance of accreditation for independent schools; and
5. To explore the role played by independent schools during the accreditation process.

1.6 RELEVANCE AND ACTUALITY OF THE STUDY

The accreditation of independent schools constitutes a critical component of South Africa's education quality assurance framework, as mandated by the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance (GENFETQA) Act No. 58 of 2001. Through accreditation, the state seeks to ensure accountability, standardisation and the provision of quality education across both public and independent schooling sectors. However, the application of uniform accreditation criteria to schools operating within vastly different socio-economic and geographic contexts has generated ongoing debate regarding equity, contextual responsiveness and educational justice. This study is therefore highly relevant, as it addresses a significant gap in understanding how accreditation processes are experienced by independent rural schools, particularly within resource-constrained environments such as those found in Limpopo Province.

The relevance of this study is further underscored by persistent inequalities within South Africa's education system, where rural schools, both public and independent, continue to face structural challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, limited financial viability and difficulties in attracting and retaining professionally qualified educators. Despite these realities, independent rural schools are evaluated using the same accreditation instruments as their urban counterparts. By critically examining the experiences of rural independent schools with the Umalusi accreditation process, this study contributes to scholarly debates on whether standardised quality assurance mechanisms adequately support educational improvement across diverse contexts or whether they inadvertently reproduce existing inequalities.

From a scholarly perspective, the study responds to a paucity of empirical research that foregrounds the lived experiences of school leaders and management teams within South Africa's independent rural schooling sector. Existing literature and policy discourse tend to prioritise regulatory compliance, performance indicators and institutional outcomes, often overlooking how accreditation is interpreted, negotiated and enacted at the school level. By adopting a qualitative, phenomenological

approach, this study generates context-sensitive, empirically grounded insights that deepen theoretical understanding of quality assurance as a socially situated and politically embedded practice rather than a purely technical process.

The actuality of the study is evident in the continued implementation of Umalusi's accreditation framework and the ongoing policy emphasis on quality assurance and accountability within the education system. As debates around equitable access to quality education, rural development and differentiated policy implementation intensify, there is an urgent need for evidence-based research that can inform more responsive and inclusive accreditation practices. This study is therefore timely, as it provides insights that are directly relevant to current policy discussions and reform efforts aimed at balancing standardisation with contextual sensitivity.

Practically, the findings of this study have the potential to inform policymakers, quality assurance bodies and education stakeholders about the unintended consequences of applying a uniform accreditation instrument across unequal contexts. By illuminating the challenges and adaptive strategies employed by independent rural schools during the accreditation process, the study may contribute to the refinement of accreditation policies and practices in ways that better support effective teaching, learning and school management in rural settings. Ultimately, the study seeks to promote a more equitable and context-responsive quality assurance system that enhances educational provision for learners in marginalised rural communities.

1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation of a research study by situating it within relevant contemporary theory and guiding the interpretation of empirical findings. In qualitative research, the theoretical framework functions as an analytical lens through which participants' experiences are understood, interpreted and contextualised, rather than tested through hypothesis-driven procedures. It makes explicit the underlying assumptions informing the study and strengthens conceptual alignment between the research problem, research questions, methodological approach and analytic processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Hennink et al., 2021). By providing a coherent theoretical orientation, the framework enhances analytical rigour and supports systematic interpretation of findings within their social and institutional contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

This study is theoretically grounded in Normalisation Process Theory, a sociological theory developed to explain how complex interventions, policies or practices are implemented, embedded and sustained within organisational and social contexts (May & Finch, 2009; May et al., 2022). NPT is widely applied in qualitative implementation research to examine the work that individuals and groups undertake to integrate externally imposed processes into everyday practice. Given that accreditation is a compulsory quality assurance mechanism imposed on independent schools by Umalusi, NPT is an appropriate framework for analysing how independent rural schools understand, engage with, enact and evaluate the accreditation process.

Recent scholars confirm the relevance of NPT beyond healthcare, highlighting its applicability to organisational change, education management and policy implementation in complex and resource-constrained settings (Schroeder et al., 2016 May et al., 2025). NPT is particularly suited to contexts where participation is mandatory rather than voluntary, as it focuses on how actors negotiate meaning, commitment and practical execution under conditions of obligation (Desveaux et al., 2017; May et al., 2022).

Normalisation Process Theory is organised around four core constructs: coherence and meaning-making, engagement and participation, task allocation and reflection and evaluation. These constructs provide a structured framework for examining the accreditation experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo.

Coherence and meaning-making refer to the sense-making work undertaken by individuals and groups when introduced to a new practice (May et al., 2018). In this study, coherence relates to how school principals and members of SMTs understand the purpose, relevance and value of the Umalusi accreditation process. This includes how accreditation criteria are interpreted, whether the accreditation instrument is perceived as contextually appropriate for rural schools and the extent to which accreditation is viewed as a mechanism for quality improvement or merely as a compliance requirement. Research indicates that limited coherence often undermines meaningful engagement with externally imposed quality assurance processes, particularly in under-resourced settings (Schroeder et al., 2016).

Engagement and participation concern the relational and commitment work that enables actors to enrol themselves and others in a new practice (May & Finch, 2009).

Within the context of this study, cognitive participation focuses on how school leadership mobilises staff involvement, sustains engagement with accreditation activities and legitimises the accreditation process within the school community. Recent studies demonstrate that leadership commitment and shared ownership are critical for sustaining participation in mandated organisational processes, especially where staff capacity and resources are constrained (Osman & Yatam, 2024; May et al., 2025).

Task Allocation refers to the operational work required to enact a new practice, including the allocation of roles, mobilisation of resources and alignment of existing routines with new requirements (May et al., 2022). In this study, collective action is used to examine how accreditation is practically implemented in independent rural schools, including compliance with staffing requirements, documentation preparation, curriculum delivery and teaching and learning practices. The construct enables an analysis of how structural challenges, such as limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure and difficulties in attracting qualified teachers, shape the enactment of accreditation standards in rural contexts. Empirical evidence suggests that when collective action is constrained by contextual factors, accreditation processes risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative (Fawns et al., 2020; May et al., 2025).

Reflection and Evaluation involve the appraisal work through which participants assess the effects and value of a new practice over time (May & Finch, 2009). In this study, reflexive monitoring is concerned with how school management evaluates the impact of accreditation on teaching and learning, school management practices and overall institutional quality. It also captures participants' reflections on whether the accreditation process contributes to sustained school improvement or places disproportionate administrative and operational burdens on rural independent schools. Recent studies highlight that reflexive monitoring is essential for distinguishing between procedural compliance and meaningful quality enhancement (Schroeder et al., 2016; Osman & Yatam, 2024).

Normalisation Process Theory is particularly appropriate for this study because accreditation is a legislated requirement for independent schools offering registered qualifications in South Africa. Schools are therefore compelled to integrate accreditation into their organisational routines regardless of contextual constraints.

NPT allows for a nuanced analysis that moves beyond compliance-focused interpretations and foregrounds the social, organisational and contextual work involved in normalising accreditation within rural school settings.

By employing Normalisation Process Theory as the theoretical framework, this study is able to conceptualise accreditation not merely as a regulatory process, but as a socially constructed and contextually negotiated practice. The framework provides a coherent lens for analysing how independent rural schools in Limpopo make sense of, participate in, implement and evaluate the Umalusi accreditation process, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of accreditation and its implications for quality teaching, learning and school management.

Although Institutional Theory and Change Management Theory were considered, they were not selected as the primary theoretical framework because their central concerns are less closely aligned with the purpose of this study. Institutional Theory is valuable for explaining how external regulatory pressures, legitimacy requirements and organisational conformity shape institutional behaviour; however, it offers less analytical specificity regarding the everyday work through which school actors interpret, enact and sustain accreditation practices. Similarly, Change Management Theory generally emphasises planned, leadership-driven organisational transitions and prescriptive strategies for managing change, whereas accreditation in this study is a compulsory, externally regulated process that schools must integrate under uneven and resource-constrained conditions. Normalisation Process Theory was therefore preferred because its constructs directly correspond with the study's focus on participants' lived experiences of sense-making, engagement, task allocation, implementation and evaluation. While the competing theories could illuminate selected macro-level or managerial dimensions, adopting them alongside NPT would risk theoretical diffusion without strengthening the analysis of how accreditation becomes embedded in routine school practice.

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section presents an overview of the research methodology employed in this study, outlining the philosophical orientation, research approach and design that guided the investigation into the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo with the Umalusi accreditation process. Given the exploratory nature of the study and

its focus on understanding participants' lived experiences within a regulated quality assurance framework, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Qualitative research is particularly suited to studies that seek to generate rich, context-sensitive insights into how social actors interpret, negotiate and respond to policy-driven processes within their everyday institutional contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). A phenomenological case study design was employed to enable an in-depth exploration of school principal and SMT members' perceptions and experiences of accreditation as it is enacted in rural schooling environments. This methodological approach foregrounds meaning-making, context and subjectivity, thereby allowing the study to move beyond compliance-focused accounts to examine how accreditation is understood, implemented, and evaluated in practice (Byrne, 2025; Tavakola & Sandars, 2025). The section further outlines the sampling strategy, data collection methods and analytical procedures used to ensure methodological coherence, credibility and alignment with the study's research questions and theoretical framework.

1.8.1 Research Paradigm

Research paradigms provide the philosophical foundations that shape how a study conceptualises reality, knowledge production and methodological choices. Paradigms comprise shared ontological and epistemological assumptions that guide researchers' understanding of social phenomena and inform how knowledge is generated and interpreted (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This study is situated within the interpretivist research paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is derived from individuals' subjective experiences rather than from objective or measurable facts. Interpretivism is particularly concerned with understanding how participants make sense of their social worlds and how meaning is produced through interaction, language and context (Byrne, 2025).

An interpretivist paradigm is appropriate for this study because its primary focus is on exploring the lived experiences of principals and SMT members in independent rural schools as they engage with the Umalusi accreditation process. From an interpretivist perspective, multiple realities are acknowledged and participants' perspectives are regarded as valid and meaningful representations of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This paradigm allows the study to move beyond surface-level descriptions of compliance and examine how accreditation is

understood, negotiated and experienced within specific rural schooling contexts. By prioritising participants' viewpoints and meanings, the interpretivist approach enables a holistic and context-sensitive understanding of accreditation as a socially situated process shaped by institutional, structural, and relational factors (Byrne, 2025). Consequently, the interpretivist paradigm provides an appropriate philosophical lens for examining the complex, contextually embedded realities of accreditation in rural independent schools.

1.8.2 Research Approach

Research approaches provide structured frameworks through which researchers select appropriate strategies for generating knowledge. Broadly, research may be conducted using quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods approaches, each differing in philosophical orientation, methodological procedures and types of knowledge produced (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo in relation to the Umalusi accreditation process. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for research that seeks to understand complex social phenomena as they occur in natural settings, without manipulation of variables and from the perspective of those directly involved (Hennink et al., 2019). Qualitative research emphasises the exploration of meaning, interpretation and context, enabling researchers to examine how individuals construct and understand their social realities (Cohen et al., 2018). Through this approach, attention is directed towards participants' subjective experiences, values, assumptions and interpretations of policy-driven processes. Such an orientation enables insight into how school principals and SMT members perceive, interpret and experience the accreditation process in resource-constrained rural environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on participants' meanings rather than on hypothesis testing or variable measurement, qualitative research provides rich, in-depth understandings of organisational practices and institutional challenges that are not easily captured through quantitative methods (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The qualitative approach was therefore appropriate for this study, as it allowed for an in-depth examination of how accreditation influences teaching, learning and school management in independent rural schools. By privileging participants' voices and situating their experiences within specific socio-economic and institutional contexts,

the approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm underpinning the study and supports a nuanced exploration of accreditation as a socially and contextually embedded process.

1.8.3 Research Design

Qualitative research encompasses a range of research designs, including ethnography, narrative inquiry, phenomenology, grounded theory and case study, each offering distinct strategies for understanding social phenomena within their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This study adopted a qualitative case study research design, which was particularly appropriate for investigating complex, contemporary phenomena situated within real-life contexts, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018).

A case study design enabled an in-depth and holistic exploration of a bounded system, allowing the researcher to focus on the particularity and complexity of the phenomenon under investigation (Stake, 2015). In the context of this study, the case study design was well-suited to examining the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo as they engage with the Umalusi accreditation process. The accreditation process is embedded within specific institutional, regulatory and socio-economic contexts, making it necessary to explore how these contextual factors shape schools' experiences, interpretations and responses. A case study approach, therefore, allowed for a nuanced analysis of accreditation as it is enacted within rural schooling environments.

Furthermore, case study research supported the use of multiple sources of data and perspectives, enhancing the depth, credibility and richness of the findings (Yin, 2018). By facilitating the examination of interactions among policy requirements, school management practices, resource constraints and teaching and learning conditions, the case study design enabled a comprehensive understanding of the accreditation process as a socially situated and contextually negotiated practice. As such, the instrumental case study design, where a specific case, a person, organisation, programme or event is examined in-depth to provide insight into a broader issue, phenomenon or theory, provided an appropriate methodological framework for addressing the research questions and achieving the objectives of this study.

1.8.4 Research Methods

Research methods refer to the techniques and procedures employed to conduct a research study in a systematic and rigorous manner (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This section provides an overview of the methods used in the study, including the sampling strategy and data collection techniques employed to generate empirical data. It further outlines the approach adopted for data analysis, as well as the measures implemented to ensure methodological rigour and ethical compliance. In qualitative research, careful attention to methodological procedures is essential to enhance credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the findings (Hennink et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2022). A detailed account of these methods is presented in Chapter 3.

1.8.4.1 Site selection and sampling

There were, at the time of this research, approximately 200 registered independent schools in Limpopo Province, located across both urban and rural areas. This study was conducted at six (6) purposively selected independent schools situated in rural areas of Limpopo Province. The schools included five (5) accredited independent schools and one (1) independent school that is still in the process of accreditation. The selected schools were identified using the publicly accessible database of the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training (Umalusi). The study population comprised members of school management from both accredited independent schools and independent schools that were in the process of attaining accreditation in rural Limpopo.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants, with no preference given to gender, race or age. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to select participants who possess specific characteristics and experiential knowledge that are relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Hennink et al., 2019). This sampling strategy was appropriate for the study, as it enabled the selection of information-rich participants who were directly involved in the accreditation process. The sample consisted of one principal and one SMT member (a Deputy Principal or Head of Department) from each participating school, with a total of 12 participants. These participants were selected because of their institutional roles, their direct engagement with accreditation requirements and their familiarity with the teaching and learning practices within their respective schools.

Their participation, therefore, provided informed insights into the perceived impact of the accreditation process on teaching, learning and school management in rural independent schools.

1.8.4.2 Data collection

The collection of empirical data was essential for generating rich and contextually grounded information for this study. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and document analysis as complementary qualitative data-collection methods. These techniques enabled the triangulation of data sources, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Interviews provided in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences of the accreditation process, while document analysis offered additional contextual and corroborative evidence related to accreditation practices and requirements.

- **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were identified as the primary data-collection method for this study. Participants comprised members of school management from independent schools situated in rural areas of Limpopo Province. Semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate as they enabled the exploration of participants' experiences while allowing flexibility for probing and clarification of emerging issues related to the accreditation process. This approach supported the generation of rich, in-depth accounts of participants' lived experiences and facilitated an interpretive understanding of how accreditation was experienced, understood and negotiated within rural school contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Through the use of open-ended questioning, the interviews allowed participants to articulate their experiences, challenges and meanings associated with their daily leadership and management responsibilities. This method was particularly valuable for capturing the complexity of participants' experiences and for exploring contextual factors influencing accreditation practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Interviews were arranged to take place at participants' respective schools or at alternative locations deemed convenient and comfortable by the participants. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate capture of responses and to enable verbatim transcription for subsequent qualitative analysis, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

- **Document analysis**

Document analysis was employed as a complementary qualitative data-collection method to support and enhance the findings generated through interviews. Document analysis involves the systematic examination and interpretation of written materials in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge relevant to the research phenomenon (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In this study, documents analysed included accreditation reports of selected independent rural schools, the accreditation instrument used by Umalusi and relevant policy and legislative documents governing the accreditation of independent schools.

The use of document analysis enabled the corroboration of participants' interview accounts and provided an additional layer of contextual and institutional insight into the accreditation process. Documentary evidence assisted in illuminating how accreditation criteria are articulated, interpreted and operationalised within rural schooling contexts. The integration of document analysis with interview data strengthened methodological rigour through data triangulation and contributed to enhanced credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings (Hennink et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

1.8.4.3 Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative analytic method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data. Thematic analysis was considered appropriate for this study because it enables a systematic yet flexible examination of participants' experiences, allowing for the development of rich, detailed and contextually grounded interpretations of the Umalusi accreditation process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis was guided by an inductive approach, in which meaning was derived from the data rather than imposed through pre-existing categories.

The analytical process involved the initial coding of transcribed interview data and documentary evidence, followed by the organisation of related codes into broader categories and themes. These themes were developed in alignment with the research questions to ensure analytical coherence and relevance to the aims of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Through this process, thematic analysis supported the identification of both shared patterns and divergent experiences

among independent rural schools, thereby providing insight into how accreditation requirements were perceived, interpreted and responded to within resource-constrained contexts. The use of thematic analysis, therefore, facilitated a nuanced understanding of accreditation as a socially and contextually embedded process, with implications for policy and practice.

- **Organisation of data**

The organisation of data formed an essential preparatory stage for qualitative analysis in this study. To manage the volume and complexity of the data, all collected data were systematically organised into smaller, more manageable units to facilitate meaningful analysis. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure an accurate and comprehensive representation of participants' accounts, which is regarded as a critical step in qualitative research aimed at preserving participants' meanings and contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Immersion in the data was achieved through repeated reading of transcripts, during which initial notes and analytic memos were developed to capture significant issues and emerging ideas using participants' own words.

Given that data were generated through multiple qualitative sources, including semi-structured interviews and document analysis, all materials were converted into a consistent and accessible format to support systematic analysis and comparison. Interview data were organised by grouping responses across participants according to key questions, enabling the identification of patterns, similarities, and variations in participants' experiences (Hennink et al., 2019). Document analysis was used to corroborate and contextualise interview findings by examining relevant accreditation reports, policy documents and institutional records. This structured approach to data organisation ensured coherence across data sources and enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

- **Coding of Data**

Coding constituted a critical phase of the qualitative data analysis process in this study. In qualitative research, coding refers to the systematic process of organising data by identifying meaningful units and assigning labels that capture salient features relevant to the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). For this study, coding commenced with an iterative process of familiarisation, during which interview

transcripts and documentary data were read and re-read to develop a holistic understanding of the dataset. This phase enabled the identification of significant segments of text that reflected participants' experiences regarding the Umalusi accreditation process.

Following familiarisation, initial codes were generated by assigning descriptive labels to data segments that captured discrete ideas, actions or meanings related to accreditation practices, challenges and institutional responses. Coding was conducted in a systematic and inductive manner, allowing patterns to be derived from the data rather than imposed through pre-determined categories (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As coding progressed, similar codes were compared, refined and grouped to enhance analytical consistency and coherence. A record of all codes was maintained to support transparency and analytical rigour. This coding process enabled the efficient retrieval and organisation of data associated with emerging thematic patterns, thereby forming the foundation for subsequent theme development and interpretation in alignment with the aims of the study (Hennink et al., 2019).

- **Establishing categories and themes**

The establishment of categories and themes constituted a key stage in the qualitative data analysis process of this study. Following the coding of data, categories were developed by clustering related codes that reflected shared meanings, ideas and experiences associated with the Umalusi accreditation process. This process enabled the identification of both major and minor themes that captured salient patterns across participants' accounts while also allowing for variation in how accreditation was experienced within different rural school contexts. Categories and themes were thus used as analytic tools to organise and interpret the data by grouping conceptually similar segments of coded data to represent core aspects of the phenomenon under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Themes were refined through an iterative process involving constant comparison within and across data sources, ensuring that they were internally coherent, distinct from one another and closely aligned with the research questions. This approach supported the development of analytically meaningful themes that articulated how accreditation requirements were understood, implemented and evaluated by school management in rural independent schools. The identification and refinement of

categories and themes, therefore, facilitated a systematic and transparent interpretation of the data, contributing to the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Hennink et al., 2019).

- **Analysis and interpretation of data**

Data analysis involved the systematic reduction and organisation of data into smaller analytic units to facilitate careful examination. Related codes were clustered into categories, which were then labelled to reflect their conceptual significance across the dataset. Consistent use of abbreviated labels supported the organisation of codes across themes and patterns, enabling coherent interpretation of participants' accounts and the identification of meaningful relationships within the data (Miles et al., 2020).

- **Reporting data findings**

The reporting of data findings involved presenting and interpreting participants' experiences through the selective use of direct quotations in order to preserve the authenticity of their experiences and the contextual realities of the study setting. Themes and their interrelationships were used to structure the presentation of the findings by foregrounding patterns of meaning and illustrating how participants made sense of the accreditation process. This approach enabled the findings to be conveyed in a manner that was both analytically rigorous and grounded in participants' lived experiences, thereby supporting interpretive depth and transparency in qualitative reporting (Tracy, 2020).

1.9 METHODOLOGICAL RIGOUR

Ensuring methodological trustworthiness is fundamental to the credibility and scholarly value of qualitative research. Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which a study convincingly represents participants' experiences and generates findings that are ethically, analytically and methodologically sound (Cycyota et al., 2021). In qualitative inquiry, research quality is achieved not through statistical validation, but through transparency, reflexivity and systematic engagement with data-generation and analytical processes. Scholars emphasise that clearly articulated procedures, accurate documentation of research decisions and sustained engagement with data enhance confidence in qualitative findings and enable readers to assess the integrity of the research process (Guest et al., 2020).

To this end, this study was guided by widely recognised principles of qualitative rigour, including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria provide a coherent framework for demonstrating that findings are grounded in participants' accounts, analytically traceable and shaped by the research context rather than researcher bias (Kyngäs et al., 2020). By systematically recording the research process and critically engaging with relevant literature, the study sought to establish a trustworthy foundation for examining the experiences of independent rural schools with the Umalusi accreditation process. Detailed strategies for ensuring trustworthiness are elaborated in subsequent chapters.

1.9.1 Credibility

Credibility is a central criterion for evaluating the quality and integrity of qualitative research, as it concerns the extent to which findings authentically represent participants' perspectives and social realities. In qualitative inquiry, credibility is established through the alignment between participants' accounts, the researcher's interpretations and the contextual conditions in which knowledge is produced (Guest et al.,2020). A credible study, therefore, demonstrates that interpretations are grounded in empirical data and are recognisable and meaningful to individuals who share similar experiences.

Contemporary qualitative scholarship emphasises that credibility is strengthened through prolonged and sustained engagement with participants, reflexive awareness and systematic strategies for validating interpretations (Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2020). Practices such as reflexive journalling, peer engagement and participant validation contribute to interpretive depth by allowing researchers to interrogate assumptions and enhance analytic transparency. Rather than residing solely in methodological techniques, credibility is increasingly understood as emerging from the researcher's reflexive positioning, theoretical sensitivity and ethical engagement with participants throughout the research process (Berger, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

In this study, credibility is conceptualised as a foundational principle that informs the overall research design and analytic orientation. By foregrounding participants' lived experiences and situating findings within their specific rural schooling contexts, the study sought to produce interpretations that are both contextually faithful and

analytically robust. Detailed strategies employed to enhance credibility are presented in later chapters of the thesis.

1.9.2 Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which research findings may hold relevance beyond the immediate context of the study, allowing readers to determine their applicability to other settings or populations. Rather than relying on statistical generalisation, qualitative transferability is achieved through the production of rich, contextualised accounts that make explicit the social, institutional and environmental conditions under which knowledge is generated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach recognises that findings are context-bound, yet potentially informative for similar settings where comparable conditions and challenges exist.

Contemporary qualitative scholars emphasise that responsibility for transferability rests not with the researcher's claims of generalisability, but with the provision of sufficiently detailed descriptions that enable informed judgement by readers and future researchers (Tracy, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thick description, contextual transparency and careful articulation of participant characteristics and setting are therefore central to supporting the analytical reach of qualitative findings. When such contextual detail is provided, insights derived from a bounded case can inform understanding across related contexts, particularly in fields characterised by structural similarity, such as rural schooling environments.

In this study, transferability is conceptualised as an analytical possibility rather than a methodological guarantee. By situating participants' experiences within clearly described rural, regulatory and institutional contexts, the study sought to offer findings that might resonate with, and be meaningfully considered in, other independent rural school settings facing comparable accreditation demands. Explicit discussion of contextual boundaries and limitations further supports transparent interpretation and potential application of the findings beyond the immediate study context, with methodological strategies elaborated in subsequent chapters.

1.9.3 Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the stability and coherence of the research process over time, ensuring that findings are logically consistent, traceable and clearly derived from the data (Miles et al., 2020). Rather than implying replication

in the positivist sense, dependability in interpretivist research emphasises transparency in methodological decision-making and the systematic documentation of how data are generated, analysed and interpreted within a specific contextual setting (Saunders et al., 2023). A dependable study therefore provides sufficient detail to allow readers to understand how interpretations were reached and to assess the internal consistency of the research process.

Recent qualitative scholarship highlights that dependability is strengthened through clear articulation of methodological choices, reflexive engagement with the research process, and the maintenance of comprehensive records that demonstrate alignment between research questions, data collection strategies and analytical procedures (Guest et al., 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2022). In this regard, dependability functions as an indicator of methodological integrity, signalling that findings are not arbitrary but are grounded in a coherent and well-documented inquiry process.

In this study, dependability is positioned as a guiding principle that informs the overall research design and methodological orientation. By clearly situating the study's analytical approach within established qualitative traditions and by ensuring coherence between the research objectives, theoretical framework and methods, the study sought to produce findings that are methodologically transparent and analytically robust. Specific strategies employed to support dependability are detailed in subsequent chapters.

1.9.4 Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which research findings are shaped by participants' meanings and empirical evidence rather than by the researcher's assumptions, preferences or predispositions. It is concerned with demonstrating that interpretations are grounded in the data and that analytic decisions are transparent and logically traceable (O'Cathain, 2019). Within an interpretivist research tradition, confirmability does not imply objectivity in the positivist sense, but rather methodological integrity, reflexive awareness and openness in documenting how conclusions are generated.

Contemporary qualitative scholarship emphasises that confirmability is strengthened through clearly articulated analytic processes, reflexive engagement with data and systematic documentation of research decisions (Hammond & Wellington, 2023).

These practices enable readers and future researchers to follow the reasoning underpinning data interpretation and to assess whether findings are supported by evidence rather than researcher bias. In this sense, confirmability functions as a key indicator of analytical transparency and ethical accountability in qualitative inquiry.

In this study, confirmability is understood as a guiding quality principle that informs the overall research design and interpretive orientation. By foregrounding participants' voices, maintaining explicit links between data and interpretation and situating analysis within a clearly articulated theoretical framework, the study sought to ensure that its findings credibly reflect the experiences of independent rural schools undergoing the accreditation process. Detailed procedures for demonstrating confirmability are presented in subsequent chapters.

1.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations constitute a fundamental component of qualitative research, particularly when studies involve human participants and generate context-specific, experience-based knowledge. Ethical research practice requires respect for participants' autonomy, protection from harm and careful attention to issues of consent, confidentiality, and institutional accountability (Tracy, 2020). In educational research contexts, ethical integrity is especially important where power relations, professional roles and institutional vulnerabilities may influence participants' willingness to contribute openly and honestly.

In accordance with internationally recognised ethical principles, this study was designed to ensure that participation was voluntary, informed and conducted within approved institutional and regulatory frameworks (BERA, 2018; Wiles, 2023). Ethical clearance and formal permission from relevant authorities were sought to ensure compliance with governance requirements and to protect the rights and welfare of participants. Such processes not only safeguard participants, but also enhance the legitimacy, credibility and trustworthiness of the research (Cohen et al., 2018).

Ethics in qualitative research are increasingly understood as an ongoing, reflexive responsibility rather than a once-off procedural requirement (Flick, 2018). Accordingly, this study adopts an ethical stance that foregrounds sensitivity to context, respect for participants' experiences and responsible handling of data throughout the research process. Detailed ethical procedures and safeguards

implemented during data collection and analysis are presented in subsequent chapters.

1.10.1 Informed Consent

Informed consent is a core ethical principle underpinning respect for participants' autonomy and right to self-determination in qualitative research. It requires that participants have the legal and cognitive capacity to consent and that their participation is voluntary, free from coercion, deception or undue influence (Wiles, 2023). Ethical consent further entails that participants are provided with clear and sufficient information regarding the purpose, nature and potential implications of the study to enable an informed and independent decision about participation (British Academy, 2023). In the context of educational research, involving institutional actors such as school management, informed consent functions as a critical safeguard for both participant protection and the integrity and credibility of the research process.

1.10.2 Privacy

Qualitative research has the potential to intrude on participants' privacy because it engages with personal, professional and institutional experiences throughout the research process (Wiles, 2023). Ethical research practice, therefore, requires that participants' rights to privacy be safeguarded through anonymity and confidentiality, particularly in educational studies involving institutional actors and power relations. Protecting privacy not only minimises potential harm to participants but also strengthens trust, ethical accountability and the overall integrity of the research (British Academy, 2023; RSA, 2021). Participants were informed of their right to privacy and were assured that their identity would be protected through anonymity and confidentiality.

1.10.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality refers to the ethical obligation to protect information disclosed by participants and to prevent unauthorised identification or disclosure of sensitive personal or institutional data. In qualitative research, maintaining confidentiality is central to safeguarding participants' rights, minimising potential harm, and sustaining trust within the research relationship (Israel, 2023). In studies involving institutional actors, such as school leadership, confidentiality further supports ethical accountability and the credibility of the research process by ensuring that participants'

contributions cannot be traced to identifiable individuals or institutions (Saunders et al., 2023). To maintain the study's anonymity, the researcher did not discuss individual participants or pass on information to others in any way that could identify individuals. The sampled independent schools were assigned codes for confidentiality and anonymity.

Anonymity in qualitative research refers to the protection of participants' identities by ensuring that individuals and institutions cannot be identified from the data or research outputs. Safeguarding anonymity is a key ethical strategy for managing privacy and reducing potential risk, particularly in studies involving sensitive institutional contexts or professional roles (Kang, 2023). By preventing the disclosure of identifying information, anonymity supports participant trust, ethical accountability and the overall integrity of the research process (BPS, 2023). In this study, the means of any identification were removed. Codes for identifying participants were used to ensure anonymity. Passwords to protect files were also used to protect the identity of participants and information. Data were transferred to coded and unnamed data sheets.

1.10.4 Voluntary Participation

Voluntary participation is a fundamental ethical principle in qualitative research and requires that individuals freely choose whether to participate without coercion, pressure or undue influence. Ethical participation further entails that participants are informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without negative consequences (ESRC, 2023). In educational research involving institutional contexts and hierarchical relationships, voluntary participation serves as a critical safeguard that protects participants' autonomy and supports the ethical integrity and credibility of the research process (NHREC, 2022). Participants in this study were informed of their right to withdraw from the study should they choose to do so.

1.11 DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

It is important to give meaning and understanding to certain concepts used within this study. These key concepts are used throughout the thesis.

Accreditation: This refers to the certification of a person, a body or an institution as having the competence to perform a specific role in the quality assurance system

established by the South African Qualifications Authority in line with the South African Qualifications Authority Act, 1995 (Act No. 58 of 1995).

Independent Schools: A school registered or deemed registered under section 46 of the South African Schools Act, 1996 (Act No. 84 of 1996), is known as an independent school, in terms of finances and governance, an entity that is financially and administratively self-sufficient. They are not managed by local, state or national governments and are also known as private schools, non-governmental schools, privately funded schools or non-state schools.

Umalusi: The Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training (Act No. 58 of 2001) was established by the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act of 2001. It is charged with supporting the NQF's objectives and developing and managing the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework under the National Qualifications Framework Act, 2008 (Act No. 67 of 2008).

Quality Council: This refers to the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training as contemplated in the National Qualifications Framework, 2008 (Act No. 67 of 2008) and the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act 2001, (Act No. 58 of 2001) as amended in 2008.

Quality Assurance: This refers to the National Qualifications Framework, 2008 (Act No. 67 of 2008) and the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act 2001 (Act No. 58 of 2001) as revised in 2008 and established the quality council for General and Further Education and Training.

Rural Education: This refers to the provision of teaching and learning in schools and educational institutions located in rural or geographically remote areas. It is shaped by the social, economic, cultural and infrastructural conditions of rural communities and often involves challenges such as limited access to qualified teachers, learning resources, technology, transport and essential services. Rural education therefore includes the policies, practices and support systems aimed at ensuring equitable access to quality education for learners in rural settings.

Limpopo: Limpopo is one of South Africa’s nine provinces and is situated in the northernmost part of the country. The province is characterised by an extensive geographical area comprising predominantly rural settlements, dispersed

communities and a comparatively limited concentration of major urban centres. Its social and economic landscape is shaped by agriculture, traditional community structures and uneven access to infrastructure and essential public services. Within the context of education, the province provides an important setting for examining the experiences of rural schools, as many institutions serve communities affected by geographical isolation, constrained resources, poverty and limited access to specialised educational support. Accordingly, Limpopo is particularly relevant to studies concerned with educational access, equity, school governance and the implementation of quality-assurance and accreditation requirements in rural contexts.

Normalisation Process Theory (NPT): This is a sociological theory used to explain how new or modified practices, policies, technologies, and organisational procedures are implemented, integrated, and sustained as routine components of everyday work. It focuses on the individual and collective work undertaken by participants to make sense of a new practice, secure engagement, operationalise it and evaluate its effects. NPT examines these processes through four interrelated constructs: coherence (how participants understand the practice), cognitive participation (how they engage with it), collective action (how they enact it in practice), and reflexive monitoring (how they assess and adapt it over time). The theory is therefore useful for analysing the factors that enable or constrain the institutionalisation of new practices within organisational settings.

School Management Team: is the formal leadership and management structure responsible for the day-to-day administration, organisation and instructional leadership of a school. It ordinarily comprises the principal, deputy principal and departmental heads or other designated senior staff members. The SMT is responsible for implementing education policies, managing teaching and learning, coordinating staff activities, overseeing curriculum delivery, administering school resources and supporting learner achievement. It also assists the principal in promoting accountable governance, effective communication, staff development and continuous school improvement.

Educational Leadership and Management: This refers to the processes through which educational leaders provide strategic direction, influence institutional practices and coordinate human, financial and physical resources to achieve educational goals. Educational leadership focuses on establishing a shared vision, motivating and

developing staff, guiding teaching and learning, and promoting continuous institutional improvement. Educational management, by contrast, emphasises planning, organising, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the policies, programmes and resources required for the effective functioning of an educational institution. Together, these interconnected processes support sound governance, accountability, equitable resource utilisation, effective curriculum delivery and improved learner outcomes.

Qualification: a formal recognition awarded by an authorised education or training institution or quality-assurance body to confirm that an individual has achieved specified learning outcomes, competencies and standards. It is obtained through the successful completion of an approved programme of study, training or assessment and may include certificates, diplomas and degrees. A qualification indicates the holder's level of knowledge and competence within a particular field and may provide access to further education, employment or professional practice.

Equity: refers to the principle of fairness in the distribution of opportunities, resources, support and treatment, taking into account the different circumstances and needs of individuals or groups. In education, equity involves identifying and addressing systemic barriers and historical disadvantages so that all learners can access, participate in and benefit from quality educational opportunities. Unlike equality, which generally provides the same resources or treatment to everyone, equity recognises that differentiated support may be necessary to achieve fair and comparable educational outcomes.

1.12 CHAPTER DIVISION

Chapter 1 – Overview and the Background of the Study

This chapter provided an overview of the study by presenting the introduction, the statement of the research problem, the research question and the aims and objectives of the study. It further outlined the theoretical framework underpinning the research, offers a brief overview of the research design and methodology and concluded with definitions of key concepts relevant to the study.

Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework

The chapter focuses on the theoretical framework of the study, clarifying the chosen theory in detail. The theory discussed is the Normalisation Process Theory. The

chapter demonstrates that NPT provides a useful lens for examining the practical experiences of schools, highlighting how accreditation becomes integrated into daily school practices despite challenges such as limited resources and contextual constraints.

Chapter 3 – Literature Review

This chapter reviews relevant scholarly literature on quality assurance and accreditation in education, with particular focus on independent and rural schooling contexts. It situates the study within existing debates on standardisation, equity and contextual responsiveness in accreditation processes.

Chapter 4 – Methodology and Research Design

This chapter provides a detailed account of the research design and methodological approach employed in the study. It further outlines the strategies used to ensure methodological rigour and addresses the ethical considerations guiding the research process.

Chapter 5 – Data Analysis and Findings, Interpretation and Presentation

This chapter presents and analyses the data generated in the study, followed by the interpretation and discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

This chapter summarises the key findings of the study and discusses their implications for policy, practice, and future research. It also outlines the limitations of the study.

1.13 CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined the legislative and policy framework governing the accreditation of independent schools in South Africa, highlighting Umalusi's role in quality assurance. It discussed the contextual challenges experienced by rural independent schools in Limpopo Province, including resource limitations, difficulties in attracting qualified teachers and infrastructural constraints that complicate compliance with uniform accreditation standards. The research problem, purpose, research questions and relevance of the study were clarified, and the qualitative case study methodology was briefly outlined. Overall, the chapter established a foundation for examining how the accreditation process influences teaching, learning and school management in

rural independent schools, with the aim of contributing to more equitable and context-responsive quality assurance practices.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework underpinning the study and explains how its key concepts and propositions provide an analytical lens for interpreting the experiences of independent rural schools within the accreditation process.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the study, including the background, problem statement, research questions, aims and objectives, as well as the significance and underlying assumptions of the research. Building on this foundation, the present chapter advances the study by outlining the theoretical framework that underpins the investigation.

A theoretical framework functions as the conceptual architecture that guides scholarly inquiry, shaping how a study is structured, interpreted and situated within existing knowledge. Contemporary methodological scholars conceptualise the theoretical framework not merely as a descriptive element, but as an analytical lens through which research problems are examined and understood (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It provides a systematic integration of established theories that are relevant to the research phenomenon, thereby ensuring that the study is anchored within recognised academic discourse and contributes meaningfully to theory development.

Rather than serving as a static ‘blueprint’, recent literature emphasises that the theoretical framework operates as a dynamic and interpretive scaffold, enabling researchers to critically engage with existing theoretical perspectives while constructing new insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In this sense, the framework guides both the design and interpretation of the study by clarifying key concepts, assumptions and relationships that inform the research process. It also plays a crucial role in demonstrating the theoretical positioning of the study, ensuring coherence between the research questions, methodology and analysis.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework can be understood as a conceptual map, directing the researcher’s engagement with empirical data and shaping the trajectory of inquiry. It synthesises existing knowledge to illuminate how specific variables or phenomena are interconnected, thereby supporting explanation, contextualisation, and, in some cases, prediction (Tight, 2020). Through this process, the researcher is able to position the study within broader debates, identify gaps in the literature and justify the relevance of the research focus.

2.2 ADVANTAGES OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Importantly, theories embedded within the framework serve not only to explain observed phenomena but also to enable the researcher to critically interrogate underlying assumptions and power dynamics within the field of study. As such, a well-developed theoretical framework strengthens the scholarly rigour of the research by moving beyond description to facilitate analytical depth and conceptual clarity.

In this chapter, the theoretical framework is therefore presented as a critical foundation for the study, informing both the analytical direction and interpretive depth of the research. It establishes the conceptual grounding necessary for understanding the experiences of independent rural schools within the broader context of accreditation, quality assurance, and educational inequality.

A theoretical framework provides the intellectual foundation for a study by articulating the key concepts, assumptions and relationships that guide the inquiry. It serves as a conceptual lens through which the phenomenon under investigation is understood, analysed and interpreted. The theoretical framework does not merely describe theory; rather, it justifies the selection of particular theoretical perspectives and demonstrates how these perspectives shape the research design, data generation and analytical processes (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Casanave & Li, 2015).

In educational research, the theoretical framework plays a critical role in situating a study within existing bodies of knowledge while simultaneously offering a structure for interrogating practice, policy and experience. It enables the researcher to move beyond descriptive accounts by providing an explanatory basis for understanding how and why particular processes operate in specific contexts. As argued, a well-articulated framework enhances conceptual coherence by linking the research problem, research questions, methodology and interpretation of findings into a logically consistent whole.

Within the context of accreditation and quality assurance, theoretical frameworks are especially important because accreditation represents a complex social, organisational and regulatory process. Accreditation is not only a technical evaluation mechanism but also a socially constructed practice shaped by power relations, institutional cultures, accountability regimes and contextual constraints. Contemporary quality assurance research increasingly emphasises the need for

theoretical approaches that are able to capture these dynamics, particularly in resource-constrained and marginalised educational settings such as rural independent schools (Harvey & Williams, 2022; Hou et al., 2024).

This study adopted a theoretical framework to examine how accreditation processes are understood, enacted and experienced by independent schools operating in rural contexts. The framework provides a basis for analysing how institutional actors interpret accreditation requirements, mobilise resources, allocate responsibilities and respond to external accountability pressures. It also allows for critical examination of the alignment or misalignment, between policy intentions and lived practice, particularly where contextual limitations shape schools' capacity to comply with prescribed standards. Importantly, the theoretical framework informs both the methodological orientation and the analytical strategy of the study. It guides the selection of variables or constructs of interest, shapes the formulation of research questions, and directs attention to specific patterns and relationships within the data. In qualitative research, such as this study, the framework supports interpretive depth by offering sensitising concepts that enable the researcher to identify underlying meanings, tensions, and processes embedded in participants' experiences (Maxwell, 2023).

By grounding the study in an explicit theoretical framework, this research ensured analytical rigour, conceptual clarity and scholarly credibility. The framework enables systematic engagement with international and South African debates on accreditation, quality assurance and school improvement, while providing a coherent structure for examining the specific challenges and opportunities faced by rural independent schools undergoing accreditation. In so doing, it bridges theory, policy and practice and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of accreditation as both a regulatory mechanism and a driver of educational change.

The theoretical framework of a study supplies the theoretical assumptions for the study's larger context (Casanave & Li, 2015). It is the basis on which a research project is built and provides a lens through which to view the findings. It also aids in grounding the study topic under investigation, as well as framing the inquiry for data analysis and interpretation.

2.3 NORMALISATION PROCESS THEORY

This research was based on the Normalisation Process Theory (NPT), a sociological theory that explains how novel ideas are implemented, embedded and integrated in various settings (Desveaux et al., 2017). This theory was deemed appropriate for this research since it describes the ways in which the accreditation process might affect quality. It considers how people comprehend and make meaning of a strategy, how to engage and participate in it, how to allocate tasks and how to reflect on or evaluate its results. It appears that the Normalisation Process Theory also emphasises that participation in an accreditation process is mandatory in some sectors, which means that it has been designed to improve quality of organisations (Desveaux et al., 2017). It focuses on four main areas which are described in subsequent sections.

2.3.1 Normalisation Process Theory Focus

This section presents the four main areas on which the NPT focuses.

2.3.1.1 Coherence and meaning-making

NPT explores how individuals within an organisation understand and make sense of a new strategy or process, like accreditation. This involves interpreting what the process entails and its significance for improving quality in the organisation. In the context of accreditation, stakeholders must grasp its purpose, how it impacts their work and the broader implications for maintaining standards (Desveaux et al., 2017). This aligns directly with the first research objective and question, which focuses on how stakeholders understand and interpret accreditation requirements. Comprehension and meaning-making enable analysis of whether accreditation is perceived as a meaningful quality improvement mechanism or merely as a compliance obligation and how this understanding shapes stakeholder attitudes towards the process.

2.3.1.2. Engagement and participation

The theory also considers how individuals are motivated to engage and actively participate in the process. Accreditation, particularly in sectors where it is mandatory, requires not only compliance but also meaningful involvement from those affected. This aspect of NPT helps explain the willingness and effort organisations put into meeting accreditation standards (Desveaux et al., 2017). This corresponds with the second research objective and question. This construct facilitates examination of how

school leaders, teachers and governing bodies are mobilised to support accreditation, the extent of their commitment and the leadership practices that enable or constrain meaningful participation, particularly within rural contexts characterised by limited capacity.

2.3.1.3 Task allocation

Normalisation Process Theory examines how tasks related to the new process are distributed among members of the organisation. In accreditation, this could mean assigning roles to various staff members, such as those responsible for preparing documentation, conducting self-evaluations or liaising with external auditors. Effective task allocation is crucial for ensuring that the accreditation process runs smoothly and that responsibilities are clearly understood (Desveaux et al., 2017). This aligns with the third research objective and question, which investigates how accreditation is operationalised within schools. This construct supports detailed analysis of how tasks are allocated, how resources are mobilised and how accreditation activities interact with existing teaching and management responsibilities. It is especially relevant for understanding how rural schools manage competing demands under conditions of resource scarcity.

2.3.1.4 Reflection and evaluation

Finally, NPT looks at how individuals and organisations reflect on the outcomes of the process and evaluate its effectiveness. For accreditation, this might involve assessing whether quality improvements have been achieved and determining if the process itself contributes to the organisation's goals. Continuous reflection helps organisations adapt and improve based on their experience with accreditation (Desveaux et al., 2017). This aligns with the fourth research objective and question, which focuses on how stakeholders evaluate the effects of accreditation. Through this construct, the study explores whether accreditation leads to perceived improvements in teaching, learning, governance and institutional capacity or whether it generates unintended consequences such as increased administrative burden.

2.4 ADVANTAGES OF NORMALISATION PROCESS THEORY

By aligning each research objective and question with the core constructs of NPT, the study achieves strong conceptual coherence between its aims, theoretical framework and methodological approach. This alignment ensures that data collection

and analysis are theoretically informed, analytically rigorous and capable of generating nuanced insights into how accreditation processes are normalised or resisted within rural independent schools. Ultimately, this theoretical alignment strengthens the study's contribution to knowledge by linking lived experiences of accreditation to broader debates on quality assurance, institutional capacity and educational equity.

In the South African context, the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act (GENFETQA) mandates that independent schools must register with the Provincial Education Department and subsequently undergo quality assurance procedures. This requirement highlights the mandatory nature of accreditation in South Africa, aligning with NPT's emphasis on how compulsory participation in such processes is often designed to enhance organisational quality (Desveaux et al., 2017). The theory provides a valuable lens for understanding how schools and other educational institutions navigate the accreditation process and its broader impact on educational standards.

2.5 STRUCTURES AND INFLUENCING FACTORS OF THE NORMALISATION PROCESS THEORY

The diagram below (Figure 2.1) visually represents the key structures and influencing factors that impact the accreditation process, such as competing accountabilities, leadership engagement and resource constraints (Desveaux et al., 2017). These factors are highly relevant to the experiences of rural schools in Limpopo, which must balance the demands of accreditation with other institutional priorities.



(Source: Desveaux et al., 2017)

Figure 2.1: Normalisation Process Theory

The NPT as illustrated in Figure 2.1 (Desveaux et al., 2017), highlights key structures influencing the accreditation process. These structures include the accreditation process itself and competing accountabilities, such as teaching, learning and other institutional activities that require attention alongside accreditation. The diagram emphasises several influencing factors that impact the accreditation process, such as the support provided to the institution by accrediting bodies or external

consultants, the engagement of leadership, and the availability of both human and financial resources.

According to NPT, for an institution to be accredited, there must be a clear understanding and acceptance ('buy-in') of the accreditation process. This means that the institution must recognise the importance of accreditation and engage with it meaningfully. Cognitive engagement, or understanding the rationale behind accreditation, is crucial for the institution's active participation in the process (Desveaux et al., 2017). Once the institution buys into the accreditation process, it aligns its beliefs, behaviours and actions with the accreditation goals, ensuring coherence within the institution. This alignment promotes a conducive institutional culture, which in turn, leads to improvements in collective quality.

Three accreditation models, as outlined by the Institute of Medicine (2001), further contextualise this study. The first model treats accreditation as a *supplement to government regulation,* where entities seek accreditation as a mark of quality. This positions accredited institutions as exceeding the basic performance standards set by the government.

The second model suggests that accreditation replaces *governmental regulation* with private regulation, especially in contexts like higher education, reducing government costs by shifting regulatory expenses to user fees (Institute of Medicine, 2001). The third model highlights accreditation as a *verification process*, ensuring compliance with government or other regulatory standards rather than setting independent criteria (Institute of Medicine, 2001).

The application of NPT to the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo provides valuable insights into their navigation of the Umalusi accreditation process. NPT emphasises the need for institutional buy-in, where schools must fully understand and engage with the purpose and objectives of accreditation to participate meaningfully. In the rural Limpopo context, schools face additional challenges, such as limited resources and infrastructure, which affect their ability to meet Umalusi's stringent accreditation standards.

Competing accountabilities, as highlighted by NPT, are particularly relevant for rural schools, which must balance the demands of accreditation with teaching and learning while managing resource constraints. Leadership engagement is also critical in these

schools, as strong guidance is needed to navigate the complexities of accreditation. NPT's focus on institutional coherence further explains how the alignment of beliefs, behaviours and actions within the school community is essential for improving overall quality through accreditation.

In rural Limpopo, where resource scarcity and distance from urban centres may hinder full engagement with the accreditation process, NPT offers a useful lens for understanding how these schools internalise and implement Umalusi's requirements. The theory helps to shed light on the factors that influence their experiences, from resource limitations to leadership roles and provides a framework for examining how the accreditation process impacts educational quality in these challenging contexts.

2.6 LIMITATIONS OF NORMALISATION PROCESS THEORY

While NPT is widely used to examine how new practices are implemented and sustained, it is primarily a process-oriented lens and, on its own, may not fully account for the political, material and institutional conditions that structure accreditation work in rural independent schools (Kumar et al., 2025). Accordingly, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study.

2.6.1 Limited Attention to Macro-Level Power and Regulation

NPT foregrounds the work that local actors do to implement and sustain a practice, but it is less explicit about how macro-level governance arrangements, regulatory authority and political contestation shape what is possible at school level. In accreditation systems, standards, evidence requirements, timelines and the consequences of non-compliance are often determined by external regulators and quality assurance bodies, creating an uneven relationship in which schools must respond to rules they did not set (Riley, 2024). In the South African schooling context, quality assurance mandates and reporting requirements may therefore structure accreditation as a compliance-driven process, particularly for small, rural providers with limited negotiating power (Umalusi, 2024).

Relatedly, power asymmetries between regulators/accreditors and rural independent schools can shape stakeholder experience in ways that are not fully theorised by NPT. Schools may have limited access to technical support, limited opportunities to contest findings and limited influence over how standards are interpreted, yet they still carry substantial documentation burdens and reputational risks. In practice,

accreditation can operate as a ‘signal’ of legitimacy to external audiences, while simultaneously functioning as a mechanism of surveillance and control, increasing pressure to demonstrate compliance regardless of local constraints (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2023). This suggests that analyses based only on NPT may understate how authority, legitimacy and accountability regimes shape the accreditation work that participants describe.

2.6.2 Underplays Material Conditions and Inequality

Although NPT acknowledges ‘context’, it does not fully theorise how entrenched material conditions and structural inequality systematically shape organisations’ capacity to undertake and sustain accreditation work. In rural independent schools, infrastructural deficits, limited staffing, constrained administrative capacity and uneven access to professional support can directly determine whether accreditation requirements are feasible, irrespective of stakeholders’ intentions or commitment. Recent critiques in evaluation and implementation research emphasise that explanations of ‘what works’ must be attentive to the ways that historically produced inequities and uneven resource distributions constrain agency and shape observed implementation patterns (Renmans et al., 2022).

Consequently, variations in ‘normalisation’ across schools may reflect unequal starting points rather than differences in leadership quality or organisational culture. Without an explicit inequality-sensitive framing, NPT-informed accounts risk obscuring how accreditation can reproduce disadvantage by holding institutions to uniform standards while ignoring uneven capacities to mobilise resources and evidence. Given ongoing debates about how quality assurance and accreditation systems can generate both improvement and burden, especially in resource-constrained settings, it is important to interpret implementation work alongside material constraints and institutional histories (Kumar et al., 2025).

2.6.3 Focus on Process Rather than Outcomes

NPT is strong in explaining how accreditation is understood, taken up, enacted and appraised, but it is less suited to demonstrating whether accreditation *causes* improvements in educational quality. Establishing impact requires additional evaluative logic and careful attention to context–mechanism–outcome relationships, especially in complex social systems where multiple initiatives operate

simultaneously (Rees et al., 2025). In this study, stakeholder accounts may indicate perceived changes in governance and routines, but these cannot be straightforwardly attributed to accreditation alone.

Because NPT is not a theory of impact evaluation, it offers limited guidance on outcome measurement, causal attribution or comparing ‘effect sizes’ across schools. For this reason, claims about accreditation benefits in this study are framed as *experienced* and *interpreted* outcomes reported by participants, and are considered alongside alternative explanations, such as concurrent policy changes, staffing transitions or shifts in community enrolment patterns. This caution aligns with contemporary guidance in realist-oriented qualitative analysis, which emphasises transparent reasoning about how outcomes are generated and why they may differ across contexts (Rees et al., 2025).

2.6.4 Risk of Responsibilising Local Actors

By emphasising the ‘work’ that participants do to embed accreditation, NPT can inadvertently shift analytic attention toward school-level effort and away from system-level conditions that structure that effort. In regulated accreditation environments, compliance expectations can be extensive and time-bound, even where schools have limited administrative support, creating pressures that are experienced as individual or organisational failure rather than as predictable consequences of governance design (Hegji, 2024). In rural independent schools, principals and teachers may therefore be positioned as the primary agents responsible for achieving accreditation outcomes, despite operating under constraints that they cannot realistically change.

This can enable a deficit framing in which limited progress is interpreted as weak leadership or poor engagement, rather than as a function of resource scarcity, regulatory complexity and uneven access to support. Accreditation research notes that external quality regimes can simultaneously encourage improvement and generate administrative burden, with burdens often falling most heavily on under-resourced providers (Kumar et al., 2025). To mitigate this limitation, the study interprets NPT constructs alongside contextual explanations and explicitly considers how governance arrangements and resource conditions constrain what actors can reasonably accomplish.

2.6.5 May not Capture Symbolic, Reputational and Compliance Dynamics Fully

In high-stakes or mandatory accreditation settings, participation may be motivated by legitimacy, risk management and market signalling as much as by commitments to improvement. Institutional theory-informed studies of accreditation emphasise that accreditation can operate as a symbol of credibility and trustworthiness to external stakeholders, which may encourage strategic compliance and 'performative' evidence production (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2023). For independent schools, this can mean prioritising documentation and audit readiness over deeper organisational learning, especially where accreditation status has implications for reputation and continued operation.

Because NPT prioritises implementation work within organisations, it may not fully capture how external institutional pressures, such as reputational competition, regulatory monitoring and resource-dependent compliance incentives, which shape motivations and behaviours. Contemporary reviews of accreditation and quality assurance highlight ongoing tensions between quality improvement aims and compliance dynamics, including the risk that accreditation becomes bureaucratised and focused on checklists rather than educational change (Kumar et al., 2025). In this study, participant accounts that foreground compliance pressure are therefore interpreted in relation to these broader institutional dynamics, not only through NPT constructs.

2.6.6 Construct Boundaries Can Be Analytically Overlapping

In practice, the boundaries between NPT constructs can be difficult to maintain during analysis because participant narratives often move between sense-making, participation, operational work and appraisal within the same account. This creates analytic overlap in which the same excerpt may plausibly be interpreted as coherence, engagement, collective action and/or reflexive monitoring. Such overlap is a recognised challenge in theory-informed qualitative analysis, where frameworks can sharpen attention but may also encourage over-categorisation if applied too rigidly (Rees et al., 2025).

As a result, coding involves interpretivist judgement and may be sensitive to how the analyst defines constructs, the granularity of coding and the extent to which context

is integrated into interpretation. Methodological mapping work on theory-driven approaches emphasises the importance of transparent analytic procedures, reflexive documentation of decisions and explicit articulation of how context is handled when linking processes to outcomes (Renmans & Castellano Pleguezuelo, 2023). In this study, these risks are managed by using clear working definitions, documenting analytic decisions through memos and allowing justified multiple-coding where overlap is analytically meaningful.

2.6.7 Addressing the Limitations

To address these limitations, this study uses NPT as a structured interpretive lens for examining how accreditation is made sense of, enacted and sustained in rural independent schools, while avoiding claims that the theory alone can explain regulatory power, institutional legitimacy or causal impact. The analysis, therefore, pays explicit attention to governance arrangements, resource conditions and rural inequalities when interpreting participants' accounts, recognising that implementation work is shaped by constraints that sit outside the school. In line with contemporary guidance on theory-driven qualitative analysis, the study treats observed and reported outcomes as context-dependent and explains them cautiously by considering plausible alternative explanations and the mechanisms through which change may (or may not) occur (Rees et al., 2025). Transparency is strengthened by documenting analytic decisions, clearly distinguishing between process explanations and impact claims and maintaining an explicit focus on how context conditions the work of accreditation (Renmans & Castellano Pleguezuelo, 2023). Overall, NPT supports a systematic account of accreditation practices, while the study explicitly acknowledges that additional theoretical lenses are required to fully explain power, inequality and legitimacy dynamics within accreditation regimes.

2.7 THE RELEVANCE OF THEORIES IN THE LITERATURE REVIEW CHAPTER

The incorporation of theory within a literature review is fundamental to establishing the intellectual and scholarly grounding of a research study. In contemporary academic research, theories are not merely descriptive tools; rather, they function as analytical frameworks that enable researchers to interpret phenomena, structure inquiry and situate their work within broader disciplinary debates (Creswell &

Creswell, 2023). The relevance of theory in the review of literature lies in its capacity to provide conceptual clarity, guide the research process and enhance the explanatory power of the study.

Firstly, theories serve as conceptual lenses through which research problems are understood. They help to define key constructs, clarify relationships between variables and establish the boundaries of the study. As Braun and Clarke (2022) argue, a theoretically informed literature review moves beyond summarising existing studies to critically engaging with how knowledge is produced and represented within a particular field. In this regard, theory enables the researcher to interrogate assumptions, identify contradictions and synthesise diverse strands of knowledge into a coherent narrative.

Secondly, theory strengthens the analytical rigour and coherence of the research. By grounding the study in established theoretical perspectives, the researcher demonstrates that the inquiry is not conducted in isolation but is part of an ongoing scholarly conversation (Tight, 2020). This theoretical anchoring ensures alignment between the research problem, research questions, methodological choices and analytical strategies. It also facilitates the development of a conceptual framework that guides data interpretation and ensures consistency throughout the research process.

Thirdly, theories play a critical role in identifying gaps in the literature and justifying the significance of the study. A well-developed theoretical review enables the researcher to highlight areas where existing theories may be insufficient, contested or in need of refinement (Booth et al., 2021). This is particularly important in studies examining complex social phenomena, such as educational accreditation in rural contexts, where multiple theoretical perspectives may intersect. Through this process, the research contributes not only to empirical knowledge but also to theoretical advancement.

Furthermore, theories facilitate the integration of empirical findings with broader conceptual insights, enabling the researcher to move beyond description towards explanation and interpretation. As Flick (2022) notes, theory-driven research enhances the depth of analysis by linking observed patterns to underlying structures

and processes. In this sense, theory provides the basis for developing generalisable insights and for situating the study within wider academic and policy debates.

In addition, the relevance of theory extends to its role in enhancing the credibility and scholarly legitimacy of the research. By engaging with contemporary theoretical perspectives, the researcher demonstrates familiarity with current debates and establishes the intellectual merit of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This is particularly important in research, where theoretical sophistication is a key criterion for quality and originality.

Importantly, recent scholars emphasise that theories should not be used uncritically. Instead, researchers are encouraged to adopt a reflexive and critical approach, recognising that theories are shaped by specific contexts, assumptions and power dynamics (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This critical engagement allows researchers to adapt, extend or challenge existing theories in ways that are responsive to their specific research contexts.

In the context of this study, theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how independent rural schools experience accreditation processes within systems characterised by inequality, regulation and institutional change. It enables the researcher to analyse accreditation not only as a procedural requirement but also as a socially and structurally embedded phenomenon.

In summary, the use of theory in the literature review is vital for ensuring conceptual clarity, analytical depth and scholarly rigour. By guiding the research process and linking empirical findings to broader intellectual traditions, theory strengthens the overall coherence and contribution of the study.

2.8 THE RELEVANCE OF THEORIES IN THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY CHAPTER

The integration of theory within the research design and methodology chapter is essential for ensuring methodological coherence, epistemological alignment and analytical rigour in scholarly inquiry. In contemporary research practice, theory does not operate independently of method; rather, it informs and shapes the design, data generation and analytical processes of a study. The relevance of theory in this chapter lies in its capacity to provide a conceptual foundation that aligns research questions, methodological choices and interpretive strategies.

Firstly, theory plays a critical role in guiding the epistemological and ontological positioning of the study. Research design is intrinsically linked to how knowledge is conceptualised and constructed. Theories inform whether a study adopts an interpretivist, positivist or critical paradigm, thereby influencing decisions related to methodology, data collection methods and analytical approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023). In qualitative research, for instance, theoretical perspectives shape how phenomena are understood and how meaning is interpreted, ensuring that methodological choices are consistent with the underlying philosophical assumptions of the study.

Secondly, theory contributes to the development of a logically coherent research design. A theoretically grounded design ensures that there is alignment between the problem statement, research questions and methods employed. As Ravitch and Carl (2021) argue, theory enables researchers to construct what is referred to as a ‘conceptual coherence map’, linking theoretical assumptions to methodological procedures. This coherence is particularly important in complex studies, where multiple variables, actors and contextual factors interact.

Thirdly, theories inform the selection of appropriate methodological approaches. Different theories prioritise different forms of data, modes of inquiry and analytical techniques. For example, systems-oriented theories may necessitate holistic, context-sensitive approaches, while critical theories may require methods that foreground issues of power and inequality. As Tracy (2020) notes, the theoretical foundation of a study directly influences methodological decisions, including sampling strategies, data collection tools and analytical frameworks. This ensures that methodological choices are not arbitrary but are grounded in a clear conceptual rationale.

Furthermore, theory enhances the interpretive depth of data analysis. Within the methodology chapter, theoretical frameworks guide how data are analysed and interpreted. Rather than relying solely on descriptive analysis, theory enables the researcher to interrogate patterns, relationships and underlying structures within the data. This is particularly important in qualitative studies, where meaning is constructed through interpretation. According to Saldaña (2021), theory-driven analysis facilitates the development of higher-order insights by linking empirical findings to broader conceptual categories and explanatory frameworks.

In addition, theory plays a crucial role in strengthening the validity and trustworthiness of the research. By providing a clear conceptual basis for methodological decisions, theory enhances the credibility of the study and demonstrates that the research process is systematic and well-justified. Maxwell (2021) emphasises that theoretical frameworks contribute to internal validity by ensuring that the research design adequately addresses the research questions and that interpretations are logically grounded in both theory and data.

Moreover, theory supports the researcher in addressing complexity and context within the research design. In studies involving dynamic and context-dependent phenomena, such as educational accreditation in rural environments, the use of theory allows for a more nuanced understanding of how structural, institutional, and social factors interact. This enables the researcher to design methodologies that are sufficiently flexible and responsive to contextual realities (Tracy, 2020).

Importantly, contemporary research emphasises the need for reflexive engagement with theory. Rather than applying theory in a rigid or prescriptive manner, researchers are encouraged to critically interrogate and adapt theoretical frameworks to align with their specific research contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023). This reflexive use of theory enhances methodological innovation and allows for the generation of context-sensitive insights.

In the context of this study, theory is integral to the design and methodological choices, informing the selection of a qualitative, interpretive approach and guiding the analysis of participants' experiences within broader systems of accreditation and educational governance. It ensures that the study is not only methodologically sound but also conceptually robust.

In conclusion, the relevance of theory in the research design and methodology chapter extends beyond its role as a supporting element; it is central to shaping the entire research process. By guiding epistemological positioning, informing methodological choices, enhancing analytical depth, and strengthening validity, theory ensures coherence, rigour and scholarly credibility. A theoretically informed methodology, therefore, provides a solid foundation for producing meaningful, reliable and impactful research outcomes.

2.9 THE RELEVANCE OF THEORIES IN THE DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS CHAPTER

The role of theory within the data presentation, analysis and discussion of findings chapter is central to advancing research from descriptive reporting to analytical interpretation and scholarly contribution. At this stage of the research process, theory functions not merely as a background framework but as an interpretivist lens that facilitates meaning-making, explanation and the development of deeper insights. Its relevance lies in enabling the researcher to connect empirical findings to broader conceptual understandings, thereby enhancing the intellectual rigour and explanatory power of the study.

Firstly, theory is essential in guiding the analytical interpretation of data. While data presentation involves organising and reporting findings, the analytical process requires moving beyond surface-level patterns to interrogate underlying meanings, relationships and structures. Theoretical frameworks provide the conceptual categories through which such interpretation is made possible, allowing the researcher to connect observed phenomena with established explanatory models (Merriam & Tisdell, 2021). In qualitative research, this process is particularly significant, as meaning is not inherent in the data itself but is constructed through theoretically informed interpretation.

Secondly, theory enables the transition from description to explanation. Without theoretical grounding, data analysis risks remaining purely descriptive and lacking analytical depth. By applying theory, the researcher is able to interpret findings within a broader context, identifying causal mechanisms, patterns of behaviour and structural influences that shape the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2021). In this sense, theory transforms empirical observations into analytically meaningful insights.

Thirdly, theory supports the development of a coherent and integrative discussion of findings. The discussion chapter requires the researcher to relate empirical findings to existing literature and theoretical perspectives, demonstrating how the study confirms, extends or challenges existing knowledge. According to Saunders et al. (2023), theory provides the basis for this comparative analysis, enabling the

researcher to position findings within established academic debates. This process is critical for demonstrating the originality and contribution of the research.

Furthermore, theory plays a vital role in enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis. The use of a clearly defined theoretical framework ensures that interpretations are not arbitrary but are grounded in established conceptual reasoning. This strengthens the dependability of the findings and allows readers to trace how conclusions were derived from both data and theory (Bazeley, 2021). In research, such transparency is essential for demonstrating methodological integrity and analytical rigour. In addition, theory facilitates the identification and exploration of patterns, relationships and contradictions within the data. Theoretical perspectives enable researchers to recognise connections that may not be immediately apparent and to interpret divergences in ways that deepen understanding rather than treating them as inconsistencies. This aligns with contemporary qualitative research practices that emphasise the importance of engaging with complexity and nuance in data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2021).

Theory is also crucial in supporting the generalisation and transferability of research findings. While qualitative studies may not aim for statistical generalisation, theoretical generalisation is achieved by linking findings to broader conceptual frameworks. This allows insights derived from a specific context, such as independent rural schools, to be understood in relation to wider theoretical constructs and applied to similar contexts (Patton, 2021). In this regard, theory strengthens the broader applicability and relevance of the study.

Moreover, theory enables the researcher to engage in critical analysis and reflexivity within the discussion of findings. By applying theoretical perspectives, researchers can interrogate power dynamics, structural inequalities and institutional constraints that shape the phenomenon under study. This is particularly important in research contexts involving education systems, where issues of equity, access and policy implementation are central. The use of theory thus facilitates a more critical and reflective engagement with the data, elevating the analysis to a higher level of scholarly sophistication (Saunders et al., 2023).

Importantly, theories also provide the foundation for theorising from empirical findings, which is a key expectation. Rather than simply applying existing theories,

researchers are expected to extend, refine or challenge them based on empirical evidence. This process, often referred to as analytic generalisation, enables the development of new conceptual insights that contribute to knowledge production within the field (Bazeley, 2021). In the context of this study, theory is integral to interpreting how independent rural schools experience the Umalusi accreditation process. It enables the researcher to move beyond describing challenges and outcomes to critically analysing the underlying structural, institutional and policy dynamics that shape these experiences. Through this theoretical engagement, accreditation is understood not only as a procedural requirement but also as a socially embedded and contextually influenced process.

In conclusion, the relevance of theory in the data presentation, analysis and discussion of findings chapter lies in its ability to transform empirical data into meaningful, explanatory and theoretically informed insights. It supports analytical depth, enhances coherence, strengthens credibility and enables the study to contribute to broader academic and policy debates. A theoretically informed analysis is therefore essential for achieving the level of rigour, originality and critical engagement required in doctoral research.

2.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented and critically engaged with the theoretical perspectives relevant to understanding the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo as they undergo the Umalusi accreditation process. The discussion drew on appropriate educational quality assurance theory, which is Normalisation Process Theory, to explain how rural schools interpret, respond to and are shaped by accreditation requirements. The chapter highlighted how this theoretical lens illuminates the complex realities faced by independent rural schools, including issues of resource constraints, institutional pressures, compliance demands and contextual challenges unique to rural settings. In particular, the framework underscores how accreditation is not merely a technical process but a socially and institutionally embedded practice that requires schools to align with national standards while navigating local limitations. Furthermore, the integration of this theory has established a clear link between the study's objectives and the broader discourse on educational quality assurance and school improvement. It has also identified gaps in existing literature, particularly regarding the lived experiences of independent rural schools

within the South African accreditation landscape, thereby reinforcing the relevance and necessity of this study. In conclusion, the theoretical framework provides a structured lens through which the study interprets the accreditation experiences of these schools. It serves as a foundation for the analysis presented in subsequent chapters, guiding the examination of empirical findings and enabling a deeper understanding of how rural independent schools engage with, and are impacted by, the Umalusi accreditation process. Overall, by foregrounding Normalisation Process Theory and its core constructs, coherence (sense-making), engagement, collective action (task allocation) and reflexive monitoring (reflection and evaluation), this chapter has established a coherent analytical lens for examining how accreditation is understood, implemented and appraised in rural independent schools. At the same time, the chapter acknowledged the limits of a purely process-focused account by highlighting how power relations, regulatory demands and material constraints may shape what schools are able to do in practice. This theoretical positioning provides the conceptual grounding for the chapters that follow, where the research design and methods are explained in detail and, subsequently, where participants' accounts are analysed to show how accreditation requirements are negotiated within real-world institutional conditions.

Chapter 3 presents a critical review of the literature relevant to the study, with particular attention to rural education, independent schooling, educational quality assurance and the accreditation of independent schools within the South African context.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Accreditation and quality assurance have become central mechanisms through which education systems worldwide seek to promote accountability, credibility and continuous improvement in schooling. In the context of independent schools, accreditation serves not only as a regulatory requirement but also as a structured process for evaluating institutional capacity, curriculum delivery, governance and learner achievement against nationally and internationally recognised standards. Contemporary literature increasingly frames accreditation as a developmental rather than purely compliance-driven activity, emphasising its role in strengthening institutional effectiveness and enhancing teaching and learning outcomes.

This chapter reviews scholarly and policy-based literature relevant to the accreditation of independent schools, with particular emphasis on rural contexts. Internationally, studies published in the post-2020 period highlight a growing shift towards integrated quality assurance models that combine internal self-evaluation with external review mechanisms, especially in response to increased accountability demands and systemic disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These models stress sustainability, relevance and institutional capacity-building, recognising that schools operate within diverse socio-economic and geographical conditions. For rural schools, accreditation processes often intersect with broader challenges related to limited resources, infrastructural deficits and restricted access to professional support, all of which influence their ability to meet prescribed quality standards.

Within the South African context, accreditation of independent schools is governed by Umalusi, the quality assurance council of the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF). Updated policy frameworks and guidelines underscore the mandatory nature of accreditation for independent schools offering registered qualifications and position quality assurance as a continuous cycle of self-evaluation, external verification and differentiated monitoring. Recent national guidelines (2022–2025) reaffirm Umalusi’s developmental approach and highlight

persistent disparities between urban and rural independent schools in their capacity to meet accreditation criteria.

The literature reviewed in this chapter is guided by the study's research questions and structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of accreditation as both a quality assurance mechanism and a driver of school improvement. By drawing on international, African and South African perspectives, the review identifies key themes, debates and gaps related to the experiences of rural independent schools undergoing accreditation. These insights provide a critical foundation for analysing how accreditation processes influence teaching, learning and school management, and they inform the theoretical framework adopted for the study. A review of related literature draws some useful lessons from various countries to strengthen the South African accreditation process articulations.

Recent methodological scholarship emphasises that a review of literature is a critical scholarly component for justifying the significance, relevance and originality of a research study, as it demonstrates how the proposed inquiry is situated within existing bodies of knowledge (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Maxwell, 2023). A rigorous review of literature requires the researcher to engage with contemporary studies in a clearly defined contextual, theoretical or methodological domain in order to establish that the research problem is worthy of systematic investigation. This may involve applying a particular methodological approach in a context where it has been underutilised or has produced limited empirical insights, thereby opening possibilities for methodological innovation and knowledge contribution (Maxwell, 2023). Rather than merely describing previous studies, the review is expected to synthesise, compare and critically evaluate relevant research to identify gaps, inconsistencies and underexplored areas that inform the framing of the research problem and questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Additionally, contemporary scholars emphasise the importance of incorporating international and comparative literature, as this enables researchers to draw transferable lessons across contexts and strengthen the analytical depth and credibility of the study (Hou et al., 2024).

3.2 BACKGROUND OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The increased emphasis on accountability, comparability and educational effectiveness has positioned accreditation and quality assurance as central

instruments of contemporary education governance worldwide. Across diverse education systems, accreditation functions as a formal mechanism for validating institutional capacity, safeguarding minimum quality standards and assuring public confidence in educational provision. Recent scholarship, particularly in the post-2020 period, reflects a decisive shift away from narrow compliance-driven models towards developmental quality assurance approaches that foreground continuous improvement, internal quality cultures and reflexive institutional practice. International literature indicates that this shift has been further accelerated by global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed systemic inequalities in institutional readiness, resource availability and governance capacity. In response, accrediting agencies and quality councils have increasingly promoted integrated models that combine internal self-evaluation with external review, emphasising adaptability, sustainability and context sensitivity. While such models are presented as more supportive and improvement-oriented, studies caution that accreditation can still constitute a significant administrative and financial burden, particularly for smaller or under-resourced institutions, potentially displacing attention from core teaching and learning functions if not well contextualised.

Within African education systems, accreditation and quality assurance are widely acknowledged as essential for improving standards and enhancing system credibility; however, their implementation is often constrained by persistent structural inequalities. Research across sub-Saharan Africa highlights chronic challenges related to inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, shortages of qualified personnel and weak institutional support systems. These challenges are most acutely experienced by rural schools, where accreditation criteria, frequently modelled on urban or well-resourced institutions, may inadequately reflect contextual realities. Consequently, accreditation processes may inadvertently reinforce existing disparities rather than serve as effective levers for equitable quality improvement.

In South Africa, the regulation and accreditation of independent schools is a statutory function administered by Umalusi in terms of the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act (GENFETQA). Accreditation within the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF) is positioned as a mandatory quality assurance process aimed at verifying institutional capacity, curriculum integrity, governance effectiveness and assessment credibility.

Recent policy revisions and implementation guidelines (2022–2025) explicitly frame accreditation as a cyclical, developmental process that incorporates self-evaluation, external verification and differentiated ongoing monitoring. This approach reflects an official commitment to quality enhancement rather than punitive compliance.

Despite this policy orientation, emerging South African literature points to disproportionate accreditation experiences among independent schools, particularly those located in rural and marginalised contexts. Rural independent schools frequently encounter compounding challenges, including financial instability, infrastructural deficits, limited access to professional support, geographical isolation and difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified staff that directly affect their ability to meet accreditation requirements. These conditions raise critical questions about the contextual responsiveness of accreditation standards and the extent to which current quality assurance frameworks enable meaningful school improvement in resource-constrained environments.

Against this backdrop, a focused and critical review of the literature is necessary to interrogate how accreditation is conceptualised, operationalised and experienced within independent schooling, with particular attention to rural contexts. By synthesising international, African and South African perspectives, this literature review establishes a conceptual and empirical foundation for examining the implications of accreditation processes for school management, teaching and learning. This background thus provides the rationale for the study and situates it within broader debates on quality assurance, equity and institutional improvement in education.

3.3 THE CONCEPT OF ACCREDITATION AND ACCREDITATION PROCESS

This section presents a conceptual and procedural overview of accreditation by examining its definition, underlying principles and the key stages involved in the accreditation process within the education sector.

3.3.1 The Concept of Accreditation

Contemporary policy and scholarly literature define accreditation as a structured and systematic quality assurance process through which an independent school's institutional capacity, curriculum delivery, governance arrangements and assessment practices are evaluated against nationally prescribed standards. In the

South African context, accreditation is administered by Umalusi and is intended to determine whether an independent school has the capacity to offer programmes and qualifications registered within the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF) (Umalusi, 2022; Umalusi, 2025a). This process functions as both a regulatory and developmental mechanism, ensuring that schools comply with minimum quality requirements while encouraging continuous institutional improvement (Hou et al., 2024).

Accreditation further serves to assure the credibility and integrity of qualifications offered by independent schools by verifying alignment with the National Qualifications Framework and National Curriculum and Assessment Standards (SAQA, 2020b). Schools seeking accreditation are therefore required to demonstrate not only access to appropriate curricula, but also the effective implementation and management of teaching, learning, assessment and internal quality assurance processes at the required standard (Umalusi, 2022b). Participation in accreditation is legally mandatory for independent schools offering registered qualifications, positioning accreditation as a central mechanism through which educational quality, accountability and public trust are safeguarded within the independent schooling sector (Umalusi, 2025a).

Contemporary scholars conceptualise accreditation as a formal, externally mediated quality assurance process through which educational institutions are evaluated and recognised against established standards of quality, integrity and effectiveness. The word ‘accreditation’ is an English word that is derived from the Latin word *credito,* meaning trust (Alstete, 2006). In recent literature, accreditation is framed not only as a mechanism for verifying compliance, but also as a process grounded in public trust, accountability and institutional credibility (OECD, 2023a; Hou et al., 2024). Within schooling systems, accreditation signals to parents, communities and regulatory authorities that an institution meets agreed benchmarks related to governance, curriculum delivery, assessment practices and learner support, thereby reinforcing confidence in educational provision (UNESCO, 2023a).

However, contemporary studies acknowledge that accreditation has historically been perceived by schools as administratively demanding and resource-intensive, particularly in contexts characterised by limited capacity. Recent empirical research indicates that while accreditation remains associated with significant documentation,

evaluation and monitoring requirements, many systems have increasingly reoriented the process toward developmental and improvement-focused quality assurance models (Harvey & Williams, 2022; Hou et al., 2024). This shift reflects a broader redefinition of accreditation as a continuous, cyclical process that integrates self-evaluation, external review and ongoing institutional learning rather than a once-off compliance exercise. Recent literature further highlights a growing emphasis on pedagogy, curriculum implementation and assessment quality within accreditation frameworks. Accrediting bodies increasingly evaluate how teaching and learning practices are aligned with curriculum standards, learner-centred pedagogies and evidence-based assessment approaches, positioning accreditation as a lever for improving instructional quality rather than merely verifying institutional inputs (OECD, 2021b; UNESCO, 2024). From this perspective, accreditation creates structured opportunities for schools to reflect on classroom practice, learner outcomes and internal quality assurance systems, thereby linking organisational evaluation with pedagogical improvement.

In addition, contemporary quality assurance research identifies two interrelated dimensions underpinning effective accreditation systems: institutional integrity and educational effectiveness. Institutional integrity refers to the presence of coherent governance structures, ethical leadership, financial sustainability and transparent management processes that enable schools to fulfil their educational mandate (OECD, 2022). Educational effectiveness, in turn, relates to the extent to which institutions demonstrate clarity of educational purpose, coherent programme design, systematic assessment practices and the use of evidence to enhance learner achievement and teaching quality (UNESCO, 2024). Together, these dimensions position accreditation as both a regulatory safeguard and a developmental mechanism that supports continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

Recent literature defines accreditation as a formal quality assurance process through which educational institutions are systematically evaluated to determine whether they meet established standards of quality, integrity and effectiveness across areas such as curriculum provision, governance, teaching and learning and institutional management. Contemporary scholars emphasise that accreditation serves as an external validation mechanism designed to promote accountability, transparency and continuous improvement within education systems (UNESCO, 2023b; Hou et al.,

2024). Through this process, accrediting bodies assess institutional performance against agreed benchmarks to assure stakeholders that minimum standards are consistently met and sustained. Similarly, recent studies conceptualise accreditation as a peer-reviewed evaluation process guided by independent quality assurance agencies, where institutions are assessed against standardised criteria to determine their fitness to deliver recognised educational programmes. This external review is intended not only to verify compliance, but also to support institutional learning and quality enhancement by providing structured feedback and recommendations for improvement (Harvey & Williams, 2022; OECD, 2023a). As such, accreditation is increasingly framed as a cyclical and developmental process that balances regulatory oversight with support for improved teaching and learning practices.

Recent empirical literature suggests that while accreditation is widely adopted as a quality assurance mechanism, evidence of its direct impact on improving teaching and learning remains mixed and context-dependent. Studies indicate that although substantial time and resources are invested by institutions to achieve and maintain accreditation, these efforts do not automatically translate into improved instructional practices or learner outcomes unless accreditation processes are meaningfully embedded within school improvement strategies (Harvey & Williams, 2022; Hou et al., 2024). Contemporary research further cautions that when accreditation is experienced primarily as a compliance-driven or documentation-heavy exercise, its potential to enhance classroom practice may be limited, particularly in resource-constrained schooling contexts (OECD, 2023a). However, recent studies also indicate that accreditation can contribute to improved teaching and learning when it is implemented as a developmental, continuous process that prioritises internal quality assurance, reflective practice and pedagogical support rather than procedural compliance alone (Hardman & Sandi, 2024; UNESCO, 2024). This implies that there is no direct link between accreditation and the quality of education provided by the organisation. However, Nasir (2021) revealed that the function of accreditation is to ensure that the public, as the users of the service, receive improved and quality education. According to Holen et al. (2021), the accrediting procedure is important in improving the quality of vocational education and training institutions. Ulker and Bakioglu (2019) contend that accreditation influences academic quality in a positive way, contributing to the improvement of processes and practices within the scope of

academic quality in a programme or institution. Kayyali (2024 weighs in on this and maintains that accreditation is viewed as a means of outside validation for the institutions, and it is seen as a benchmark of high standards. However, if the institution loses its accreditation status, it can affect its reputation.

Recent literature conceptualises accreditation as a structured process through which an external accrediting body evaluates an educational institution or programme against stated standards and formally recognises it as meeting those expectations. In this sense, accreditation is grounded in self-study and peer/external review and is used for public accountability and continuous improvement (CHEA, 2024). To accredit, therefore, is to recognise an institution or programme as having met specified criteria or standards; by implication, an accredited institution is expected to demonstrate ongoing quality improvement beyond minimum requirements established by the accrediting body (CHEA, 2024). Similarly, quality assurance in education is commonly defined as a systematic, ongoing process of monitoring, review and evaluation aimed at ensuring that acceptable educational standards are maintained and enhanced over time (UNESCO, 2023b). This means that quality assurance can be regarded as a coordinated set of organisational activities designed to ensure that the quality of educational provision meets prescribed standards and stakeholder expectations (UNESCO, 2023a).

Kafle and Aryal (2021) also weigh in on this discussion and describe quality assurance as a concept that emerged from attempts to prevent defects from occurring during a process rather than only judging the finished product. It often involves accreditation, which is done to demonstrate to everyone that an organisation takes care to ensure sufficient quality.

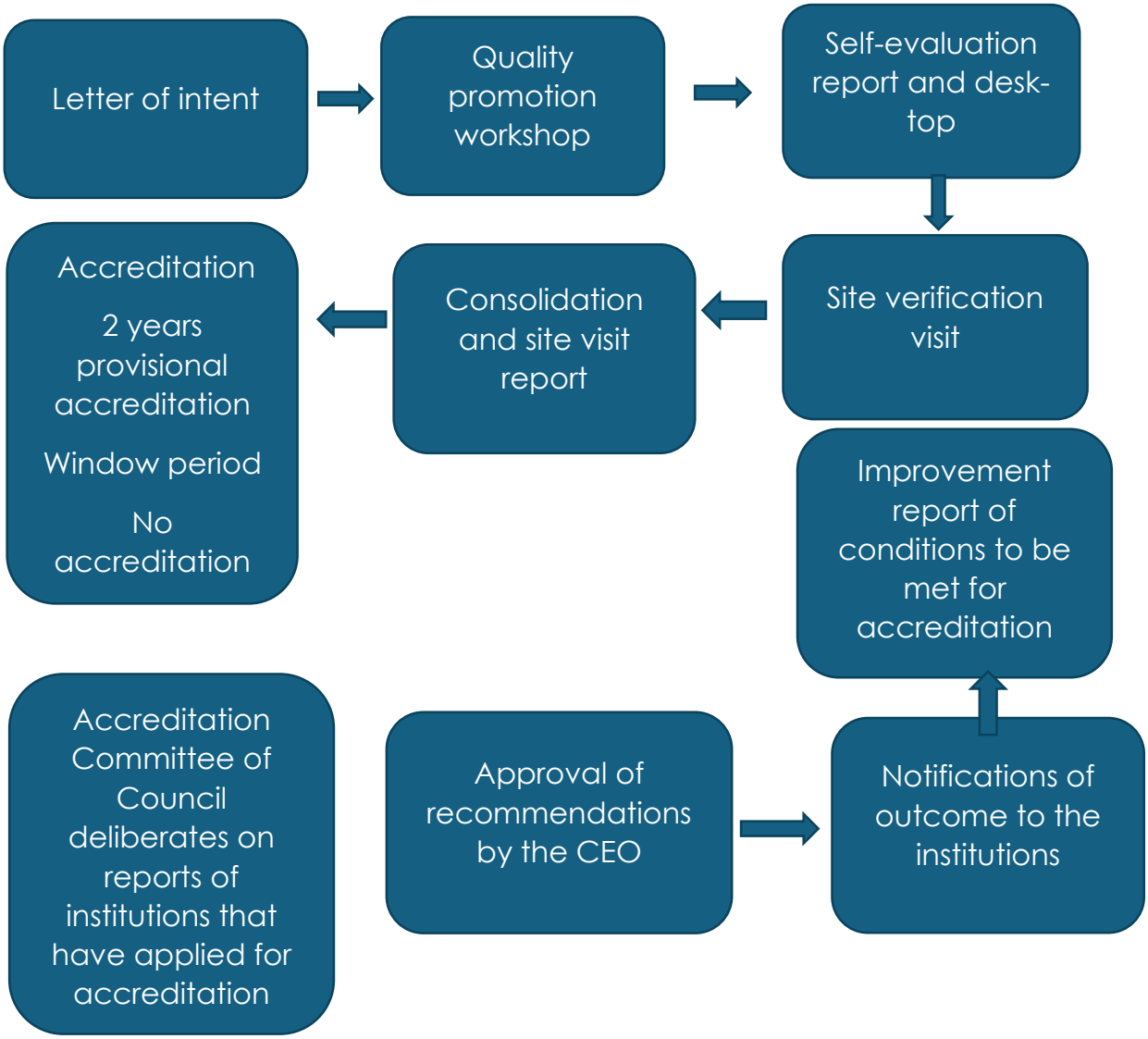
3.3.2 Accreditation Process

Policy and criteria for the quality assurance, accreditation and monitoring of independent schools and private assessment bodies prescribe the following process of accreditation:

a) Application for accreditation to offer a qualification on the sub-framework;
b) Self-evaluation by the independent school to enhance an internal culture of quality management and ongoing improvement;
c) A desktop evaluation of the self-evaluation report;

d) External validation to ensure that the independent schools meet the regulated criteria, national policy and regulations and to ensure a benchmarked standard of provision and school improvement;
e) Granting of accreditation or provisional accreditation or no accreditation by the Council; and
f) Periodic monitoring to ensure maintenance of standards and continued improvement.

The diagram below illustrates the accreditation process:



(Source: Policy and Criteria for Quality Assurance, 2018)

Figure 3.1: Accreditation process

The process of accreditation for independent schools in South Africa begins with an initial application, known as the letter of intent, which is submitted online (Umalusi,

2019). Following this, school officials attend a Quality Promotion (QP) workshop, where the entire accreditation process is explained. Schools are required to submit self-evaluation documents, which are then assessed by Umalusi through a desktop evaluation. If the school meets the necessary criteria at this stage, Umalusi conducts a site verification visit (Umalusi, 2021b). During this visit, a comprehensive report is compiled and a recommendation is made, leading to one of three outcomes: full accreditation, provisional accreditation for two years, or a 'window period' allowing the school to address areas of improvement (SAQA, 2020a).

The Accreditation Committee of Council (ACC) reviews the reports for each institution, with final approval given by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the Senior Manager for Evaluation and Accreditation (Umalusi, 2017). Institutions that receive provisional accreditation or a window period are given the opportunity to address deficiencies. Once improvements are made, Umalusi conducts a second evaluation, often including an unannounced site visit, to verify the implementation of corrective measures (SAQA, 2020a). If a school continues to meet only partial requirements, it may receive provisional accreditation again, but repeated failure to meet standards results in 'no accreditation', with the school advised to reapply or appeal the decision (Umalusi, 2019).

Furthermore, accredited institutions are subject to biannual differentiated monitoring to ensure that they maintain the required standards and demonstrate continued improvement (SAQA, 2020b). Schools that fail to maintain these standards are given a period to improve, and if they do not meet the requirements within this time frame, Umalusi may issue a notice of intent to withdraw accreditation (Umalusi, 2021a).

3.3.3 Impact of Accreditation Process on the Effective Management of Independent Schools

Hail et al. (2019) argues that the accreditation process validates the quality of educational programmes, helping schools maintain credibility in both local and global contexts. Therefore, accreditation acts as a form of quality assurance, ensuring that schools adhere to a set framework that aligns with national and international educational standards (Burroughs, 2023). Banerjee and Samaddar (2020) support this by stating that accreditation serves as a value-added certification, attained through rigorous auditing processes that confirms whether a school adheres to

predefined standards or not. The evaluation process fosters transparency, helping school management refine operational strategies to meet accreditation requirements.

Effective management in accredited schools is often built around a continuous improvement model, where regular evaluations inspire management to address weaknesses and invest in areas that improve performance (Mthembu, 2017). Salkım Işlek et al. (2017) further emphasise that accreditation enhances the reliability and validity of a school's operations, which, in turn, strengthen trust among stakeholders. Schools that are accredited are perceived to offer a more reliable and valid education, which could persuade parents to enrol their children in these institutions (Mthembu, 2017). This perception of reliability also promotes a school's reputation, giving it a competitive advantage in attracting students and staff (Mthembu, 2017).

Furthermore, the accreditation process provides a structure that guides school management decisions, helping to align them with the educational institution's strategic goals (Burroughs, 2023). For example, accredited schools often follow strict guidelines for hiring qualified teachers, maintaining infrastructure and offering a curriculum that meets state or national benchmarks (Onyesom & Umoeshiet, 2018). As a result, the accreditation process plays a critical role in shaping the overall management of independent schools, particularly in areas like human resources, curriculum development and financial planning.

However, according Stura et al. (2019), there are biases associated with accreditation systems, especially concerning the subjectivity of evaluators and the reference frameworks they use. This has led to discrepancies in the evaluation process, where schools may receive differing results based on which accrediting body conducts the assessment (Stura et al., 2019). Burroughs (2023) highlights that accreditation standards often change over time, becoming either stricter or more lenient. This inconsistency poses challenges for school administrators who must constantly adapt to evolving standards, often leading to financial and operational strain (Grissom et al., 2021).

3.3.4 The Role that Independent Schools Play during the Accreditation Process

Baharun et al. (2021) indicate that during quality assurance, the school carries out ongoing evaluations to serve as the basis for further institutional development. It

appears that the school also undergoes self-evaluation to check if they meet the standards (Baharun et al., 2021). This means that the school's role in accreditation process starts when the school conducts a self-evaluation by involving all the components of the school. It seems as though the results of these are used to develop work plans and school activity plans and budgets (Baharun et al., 2021). This means that all stakeholders are actively involved in the process of maintaining and improving the school's quality standards.

Ulewicz (2017) took this matter further and started the argument by defining a stakeholder in schools. Ulewicz (2017) defines stakeholder is any person or a group of people that can influence the process of achieving the aims of a given organisation. Independent schools have got stakeholders that plays a role during accreditation process. This is done through conducting of surveys to determine satisfaction levels of stakeholders in order to improve quality (Ulewicz, 2017). All stakeholders, including teachers, administrators' learners and sometimes even parents, participate in the self-evaluation to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement (Setiawan & Suryadi, 2024). This collaborative approach allows for a more accurate assessment of whether the school meets accreditation standards (Setiawan & Suryadi, 2024).

Iroegbu and Etudor-Eyo (2018) approached this concept from a different perspective. The authors opined that quality is typically associated with highly professional performance, emphasising a direct link between teacher quality and quality assurance in the field of education (Iroegbu & Etudor-Eyo, 2018). This means that teachers at schools play a critical role during the quality assurance process. Burra and Fanuel (2021) also weigh in on the discussion believing that when schools are effectively monitored by the quality council, the quality of education is likely to be achieved. This suggests that when schools are subjected to accreditation process, teachers and learners should be included as they are actively involved in the teaching and learning process (Burra & Fanuel, 2021; Setiawan & Suryadi, 2024). Stura et al. (2019) allude that quality assurance imposes several bureaucratic requirements which teachers must undertake beyond their normal activities. For this reason, quality procedures are seen with hostility by teachers who find them unfair, overly bureaucratic and energy consuming (Stura et al., 2019). This means that during accreditation process, teachers are required to undertake some duties beyond their

everyday duties which is teaching. Because of this, most teachers during accreditation process are reluctant to participate, which compromises quality.

3.4 INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON ACCREDITATION

International perspectives on accreditation reveal significant variations in how different countries and regions conceptualise, implement and prioritise the process, often reflecting broader institutional, cultural, and governance structures.

Denkler (2021) defines accreditation as a third-party attestation of competence, emphasising impartiality and consistent operation in specific conformity assessment activities, including testing, calibration, inspection, certification and validation. Such activities, undertaken by an authoritative body, ensure the reliability of conformity assessments. This approach aligns with Perveen et al.'s (2021) assertion that accreditation assures the public that institutions have met rigorous professional standards, thereby promoting trust and common benchmarks across sectors. Denkler (2021) expands this definition by including a wide array of functions such as the certification of management systems, persons and products, as well as the provision of proficiency testing and production of reference materials, underlining the multifaceted nature of accreditation activities.

In the United States (US), the accreditation system is often lauded as a pioneering model, providing students with expanded choices and access to superior educational programs (Ncube, 2015; Manimala, et al., 2020). Accreditation is not just an evaluative process but a fundamental standard of institutional quality, deeply embedded in both public and private education systems. This comprehensive system contrasts with European models, where accreditation is often regulated by a single national assessment body, operating on a non-profit basis to avoid competition among accrediting bodies (Denkler, 2021). In Europe, accreditation bodies themselves must be accredited to ensure the quality of their assessments, thereby establishing a robust, hierarchical structure of accountability.

In contrast to the US and European models, accreditation in Asia presents a more complex and varied landscape. Recent analyses of quality assurance in China, for example, indicate that accreditation and evaluation are embedded in a strongly state-led governance architecture, in which government ministries and national evaluation structures play a central role in setting expectations and monitoring quality, leaving

comparatively less space for independent, market-based accrediting agencies (Weiming et al., 2024). However, the Indian context presents a different set of challenges, where accreditation frameworks explicitly require institutions to demonstrate performance across multiple domains, such as curricular design, teaching-learning and evaluation, infrastructure and learning resources, governance and leadership, and continuous improvement, reflecting the multifaceted nature of educational quality assurance in a large and diverse system (NAAC, 2022; 2024).

Holen et al. (2021) discusses the role of accreditation in other regions, such as the Middle East, where the National Qualification Authority plays a pivotal role in designating institutions to evaluate and certify candidates. These evaluation institutions are subject to rigorous monitoring and auditing to ensure that they meet national standards for accreditation (Holen et al., 2021). This system reflects a broader understanding of accreditation as not just a matter of institutional quality but also a key component of national governance and regulatory frameworks.

In Pakistan, the role of accreditation in quality assurance has evolved in response to political and administrative challenges (Perveen et al., 2021). Perveen et al. (2021) note that the establishment of quality assurance agencies has helped mitigate political interference in educational assessment processes, thus strengthening the credibility and reliability of accreditation outcomes. This shift represents a form of governmental control over education institutions, exercised through legislation and funding, where accreditation serves not only as a means of quality control but also as a tool for accountability, quality improvement and the facilitation of student mobility across institutions and borders (Perveen et al., 2021).

However, the relationship between accreditation and educational quality is not universally positive. In Indonesia, Ratumana and Marantika (2021) argue that accreditation has not been effectively integrated into the education quality assurance system. Instead, it is often seen as an administrative procedure with limited impact on actual educational outcomes. The accreditation instruments used in Indonesia, according to Ratumana and Marantika (2021), fail to deliver the intended results, reflecting broader systemic weaknesses that undermine the potential benefits of the accreditation process.

Nepal provides an interesting case study in the evolution of quality assurance systems. Kafle and Aryal (2021) highlight the establishment of the Education Review Office (ERO) in 2010 as a key development in promoting accountability and improving education quality through independent performance audits. These audits, conducted by former education personnel trained in standardised tools, reflect a rigorous approach to quality assurance that spans both public and private schools. Nepal's system stands out for its comprehensive use of quality indicators, which guide auditors during their evaluations, ensuring that schools meet or exceed national standards (Kafle & Aryal, 2021).

In Indonesia, the internal quality assurance system, as described by Wilianet al. (2020), involves all components within an educational unit to ensure that it meets national education standards. This participatory approach echoes South Africa's system, where private schools are legally required to perform at or above the national average, particularly in high-stakes examinations like the Grade 12 results. Both systems demonstrate how internal and external mechanisms of quality assurance can complement each other, ensuring that educational institutions maintain high standards of performance and accountability (Wilian et al., 2020).

These international perspectives underscore the diversity of accreditation systems globally, reflecting the unique educational, cultural and regulatory contexts in which they operate. While accreditation serves a common purpose, ensuring quality and accountability in educational and professional institutions, the methods and outcomes of accreditation vary significantly across different regions, shaped by local governance structures, political environments and institutional capacities. As Denkler (2021) and Perveen et al. (2021) suggest, the reliability and credibility of accreditation processes depend not only on the rigour of the standards applied but also on the broader social and political frameworks within which they are embedded.

3.5 AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON ACCREDITATION

Recent African scholars on accreditation and quality assurance continue to underscore persistent constraints, including inadequate funding, deteriorating infrastructure and limited institutional capacity, which undermine effective quality assurance systems across the continent. A comprehensive systematic review of quality assurance in sub-Saharan Africa by Mireku and Bervell (2024) identifies

insufficient financial resources, poor implementation of quality policies and overstretched human capacity as dominant challenges affecting accreditation processes in educational institutions. These constraints are particularly evident in public institutions where laboratories, libraries and instructional materials remain inadequate, thereby limiting the ability of schools and universities to meet established quality benchmarks.

In the Nigerian context, recent studies affirm that weak infrastructure, limited instructional resources and chronic underfunding continue to impede quality assurance efforts. Wordu (2026) notes that many higher education institutions in Nigeria struggle with deteriorating physical facilities and insufficient laboratory and teaching equipment, conditions that directly affect accreditation outcomes and the credibility of academic programmes. Similarly, Nwosu (2025) emphasises that the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms depends heavily on the availability of financial and material resources to support continuous monitoring, evaluation and institutional improvement.

These challenges reflect broader continental patterns. Zickafoose et al. (2024) demonstrate that across sub-Saharan Africa, funding constraints and weak accountability structures continue to limit the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4, particularly in resource-poor and rural contexts. Schools located in rural and marginalised areas experience disproportionate shortages of infrastructure, qualified teachers and learning materials, resulting in persistent disparities in educational quality between urban and rural institutions (Sumida & Kawata, 2024). Kenya's education system illustrates sustained efforts to strengthen quality assurance through institutional reforms and regulatory frameworks. The Ministry of Education has reinforced the Directorate of Quality Assurance and Standards and introduced updated national policies that emphasise supervision, curriculum compliance and continuous school improvement (Republic of Kenya, 2024). Recent analyses highlight the evolving role of Quality Assurance and Standards Officers (QASOs) as instructional leaders tasked with supporting curriculum implementation and mentoring teachers, particularly under the Competency-Based Education framework (Kurasa Africa, 2025). While these reforms signal strong policy commitment, evidence suggests that their effectiveness remains

contingent on adequate resourcing, staff capacity development and sustained political support (Republic of Kenya, 2024).

In Tanzania, contemporary research similarly highlights the centrality of school inspection and internal quality assurance systems in maintaining educational standards. Omollo et al. (2024) report that the effectiveness of internal school quality assurance teams in Tanzanian secondary schools is constrained by limited training, heavy workloads and insufficient operational resources. Complementing this, Joseph and Urio (2025) emphasise that quality assurance in rural Tanzanian schools is often weakened by transport challenges, funding shortages and limited follow-up on inspection recommendations. These studies suggest that inspection processes are most effective when feedback is constructive, context-sensitive and accompanied by realistic support mechanisms that enable schools to implement recommendations. Despite ongoing reforms, resource scarcity remains a systemic obstacle to quality assurance across many African education systems. Mireku and Bervell (2024) note that accreditation processes, while designed to promote equity, efficiency and accountability, often lack practical impact due to funding limitations and weak enforcement capacity. In Nigeria, quality assurance frameworks encompass school self-evaluation, staff appraisal and performance audits; however, their sustainability depends on consistent financial investment and logistical support (Wordu, 2026; Nwosu, 2025).

Overall, recent evidence underscores that accreditation and quality assurance systems in Africa are able to serve as powerful tools for educational improvement when supported by adequate funding, effective monitoring structures and institutional buy-in. Without sustained investment, particularly in rural and underserved contexts, quality assurance efforts risk reinforcing existing inequalities between institutions rather than reducing them (Sumida & Kawata, 2024; Zickafoose et al., 2024).

3.6 SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE ON ACCREDITATION

South Africa’s democratic transition continues to shape the evolution of its education system, requiring sustained transformation in governance, accountability and quality assurance practices. More than three decades after the end of apartheid, educational reform remains a central policy priority, as the system seeks to address deep-seated inequalities while maintaining public accountability and efficiency. Contemporary

policy discourse highlights quality assurance and institutional self-evaluation as essential mechanisms for ensuring that educational institutions are responsive to social transformation, economic development needs and international benchmarks (DHET, 2021; CHE, 2023).

In recent years, quality assurance in South Africa has increasingly been framed as a dual process that combines accountability and developmental improvement. While accreditation systems are designed to safeguard public confidence and ensure responsible use of state resources, they are also expected to support continuous institutional learning and enhancement (CHE, 2023). This approach reflects a broader global shift away from purely compliance-driven models toward quality assurance frameworks that encourage reflective practice, self-evaluation and evidence-based improvement.

Despite the maturation of quality assurance structures, persistent structural challenges continue to undermine educational quality. One of the most significant constraints remains overcrowding in schools and post-school institutions. Recent empirical research demonstrates that high learner-to-teacher ratios directly affect the quality of teaching, assessment practices, classroom management and learner engagement, particularly in historically disadvantaged communities (Reddy et al., 2021; Spaull & Pretorius, 2022). These findings suggest that even when institutions meet formal accreditation requirements, learning conditions may remain sub-optimal if systemic resource constraints are not addressed. Consequently, accreditation alone cannot fully compensate for inequalities in infrastructure, staffing and institutional capacity.

South Africa's quality assurance architecture is characterised by a differentiated structure across the basic, further and higher education sectors, aligned with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Within the General and Further Education and Training (GFET) band, Umalusi functions as the statutory quality council, operating under the NQF and the GFET Acts. Its mandate is to ensure the credibility, coherence and comparability of qualifications and assessment systems within this sub-framework (Umalusi, 2023a). This multi-layered governance arrangement reflects an attempt to balance central oversight with sector-specific quality requirements (CHE, 2023). At the higher education level, quality assurance oversight is exercised by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), a permanent

committee of the Council on Higher Education. The HEQC is responsible for programme accreditation, institutional audits and quality promotion initiatives across universities and other higher education institutions. Recent CHE reviews emphasise that these processes aim not only to ensure compliance with minimum standards but also to stimulate institutional responsiveness to curriculum relevance, teaching effectiveness and societal needs (CHE, 2023).

Umalusi's role in the quality assurance of general and further education is executed through several interrelated functions. One of its core responsibilities is the monitoring and moderation of external assessments and certification. Through standardisation and moderation processes, Umalusi ensures that examinations meet nationally accepted standards of validity, reliability and fairness before certificates are awarded. Certification serves as a key public good, providing assurance that learner achievements have national and international credibility (Umalusi, 2023b). Another critical function is the accreditation of education and training providers and assessment bodies, particularly within the independent education sector. Umalusi evaluates whether private schools, colleges and examining bodies possess the institutional capacity, such as qualified staff, appropriate infrastructure, governance systems and assessment practices, required to deliver curricula in line with national standards (Umalusi, 2022a). While this function does not extend to public schools, it plays a vital role in regulating private provision and protecting learners from substandard educational offerings.

Umalusi also undertakes the evaluation of qualifications and curricula, reviewing their structure, cognitive demand, coherence and alignment with the broader NQF. Ongoing curriculum evaluation ensures that qualifications remain relevant to societal needs while maintaining academic rigour and comparability across providers (Umalusi, 2022b). This process is particularly important in a context marked by rapid curriculum reform and skills development imperatives. Unlike systems where examinations are centrally designed and administered by a single national authority, South Africa operates a decentralised assessment model. In this system, Umalusi does not set examinations but instead provides oversight of accredited assessment bodies. This regulatory approach allows for institutional diversity while ensuring that national standards are consistently applied across examination systems (Umalusi,

2023b). Such oversight is critical to preserving the integrity of high-stakes assessments and public trust in the education system.

Accreditation policy for independent schools within the GFET band reflects a two-phase quality assurance model comprising institutional self-evaluation and external evaluation through site visits. A standardised evaluation instrument is applied uniformly across institutions, regardless of geographic location, to ensure fairness and consistency in quality judgements (Umalusi, 2022a). Recent policy reviews indicate that self-evaluation is increasingly positioned as a developmental tool that encourages schools to engage critically with their own performance data, governance practices and teaching and learning processes, rather than viewing accreditation solely as a compliance exercise (CHE, 2023; Umalusi, 2023b).

Overall, while South Africa has established robust quality assurance institutions and regulatory frameworks, recent evidence suggests that the effectiveness of accreditation processes depends heavily on broader systemic conditions. Sustainable improvement in educational quality requires alignment between quality assurance mechanisms, adequate resourcing and targeted interventions to address inequality, overcrowding and institutional capacity constraints (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022; CHE, 2023).

3.7 CHALLENGES FACED BY RURAL INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS DURING ACCREDITATION PROCESS

Rural independent schools face compounded and context-specific challenges during the accreditation process, largely arising from geographical isolation, chronic financial constraints, limited institutional capacity and historical inequalities embedded in education systems. While accreditation frameworks are designed to assure minimum quality standards, their application in rural contexts often exposes structural disparities that affect schools' ability to comply with prescribed requirements. Recent literature emphasises that rural schooling environments differ significantly from urban settings in terms of infrastructure availability, access to professional support, leadership capacity and socio-economic conditions, which collectively shape accreditation outcomes (Hardman & Sandi, 2024; Zickafoose et al., 2024).

3.7.1 Financial Constraints

Financial constraints remain one of the most significant barriers confronting rural independent schools during the accreditation process. Accreditation requires schools to meet a range of financial obligations, including application and evaluation fees, costs associated with site verification visits and expenditure on infrastructure, learning resources and compliance documentation. For rural independent schools that rely almost entirely on school fees and limited community contributions, these costs are often unsustainable, resulting in delayed applications, prolonged provisional accreditation or failure to complete the accreditation process altogether (Umalusi, 2023b).

Recent studies indicate that financial vulnerability in rural schools is closely linked to broader structural inequalities within the education system. The absence of state subsidies and limited access to external funding opportunities place rural independent schools at a disadvantage compared to urban independent and public schools. As a result, schools struggle to invest in essential facilities such as libraries, laboratories, information and communication technology (ICT), and safe infrastructure all of which are increasingly emphasised in accreditation criteria (DBE, 2021b; Hardman & Sandi, 2024).

Financial constraints also directly affect staffing capacity. Accreditation requires schools to employ appropriately qualified and professionally registered educators; however, rural independent schools are often unable to offer competitive salaries or adequate incentives. Contemporary South African research shows that qualified teachers are more likely to seek employment in better-resourced urban schools or public schools that offer greater job security and benefits. This persistent difficulty in attracting and retaining educators registered with SACE undermines compliance with accreditation standards related to staffing, curriculum delivery and learner support (Fowler, 2023; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025).

Furthermore, limited financial capacity constrains schools' ability to respond effectively to accreditation feedback. Schools that receive provisional accreditation or window periods are expected to implement improvement plans within defined timeframes, often require further financial investment. Without targeted financial support or differentiated funding mechanisms, rural independent schools may

struggle to sustain required standards over time, increasing the risk of accreditation withdrawal. Recent policy analyses caution that unless accreditation processes are accompanied by developmental support and contextualised expectations, financial pressures may entrench inequality rather than promote quality improvement in rural education settings (Umalusi, 2023b; Zickafoose et al., 2024).

3.7.2 Limited Resources

Rural independent schools characteristically operate under severe resource constraints that significantly undermine their capacity to meet the infrastructural, administrative and pedagogical requirements of accreditation. Contemporary literature consistently demonstrates that rural schooling environments are marked by systemic deficits in basic physical infrastructure, including inadequate sanitation, unreliable access to clean water and electricity, poor road networks and dilapidated learning facilities. These material limitations directly compromise compliance with accreditation standards, which increasingly prioritise safe, well-resourced and learner-centred educational environments (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; DBE, 2022).

Recent empirical studies further indicate that resource shortages in rural independent schools extend beyond basic infrastructure to encompass limited access to modern ICT. As accreditation frameworks increasingly emphasise digital record-keeping, curriculum delivery support systems, assessment moderation and data-driven school management, the absence of ICT infrastructure places rural schools at a structural disadvantage. Schools lacking reliable internet connectivity, adequate computer hardware or digital learning platforms struggle to meet both operational and quality assurance expectations embedded within contemporary accreditation criteria (Umalusi, 2023a; Lombo & Subban, 2024).

The implications of limited resources are not merely administrative but profoundly pedagogical. Inadequate learning and teaching support materials (LTSM), overcrowded classrooms and poorly maintained facilities constrain educators' ability to implement accredited curricula effectively and to provide inclusive and engaging learning opportunities. International and African scholarship cautions that accreditation systems which apply uniform standards across unequal contexts, risk conflating resource availability with educational quality, thereby disadvantaging rural

institutions that demonstrate pedagogical commitment despite material deprivation (Hardman & Sandi, 2024; Zickafoose et al., 2024).

Moreover, persistent resource inadequacies hinder rural schools' capacity to respond constructively to accreditation feedback. Improvement plans often require capital investment in infrastructure upgrades, technology acquisition and resource expansion, demands that exceed the financial and material means of most rural independent schools. In the absence of differentiated support mechanisms, limited resources thus function as a structural barrier that perpetuates provisional accreditation statuses or accreditation failure, reinforcing existing inequities between rural and urban independent schooling contexts (Fowler, 2023; Umalusi, 2023b).

3.7.3 Geographical Isolation

Geographical isolation constitutes a significant structural constraint for rural independent schools undergoing the accreditation process. Schools situated in remote and sparsely populated areas are often required to travel considerable distances to engage with accrediting authorities, participate in compulsory quality promotion workshops or facilitate on-site verification visits. These spatial constraints translate into heightened logistical and financial demands, including transport, accommodation, subsistence costs and the opportunity cost associated with extended absences of school leadership from day-to-day management and instructional oversight (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Hardman & Sandi, 2024).

Recent policy and empirical literature indicate that distance-related barriers extend beyond financial implications to affect the efficiency, continuity and relational dimensions of the accreditation process. Infrequent physical access to accrediting bodies can result in prolonged turnaround times for evaluations, delayed feedback on self-evaluation reports and limited opportunities for follow-up support or clarification of accreditation requirements. Umalusi's recent monitoring reports acknowledge that schools in rural provinces are more likely to experience delays in site visits and post-evaluation decision-making due to geographical dispersion and resource constraints within accrediting structures themselves (Umalusi, 2023a).

Moreover, distance exacerbates professional isolation by restricting sustained interaction between rural schools and quality assurance personnel. This weakens ongoing communication, reduces access to developmental guidance and limits

schools' ability to engage in continuous quality improvement between accreditation cycles. Contemporary rural education scholarship cautions that when accreditation processes rely heavily on centralised, face-to-face mechanisms, geographically marginalised schools are systematically disadvantaged, thereby reinforcing spatial inequities within quality assurance regimes (DBE, 2021b; Zickafoose et al., 2024). In this regard, distance operates not merely as a logistical challenge but as a structural mediator of unequal accreditation experiences across rural and urban independent schooling contexts.

3.7.4 Incompatible Standards

Accreditation standards are frequently formulated around assumptions that reflect the organisational capacity, infrastructural adequacy, and human resource availability of well-resourced urban schools, resulting in a persistent misalignment with the lived realities of rural independent schools. Although accreditation frameworks are intended to promote consistency and comparability in educational quality, they often privilege uniform compliance over contextual responsiveness, thereby obscuring the structural inequalities that shape rural schooling environments. Recent scholarship emphasises that rural schools operate within markedly constrained conditions characterised by limited infrastructure, scarce specialist personnel and restricted access to professional support networks, factors that are insufficiently accommodated within standardised accreditation criteria (Hardman & Sandi, 2024; Zickafoose et al., 2024).

The continued application of 'one-size-fits-all' accreditation benchmarks places rural independent schools at a systemic disadvantage, as they are required to demonstrate compliance with standards that presuppose levels of resourcing and institutional capacity beyond their reach. In the South African context, this rigidity is particularly evident where accreditation instruments do not adequately distinguish between historically advantaged and marginalised schooling contexts. Policy analyses indicate that such misalignment may inadvertently conflate educational quality with material provision, rather than recognising pedagogical effectiveness, contextual innovation and adaptive leadership practices evident in many rural schools (DBE, 2022; Umalusi, 2023b).

Consequently, rural independent schools may experience accreditation not as a developmental quality-enhancement mechanism but as a regulatory hurdle that reinforces spatial and socio-economic inequities. Emerging literature from both South Africa and comparable developing-country contexts cautions that unless accreditation standards are differentiated, flexible and context-sensitive, they risk reproducing existing inequalities and undermining the transformative intent of quality assurance systems. Addressing incompatibilities between accreditation standards and rural schooling realities, therefore, remains essential for ensuring that accreditation functions as an enabling rather than exclusionary instrument within diverse educational landscapes (Fowler, 2023; Hou et al., 2024).

3.7.5 Maintaining Standards

While the attainment of accreditation represents a significant institutional milestone, sustaining the required quality standards over time presents an ongoing challenge for many rural independent schools. These difficulties are largely attributable to persistent structural constraints, including chronic shortages of qualified staff, limited and unstable financial resources and fluctuating learner enrolments, all of which undermine institutional continuity and organisational capacity. Contemporary research underscores that accreditation is not a static achievement but a dynamic process that requires sustained investment, effective leadership and stable human and material resources, conditions that are often fragile in rural schooling contexts (Umalusi, 2023b; Hardman & Sandi, 2024).

Accreditation frameworks typically require schools to consistently demonstrate compliance with rigorous benchmarks relating to staff qualifications, learner performance, governance systems, assessment practices and infrastructure maintenance. However, rural independent schools often operate within tight financial margins and rely on a small number of educators who perform multiple roles. These conditions significantly constrain schools' ability to maintain compliance on a continuous basis, particularly in relation to staffing and curriculum implementation. Recent South African studies indicate that rural schools experience disproportionately high staff turnover, as qualified educators are drawn to urban or public-sector schools that offer greater job security, professional development opportunities and improved remuneration (Fowler, 2023; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025).

High levels of staff turnover disrupt institutional memory and weaken the consistency required for sustained quality assurance. When experienced educators and school leaders exit the system, schools are often compelled to rely on underqualified or temporary staff, thereby compromising continuity in teaching, assessment and quality management practices. This instability poses a direct risk to ongoing compliance with accreditation standards and increases the likelihood of schools reverting to provisional accreditation statuses or being placed under heightened monitoring (Umalusi, 2023b).

Moreover, maintaining standards over time requires schools to respond constructively to accreditation feedback and monitoring outcomes, which frequently necessitate further investment in infrastructure, professional development and quality assurance systems. For rural independent schools lacking access to targeted developmental support or differentiated funding models, such expectations may be unrealistic. Emerging scholarship cautions that without sustained post-accreditation support and contextual sensitivity, accreditation regimes may inadvertently function as mechanisms of exclusion, reinforcing rural-urban disparities rather than enabling long-term school improvement (Hou et al., 2024; Zickafoose et al., 2024). Ensuring the sustainability of accreditation standards in rural independent schools therefore remains contingent on the alignment of quality assurance expectations with contextual capacity and ongoing institutional support.

3.7.6 Unfavourable Perception

Public perception constitutes a significant yet often under-examined factor shaping the accreditation experiences of rural independent schools. Rural schools are frequently constructed within dominant educational discourses as inherently deficient, underperforming or inferior to their urban counterparts. Such deficit-based perceptions are deeply embedded in historical patterns of spatial inequality and continue to influence how rural schools are viewed by communities, stakeholders and external quality assurance bodies. Recent scholarship cautions that these negative stereotypes can contribute to the marginalisation of rural schools by eroding institutional legitimacy and undermining confidence in their capacity to meet accreditation standards (Hardman & Sandi, 2024; Zickafoose et al., 2024).

Unfavourable public perception has tangible implications for accreditation processes, as it directly affects levels of community trust, stakeholder buy-in and local support. Rural independent schools that are perceived as low-quality institutions often struggle to mobilise the financial, social and symbolic capital required to sustain accreditation initiatives. Limited community confidence can translate into reduced learner enrolments, constrained fee income and weakened partnerships, all of which undermine schools' ability to invest in infrastructure, technology and qualified personnel, key components assessed during accreditation (Pillay, 2018; Umalusi, 2023a).

Furthermore, negative perceptions can diminish parental involvement, which is increasingly recognised as a critical dimension of school governance, accountability and quality assurance. Contemporary studies in South Africa suggest that where parents lack confidence in a school's quality or long-term sustainability, their engagement in governance structures, fundraising activities and school improvement initiatives is often limited. This reduced participation has direct consequences for accreditation criteria related to stakeholder involvement, leadership accountability and institutional coherence (Mestry, 2020; Fowler, 2023).

Importantly, emerging rural education research challenges homogenised deficit portrayals of rural schools by highlighting their contextual strengths, resilience and adaptive practices. However, unless accreditation systems and public narratives actively recognise these contextual realities, unfavourable perceptions risk becoming self-reinforcing, contributing to a cycle in which rural independent schools are structurally disadvantaged in accreditation processes. Addressing issues of perception, therefore, requires not only community engagement strategies at the school level but also broader policy and quality assurance frameworks that foreground equity, contextual sensitivity and asset-based understandings of rural schooling (Hou et al., 2024; DBE, 2021b).

3.7.7 Governance and Management Structures

Effective governance and management structures are central to the successful implementation and sustainability of accreditation processes; however, rural independent schools frequently experience significant constraints in this regard. Umalusi's accreditation framework places explicit emphasis on leadership,

governance and management as core input criteria, requiring schools to demonstrate strategic direction, sound administrative systems, policy compliance and effective communication structures (Umalusi, 2022a). For many rural independent schools, meeting these requirements is complicated by limited managerial capacity, role overload among school leaders and governance structures that often lack professional expertise and stability.

A recurring challenge in rural contexts is the concentration of governance and management responsibilities in a small number of individuals, frequently the principal and a limited SMT. Empirical studies indicate that rural school principals often juggle multiple roles, including instructional leadership, financial management, compliance oversight and stakeholder engagement, leaving limited capacity to manage the complex documentation and evidence requirements associated with accreditation (Sibuyi et al., 2024). This situation undermines both strategic leadership and the consistent application of quality management systems expected by Umalusi during accreditation and post-accreditation monitoring.

Governance challenges are further exacerbated by the limited functionality of school governing bodies (SGBs) in rural independent schools. While governance structures are legally mandated to provide oversight, accountability and strategic support, rural SGBs often comprise members with limited formal education, governance training or familiarity with regulatory frameworks. As a result, their ability to contribute meaningfully to policy development, financial oversight and compliance monitoring is constrained, weakening institutional readiness for accreditation (DBE, 2021b). Umalusi accreditation guidelines explicitly require evidence of effective governance practices, including documented policies, strategic planning and internal accountability mechanisms, areas in which many rural schools struggle to demonstrate compliance.

Management capacity constraints are also evident in the implementation of internal quality assurance processes, particularly self-evaluation and continuous improvement planning. Umalusi's accreditation model is premised on schools' ability to conduct systematic self-evaluation, collect and analyse evidence and implement improvement plans aligned with accreditation feedback. However, research indicates that rural school management teams often lack the technical expertise, time and administrative support required to operationalise these processes effectively,

resulting in superficial compliance rather than embedded quality cultures (Fowler, 2023). This compliance-driven engagement can reduce accreditation to a bureaucratic exercise, rather than a developmental process aimed at institutional improvement.

Furthermore, governance instability caused by leadership turnover poses a significant risk to sustained accreditation compliance. Rural independent schools frequently experience high turnover among principals and senior managers due to limited remuneration, workload pressures and professional isolation. Such turnover disrupts institutional memory, weakens continuity in quality management practices and compromises the consistency required for maintaining accreditation standards over time (Umalusi, 2023b). These challenges are compounded by limited access to professional development opportunities tailored to governance and leadership in rural contexts, further constraining schools' capacity to meet accreditation expectations.

Overall, the literature suggests that governance and management challenges constitute a structural barrier to successful and sustained accreditation for rural independent schools. Without targeted leadership development, governance training and differentiated support from accrediting authorities, rural schools remain disadvantaged within standardised quality assurance regimes. Addressing these challenges requires a shift towards more context-responsive accreditation approaches that recognise capacity constraints while still upholding quality and accountability imperatives (Hardman & Sandi, 2024; Hou et al., 2024).

3.7.8 Curriculum Compliance

Curriculum compliance constitutes a significant challenge for rural independent schools undergoing the Umalusi accreditation process. Umalusi accredits independent schools on the basis of their demonstrated capacity to implement curricula aligned with qualifications registered on the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF), particularly the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS). Accreditation, therefore, requires schools to provide verifiable evidence of curriculum alignment, appropriate subject offerings, adherence to prescribed

instructional time and compliance with national assessment and moderation requirements (Umalusi, 2022a; Umalusi, 2024).

For rural independent schools, achieving and sustaining curriculum compliance is complicated by entrenched structural and contextual constraints. These schools often operate with limited human, material and financial resources, which restrict their ability to offer the full range of CAPS-aligned subjects or to maintain consistent curriculum pacing across grade levels. Shortages of suitably qualified educators, particularly in specialist subjects such as mathematics, science and technology, further undermine effective curriculum implementation and increase the likelihood of non-compliance during accreditation evaluations (DBE, 2021b; Fowler, 2023).

Curriculum compliance challenges are especially pronounced in rural schools that adopt curriculum adaptations to accommodate multigrade teaching, diverse learner needs and inclusive education practices. While such adaptations are pedagogically necessary in many rural contexts, Umalusi's accreditation framework applies uniform curriculum standards across all independent schools. This standardisation leaves limited space for contextual flexibility and creates tension between locally responsive teaching practices and regulatory compliance requirements. Research in rural and inclusive education contexts indicates that schools often struggle to demonstrate that curriculum adaptations remain fully aligned with national qualification requirements, despite meeting learners' educational needs effectively (Fowler, 2023; Ledwaba & Sefotho, 2024).

Assessment compliance represents an additional dimension of curriculum adherence that presents difficulties for rural independent schools. Umalusi requires schools to implement valid, reliable and CAPS-aligned internal assessment systems, supported by accurate record-keeping and participation in moderation processes. Rural schools frequently encounter challenges related to assessment administration, documentation and moderation readiness due to limited administrative capacity and restricted access to professional support. Umalusi monitoring reports consistently identify weaknesses in assessment practices and incomplete curriculum documentation as contributing factors to provisional accreditation or delayed accreditation outcomes (Umalusi, 2023b).

Moreover, the curriculum compliance requirements associated with accreditation place considerable administrative demands on school leadership and teaching staff. Schools are expected to maintain extensive documentary evidence, including subject policies, assessment plans, lesson plans and proof of curriculum coverage. In rural independent schools with small management teams and limited administrative support, these demands can divert attention away from instructional leadership and teaching towards bureaucratic compliance. Scholars caution that such compliance-driven engagement risks undermine the developmental intent of accreditation by prioritising procedural adherence over meaningful curriculum improvement (Hou et al., 2024).

Overall, curriculum compliance remains a complex and multidimensional challenge for rural independent schools seeking Umalusi accreditation. Without differentiated guidance, contextual recognition and sustained professional development support, rural schools are disproportionately disadvantaged within a standardised quality assurance regime. Addressing this challenge requires a more context-sensitive accreditation approach that balances regulatory rigour with pedagogical flexibility, while safeguarding the integrity of nationally registered qualifications (Hardman & Sandi, 2024; Umalusi, 2024).

3.7.9 Policy and Documentation Requirements

Policy and documentation requirements constitute a substantial challenge for rural independent schools undergoing the Umalusi accreditation process. Umalusi's accreditation framework requires independent schools to develop, implement, maintain and regularly review an extensive range of formal policies and records as evidence of institutional capacity, governance effectiveness, curriculum implementation, assessment quality, learner support and internal quality management systems (Umalusi, 2022a; Umalusi, 2024). These requirements are assessed through school self-evaluation reports, desktop evaluations, site verification visits and ongoing post-accreditation monitoring.

For rural independent schools, compliance with these policy and documentation expectations is often constrained by limited administrative capacity and technical expertise. Many rural schools operate with small management and administrative teams, where principals and educators are required to perform multiple roles,

including teaching, leadership, financial management and regulatory compliance. As a result, the drafting, systematic filing, continuous updating and alignment of policies with evolving accreditation criteria place significant pressure on already overstretched staff (Fowler, 2023; Sibuyi et al., 2024).

Umalusi's accreditation model places strong emphasis on documentary evidence as a primary indicator of institutional readiness and quality assurance. Schools are expected to provide written proof of policy implementation, monitoring mechanisms and quality improvement processes across all functional areas of the school (Umalusi, 2023). However, research suggests that in rural contexts, the emphasis on documentation can result in a compliance-oriented engagement with accreditation, where the production of files becomes an end in itself rather than a reflection of embedded quality practices. This aspect risks shifting attention away from teaching and learning towards administrative compliance (Hou et al., 2024).

Policy and documentation requirements further presume a level of organisational stability and institutional continuity that many rural independent schools struggle to sustain. High staff and leadership turnover in rural contexts disrupts institutional memory and complicates the consistent implementation and review of policies. Newly appointed principals or senior managers often inherit fragmented or incomplete documentation systems and must reconstruct accreditation evidence retrospectively, increasing the likelihood of provisional accreditation or delayed accreditation outcomes (Umalusi, 2023b).

In addition, rural independent schools frequently experience limited access to ongoing guidance and capacity-building opportunities related to documentation and quality management. Although Umalusi provides formal guidelines and templates, the geographical distance of rural schools from accrediting authorities and professional networks reduces opportunities for sustained mentorship and clarification of policy requirements. The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2022) acknowledges that rural schools are disadvantaged in their access to professional support structures, which affects their ability to interpret and operationalise policy and documentation requirements consistently.

Overall, policy and documentation requirements represent a structural challenge within the Umalusi accreditation process for rural independent schools. Without

differentiated administrative support, targeted capacity-building initiatives and greater contextual sensitivity, these requirements risk reinforcing inequalities between rural and urban independent schools. Addressing this challenge requires an accreditation approach that recognises documentation as part of a developmental quality-improvement process rather than a purely regulatory compliance mechanism (Hardman & Sandi, 2024).

3.7.10 Teacher Qualifications and Retention

Teacher qualifications and retention constitute a critical challenge for rural independent schools seeking and maintaining accreditation with Umalusi. Within the accreditation framework, Umalusi places strong emphasis on the availability of appropriately qualified educators who are professionally registered with the SACE and possess subject-specific qualifications aligned with the CAPS (Umalusi, 2022a; Umalusi, 2024). Compliance with these requirements is a key determinant of accreditation outcomes, particularly in relation to curriculum implementation, assessment quality, and learner support.

For rural independent schools, securing and retaining suitably qualified teachers is particularly challenging due to persistent structural and contextual constraints. Limited financial resources restrict schools' ability to offer competitive salaries, benefits and career development opportunities comparable to those in urban independent schools or the public education sector. As a result, rural independent schools frequently rely on underqualified, temporary or multi-subject educators, which undermines their capacity to meet Umalusi's staffing and curriculum criteria (Fowler, 2023; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025).

Recent research highlights that qualified teachers are more likely to migrate towards better-resourced urban schools or public schools that offer greater job security, professional development opportunities and improved working conditions (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025). This pattern contributes to high staff turnover in rural independent schools, disrupting continuity in teaching, assessment practices and internal quality assurance systems. Such instability poses a direct risk to sustained accreditation compliance, as Umalusi requires consistent implementation of accredited curricula by suitably qualified educators over time (Umalusi, 2023b).

Teacher retention challenges are further amplified by professional isolation and workload pressures experienced in rural contexts. Educators in rural independent schools are often required to teach multiple grades or subjects outside their areas of specialisation, assume additional administrative responsibilities and contribute to accreditation-related documentation and self-evaluation processes. These demands increase workload stress and reduce job satisfaction, leading to burnout and attrition (Sibuyi et al., 2024). From an accreditation perspective, frequent staff turnover weakens institutional memory and compromises the consistency of evidence required during desktop evaluations and site verification visits.

In addition, limited access to continuous professional development constrains rural teachers' ability to upgrade qualifications or strengthen curriculum-specific competencies. While Umalusi expects schools to demonstrate ongoing staff development as part of quality improvement, rural independent schools often face barriers related to cost, distance and limited access to accredited training providers (DBE, 2021b). This restricts opportunities for teachers to meet evolving curriculum and assessment requirements, further challenging accreditation readiness.

Overall, challenges related to teacher qualifications and retention represent a structural barrier to effective and sustained accreditation for rural independent schools. Without targeted support mechanisms, differentiated accreditation expectations and policy interventions aimed at attracting and retaining qualified educators in rural settings, these schools remain disproportionately disadvantaged within standardised quality assurance systems. Addressing this challenge is essential if accreditation is to function as a developmental mechanism that supports educational quality and equity, rather than reinforcing existing rural-urban disparities (Hardman & Sandi, 2024; Umalusi, 2024).

3.8 ACCREDITATION FACTORS INFLUENCING TEACHING AND LEARNING

The accreditation process exerts a multifaceted influence on teaching and learning, functioning not merely as a regulatory mechanism but as a structural force that shapes curriculum coherence, pedagogical practices, teacher capacity and the allocation of educational resources. Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises accreditation as a key instrument through which quality assurance agendas intersect with classroom-level practices, influencing how knowledge is

selected, organised and enacted within schools (Harvey & Williams, 2022; Hou et al., 2024). While accreditation is designed to promote minimum standards and public accountability, its implications for educational practice are neither uniform nor unproblematic.

Recent literature suggests that accreditation has the potential to strengthen teaching and learning by promoting curriculum alignment, professionalisation of the teaching workforce and systematic approaches to assessment and quality management (Umalusi, 2023b; Hardman & Sandi, 2024). At the same time, studies caution that accreditation regimes may generate unintended consequences, particularly where compliance demands intensify administrative workloads, narrow pedagogical choices or divert attention away from learner-centred teaching towards performative accountability (Fowler, 2023; Hou et al., 2024). The effects of accreditation on teaching and learning are therefore contingent on how standards are interpreted, implemented and mediated within specific institutional and contextual settings.

Within independent schools, several interrelated factors emerge as central to understanding how accreditation influences teaching and learning. These include the degree of curriculum alignment and standardisation required by accrediting bodies, the availability and retention of suitably qualified teachers, access to adequate material and human resources and the ongoing tension between maintaining externally prescribed standards and fostering pedagogical innovation responsive to local learner needs (Harvey & Williams, 2022; Hardman & Sandi, 2024). This complex interplay underscores the need to view accreditation not as a linear driver of improvement, but as a dynamic process whose educational impact is shaped by institutional capacity, leadership practices and contextual constraints.

3.8.1 Curriculum Alignment and Standardisation

Accreditation processes commonly require schools to align their curricula with externally defined national or international standards in order to ensure coherence, comparability and accountability in educational outcomes. Within quality assurance frameworks, curriculum alignment is positioned as a central mechanism through which accrediting bodies seek to verify that teaching and learning are oriented towards clearly articulated learning outcomes and qualification requirements. Recent scholarship argues that such alignment can contribute to increased curricular

coherence, transparency and consistency, particularly by clarifying expectations regarding knowledge, skills and assessment practices across institutions (Duarte & Vardasca, 2023; Hou et al., 2024). From this perspective, accreditation-driven curriculum alignment serves as a regulatory instrument intended to safeguard educational standards and enhance public trust in schooling provision.

However, contemporary research also highlights the unintended pedagogical consequences associated with heightened standardisation pressures. The requirement to demonstrate alignment with prescribed standards may constrain teachers' pedagogical autonomy and narrow curricular enactment, particularly where accreditation criteria privilege measurable outputs over contextual responsiveness. Studies indicate that educators working within high-stakes accreditation environments may experience pressure to prioritise examinable content, leading to instructional practices that emphasise compliance and performance indicators at the expense of creativity, innovation and deeper forms of learning (Stensaker & Maassen, 2021; Harvey, 2024). In such contexts, curriculum alignment risks being reduced to a technical exercise rather than a reflective process grounded in learners' diverse needs and local realities.

The literature increasingly conceptualises this tension as a structural dilemma inherent within contemporary quality assurance regimes. While accreditation seeks to promote minimum standards and equity across institutions, rigid curricular standardisation may inadvertently undermine the adaptive and developmental dimensions of teaching and learning, particularly in resource-constrained or contextually diverse schooling environments (Hou et al., 2024). The challenge for schools, therefore, lies in negotiating a balance between compliance with accreditation standards and the preservation of pedagogical flexibility necessary for meaningful, learner-centred education. This ongoing tension remains a critical and contested dimension of accreditation's influence on teaching and learning.

3.8.2 Teacher Qualifications and Professional Development

Teacher qualifications and ongoing professional development are central components of contemporary accreditation frameworks and are widely regarded as key determinants of teaching quality and learner outcomes. Within quality assurance systems, accreditation serves as a mechanism through which schools are required

to demonstrate that educators possess appropriate academic qualifications, subject specialisation and professional registration aligned with nationally prescribed standards. Recent international and national literature underscores that teacher quality is one of the most significant in-school factors influencing instructional effectiveness, curriculum enactment and learner achievement (OECD, 2021b; UNESCO, 2023a).

Accreditation requirements typically extend beyond initial teacher qualifications to include evidence of continuous professional development (CPD). Contemporary studies indicate that accredited institutions are expected to create structured opportunities for teacher learning that support curriculum alignment, assessment literacy and pedagogical innovation. Ongoing professional development is increasingly framed as a collective and sustained process, embedded within school practices rather than discrete training events, thereby strengthening teachers' capacity to respond to evolving curricular and learner needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; OECD, 2021a). From this perspective, accreditation can function as a catalyst for professional growth by encouraging schools to institutionalise cultures of reflective practice and instructional improvement.

However, the literature also highlights that the professional development expectations associated with accreditation may generate significant pressures, particularly in under-resourced and rural schooling contexts. Teachers are often required to engage simultaneously in instructional delivery, professional learning activities and accreditation-related compliance tasks, including documenting qualifications, maintaining professional learning records and providing evidence of pedagogical alignment. Recent empirical studies caution that these cumulative demands may intensify workload stress and contribute to professional fatigue, especially where professional development is experienced as externally driven rather than contextually meaningful (Moyo & Makura, 2022; UNESCO, 2023b).

Scholars increasingly problematise the assumption that accreditation-mandated professional development automatically translates into improved teaching practice. While formal qualification requirements and CPD frameworks are necessary for ensuring minimum standards, their impact is mediated by contextual factors such as school leadership, resource availability and teacher agency. When professional development is narrowly aligned to compliance indicators, it may prioritise procedural

accountability over deep pedagogical learning, thereby limiting its transformative potential (OECD, 2021a; Naidoo, 2024). Consequently, the literature calls for accreditation systems that balance accountability with professional autonomy and recognise teachers as active participants in shaping meaningful professional learning trajectories.

3.8.3 Resource Allocation and Infrastructure

Resource allocation and infrastructural capacity constitute a central evaluative dimension within accreditation frameworks, reflecting the assumption that adequate material conditions are fundamental to effective teaching and learning. Within the Umalusi accreditation process, independent schools are required to demonstrate that they possess sufficient physical infrastructure, learning and teaching support materials and technological resources to deliver curricula aligned with qualifications registered on the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (Umalusi, 2023b). For rural independent schools, however, compliance with these requirements is often constrained by persistent resource inequalities and infrastructural deficits rooted in historical underdevelopment and ongoing socio-economic marginalisation.

Recent scholarship indicates that resource adequacy is a key determinant of instructional quality, learner engagement, and assessment credibility, particularly in contexts where schools are expected to implement standardised national curricula and assessment practices (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2023b). Accreditation requirements frequently necessitate investment in textbooks, laboratories, libraries, (ICT and safe learning environments. While such investments can enhance educational quality, rural independent schools often lack the financial capacity to make sustained infrastructural upgrades, placing them at a systemic disadvantage within accreditation regimes (DBE, 2021b).

Infrastructure-related challenges are especially acute in rural contexts, where schools commonly operate in facilities characterised by inadequate classrooms, unreliable electricity, limited internet connectivity and insufficient specialist spaces such as science laboratories and libraries. The expansion of digital and blended learning expectations within accreditation and quality assurance systems further intensifies this challenge, as schools without reliable ICT infrastructure struggle to meet

standards related to curriculum delivery, assessment moderation and record-keeping (UNESCO, 2023a). As a result, rural independent schools may be judged as underperforming against accreditation criteria that implicitly assume access to urban-level resources. The literature increasingly problematises the tendency of accreditation systems to conflate material provision with educational quality. While adequate resources are undoubtedly necessary, scholars caution that uniform infrastructure standards may obscure contextual variation and disadvantage schools that demonstrate pedagogical commitment and innovation despite material scarcity (Tikly, 2022; World Bank, 2022). In rural independent schools, limited resource allocation can therefore function as a structural barrier to accreditation, rather than merely an indicator of institutional inefficiency.

Overall, resource allocation and infrastructure emerge as critical yet inequitable determinants of accreditation outcomes for rural independent schools. Without differentiated resource benchmarks, targeted infrastructural support and context-sensitive evaluation criteria, accreditation processes risk reinforcing existing rural, urban disparities. Addressing these challenges requires a shift towards accreditation approaches that recognise contextual constraints while maintaining commitments to educational quality and learner protection (Tikly, 2022; Umalusi, 2023b).

3.8.4 Pedagogical Practices and Innovation

Accreditation processes increasingly influence pedagogical practices by promoting the adoption of instructional approaches that are grounded in empirical evidence and aligned with demonstrable learner outcomes. Within contemporary quality assurance frameworks, accredited schools are expected to provide evidence that teaching practices are effective in facilitating meaningful learning, often through the systematic use of learner performance data, formative assessment strategies and reflective instructional design. Recent research suggests that this outcomes-oriented emphasis can encourage teachers to adopt pedagogies that are structured, transparent and aligned with clearly articulated learning goals, thereby enhancing curriculum coherence and instructional accountability (Shavelson, 2021; Biesta, 2022).

At the same time, the literature cautions that strong accountability pressures associated with accreditation may constrain pedagogical innovation, particularly

where evaluation criteria prioritise standardisation and measurable outputs. Teachers operating within high-stakes quality assurance environments may feel compelled to prioritise compliance with prescribed frameworks and assessment metrics, potentially reducing opportunities for experimentation, creativity and contextually responsive teaching practices (Priestley et al., 2021; OECD, 2023a). In such contexts, pedagogical practices risk becoming instrumental and performative, oriented more toward satisfying accreditation requirements than fostering deep, critical and transformative learning. This tension is especially salient in independent schools, which often value curricular flexibility and pedagogical diversity as part of their educational identity. Contemporary studies argue that when accreditation systems emphasise uniform standards without sufficient recognition of contextual variation, they may unintentionally limit schools' capacity to innovate or to implement alternative pedagogical models suited to their learners' needs (Priestley et al., 2021; Biesta, 2022). From a doctoral perspective, this highlights a structural paradox within quality assurance regimes: while accreditation seeks to improve teaching quality, rigid accountability mechanisms may simultaneously narrow the pedagogical space required for innovation and professional agency.

Recent scholarship, therefore, calls for accreditation approaches that balance accountability with trust-based professionalism, enabling teachers to exercise informed pedagogical judgement while remaining accountable for learner outcomes. When accreditation frameworks explicitly recognise innovation, reflective practice and contextual responsiveness as legitimate indicators of quality, they are more likely to support pedagogical development rather than inhibit it (OECD, 2023a; Shavelson, 2021). This balance is critical if accreditation is to function as a catalyst for pedagogical improvement rather than a constraint on educational creativity.

3.8.5 Assessment and Accountability

Assessment and accountability constitute a central dimension of accreditation processes and exert a significant influence on teaching and learning practices within schools. Within quality assurance frameworks, accredited institutions are required to demonstrate that learners are achieving specified learning outcomes through the use of valid, reliable and systematic assessment practices. As a result, accreditation regimes often intensify the emphasis on formal assessment systems, performance

indicators and evidence-based reporting, all of which shape instructional priorities and classroom practices (Winstone & Carless, 2021; OECD, 2023b).

From an accountability perspective, robust assessment systems are intended to enhance transparency, comparability and institutional responsibility. Accreditation-driven assessment requirements enable schools to monitor learner progress, evaluate curriculum effectiveness and demonstrate compliance with national standards. Recent scholarship suggests that when assessment data are used formatively, they can support instructional improvement by informing pedagogical decision-making and identifying areas for targeted intervention (Boud & Dawson, 2021; Shavelson, 2021). In this sense, assessment functions not only as a mechanism of control but also as a potential tool for enhancing teaching and learning quality.

However, contemporary research also cautions against the unintended consequences of heightened accountability pressures associated with accreditation. Where assessment practices are primarily oriented towards external accountability and performance measurement, teachers may experience reduced pedagogical autonomy and increased pressure to teach to the test. This can result in a narrowing of the curriculum, privileging easily measurable outcomes over broader educational goals such as critical thinking, creativity and learner well-being (Priestley et al., 2021; Biesta, 2022). In such contexts, assessment risks becoming a performative exercise that prioritises compliance and reporting over deep learning and intellectual development.

The literature increasingly frames assessment-accountability tensions as a structural dilemma within contemporary quality assurance regimes. While accreditation seeks to ensure public accountability and minimum standards, excessive reliance on standardised assessment practices may undermine the formative and developmental purposes of assessment, particularly in diverse and resource-constrained schooling contexts (Winstone & Carless, 2021). The challenge for schools, therefore, lies in balancing the demands of accountability with assessment approaches that support learner-centred pedagogy and holistic educational development. Achieving this balance is critical if accreditation is to function as a catalyst for meaningful educational improvement rather than a constraint on pedagogical practice.

3.8.6 School Culture and Stakeholder Involvement

Accreditation processes are increasingly conceptualised as mechanisms for fostering a culture of continuous improvement, premised on the active participation of multiple stakeholders in reflecting on and enhancing teaching and learning practices. Contemporary quality assurance scholarship emphasises that sustainable school improvement is most likely to occur when accreditation processes are embedded within collaborative organisational cultures that engage teachers, school leaders, parents and learners as co-constructors of quality (Harvey & Williams, 2022; Hou et al., 2024). In this regard, stakeholder involvement is not merely instrumental but constitutive of meaningful accreditation, as it promotes shared ownership of quality standards and institutional goals.

However, emerging literature cautions that the intensification of external accountability demands can generate tensions within school communities, particularly in contexts characterised by limited resources and high workloads. Teachers and school leaders may experience accreditation as compliance-driven and externally imposed, leading to perceptions that accreditation requirements compete with, rather than support, pedagogical priorities and learner-centred practices (Stensaker & Harvey, 2006; Fowler, 2023). Such tensions may undermine professional autonomy and erode trust, especially where accreditation is experienced as prioritising documentary evidence and performance indicators over contextualised teaching and learning needs.

Recent studies argue that these tensions can be mitigated when accreditation processes are deliberately structured to encourage inclusive dialogue, collective reflection and transparent communication among stakeholders. Engaging educators, parents and learners in accreditation-related decision-making enables schools to negotiate external standards in ways that align with their educational values and contextual realities (Hou et al., 2024; Hardman & Sandi, 2024). When accreditation is enacted as a participatory and developmental process, rather than a narrow compliance exercise, it is more likely to reinforce school improvement efforts and strengthen institutional coherence, thereby supporting rather than detracting from teaching and learning.

3.8.7 Learner Support Systems

Learner support systems constitute a critical accreditation factor influencing teaching and learning, as they provide the organisational and pedagogical mechanisms through which schools address learners' academic, psychosocial and developmental needs. Contemporary quality-assurance frameworks increasingly conceptualise learner support as integral to instructional quality rather than as an ancillary service. Recent international evidence underscores that schools with well-coordinated learner support systems are better positioned to promote learner engagement, persistence and achievement, particularly in contexts characterised by socio-economic disadvantage (Oates et al., 2021).

Within accreditation regimes, learner support systems are typically evaluated through schools' capacity to identify learning needs early, implement targeted academic and psychosocial interventions and monitor learner progress systematically. Such systems commonly encompass remedial support, guidance and counselling services, inclusive education practices, pastoral care and mechanisms for family engagement. Post-pandemic analyses highlight that effective learner support has become increasingly important as schools respond to learning loss, mental-health challenges and widened inequalities in access to learning (UNICEF, 2022). Accreditation processes, therefore, increasingly foreground learner support as a marker of institutional responsiveness and resilience.

Recent scholarship further emphasises that learner support systems play a mediating role between teaching practices and learning outcomes. Where teachers are supported by structured learner support mechanisms, such as diagnostic assessment tools, referral pathways and multidisciplinary collaboration, they are better able to differentiate instruction and respond to diverse learner needs (Oates et al., 2021). Conversely, weak or fragmented learner support systems place additional pressure on teachers to address complex learner challenges within the classroom, often without specialist training or institutional backing, thereby constraining pedagogical effectiveness.

Digitisation and blended learning modalities have also reshaped contemporary learner support systems. Emerging research indicates a shift from predominantly reactive, remedial models towards more proactive, networked and learner-centred

support structures that integrate academic, technological and psychosocial dimensions (Panda, 2022). However, this evolution raises concerns regarding equity, as schools with limited technological infrastructure or professional support capacity may struggle to implement digitally enabled learner-support models effectively (UNESCO, 2023b).

The literature increasingly problematises the assumption that the mere presence of learner support policies guarantees meaningful support in practice. Studies caution that accreditation-driven learner support initiatives may become procedural and compliance-oriented if they are insufficiently embedded in everyday teaching and learning processes (Oates et al., 2021). Effective learner support systems require coherent alignment between policy, professional practice and school culture, as well as sustained investment in staff capacity and inter-professional collaboration.

Overall, learner support systems are a pivotal lens through which accreditation processes influence teaching and learning. When thoughtfully designed and contextually responsive, such systems can enhance instructional effectiveness and learner success. Conversely, where learner support is under-resourced or treated primarily as a compliance requirement, accreditation risks reinforcing existing inequities rather than promoting inclusive and sustainable educational improvement (UNESCO, 2023b).

3.8.8 School Leadership and Management

School leadership and management are widely recognised as pivotal factors influencing teaching and learning and are therefore central to contemporary accreditation frameworks. Quality-assurance systems increasingly position school leaders not merely as administrators but as instructional leaders responsible for setting direction, fostering a culture of learning and ensuring that teaching practices align with curriculum standards and learner needs. Recent international evidence suggests that leadership is second only to classroom teaching among school-based factors affecting learner achievement, underscoring its critical role in educational quality and improvement (UNESCO, 2024).

Within accreditation contexts, effective leadership and management are evaluated through schools' capacity to articulate a clear vision for learning, implement coherent quality-management systems and support teachers through supervision,

professional development and performance feedback. The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) indicates that schools led by principals who prioritise instructional leadership, collaborative decision-making and teacher development demonstrate more positive learning climates and stronger pedagogical practices (OECD, 2022). These leadership practices are closely linked to improved teacher motivation, professional collaboration and consistency in curriculum implementation.

Recent scholarship further highlights the role of leadership in mediating the impact of accreditation on teaching and learning. Accreditation processes generate increased accountability demands, requiring school leaders to interpret external standards, mobilise resources and coordinate internal quality assurance activities. Leaders who adopt distributive and participatory leadership approaches are better able to integrate accreditation requirements into everyday school practices, thereby reducing compliance-driven engagement and strengthening instructional coherence (Ghamrawi, 2023). In contrast, managerial or compliance-oriented leadership approaches may lead to superficial adherence to accreditation criteria without meaningful pedagogical improvement.

Contemporary research also emphasises that effective school management structures support teaching and learning by ensuring the strategic allocation of resources, efficient administrative systems and clear communication channels. Sound management practices enable schools to create enabling conditions for teaching, such as manageable workloads, access to learning materials and time for professional collaboration (Olowoselu, 2024). Accreditation frameworks increasingly assess these organisational capacities as indicators of a school's ability to sustain quality over time.

The literature problematises the assumption that leadership capacity is uniformly distributed across schooling contexts. The *Global Education Monitoring Report 2024/5* highlights significant disparities in the preparation and support of school leaders internationally, noting that many leadership development programmes insufficiently emphasise learning-focused leadership and staff development (UNESCO, 2024). In resource-constrained or rural contexts, leadership challenges may be intensified by role overload, limited professional support and governance

constraints, all of which can affect the translation of accreditation requirements into improved teaching and learning.

Overall, school leadership and management function as a critical conduit through which accreditation influences teaching and learning. When leadership is learning-centred, collaborative and strategically aligned with quality-assurance expectations, accreditation can serve as a catalyst for sustainable school improvement. Conversely, weak leadership and management capacity risk reducing accreditation to a procedural exercise, limiting its potential educational impact (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2024).

3.8.8 Facilities

School facilities, particularly classrooms and ablution facilities, represent a critical accreditation factor influencing teaching and learning, as they constitute the physical conditions within which educational processes are enacted. Contemporary quality-assurance frameworks emphasise that safe, hygienic and adequately resourced learning environments are foundational to effective instruction, learner engagement and educational equity. Accreditation systems increasingly evaluate facilities not merely for compliance with minimum standards, but as indicators of a school's capacity to provide enabling conditions for quality teaching and learning (UNESCO, 2023b).

Classroom infrastructure plays a central role in shaping pedagogical practices and learner outcomes. Well-designed classrooms that provide adequate space, ventilation, lighting and furniture enable teachers to implement learner-centred pedagogies, differentiated instruction and collaborative learning activities. Conversely, overcrowded, poorly maintained or structurally inadequate classrooms constrain instructional flexibility, exacerbate classroom management challenges and negatively affect learner concentration and academic performance (World Bank, 2022). Recent evidence suggests that classroom conditions are particularly influential in resource-constrained contexts, where physical learning environments can either mitigate or compound broader socio-economic disadvantages (UNESCO, 2023b).

Ablution facilities are an equally significant, though often under-examined, component of school infrastructure influencing teaching and learning. Adequate, safe

and hygienic sanitation facilities are essential for learner health, dignity and consistent school attendance. Poorly maintained or insufficient ablution facilities have been shown to contribute to increased absenteeism, reduced instructional time and negative psychosocial experiences for learners, particularly for girls and learners with disabilities (UNICEF, 2022). From an accreditation perspective, the availability of functional ablution facilities is therefore directly linked to schools' ability to sustain teaching and learning without disruption.

Recent post-pandemic policy and research literature further highlights the role of school facilities in supporting learner well-being and safeguarding. Health and safety considerations, including access to clean water, sanitation and adequately ventilated classrooms, have become more prominent within quality assurance and accreditation criteria following COVID-19. Schools that lack compliant facilities are at greater risk of failing accreditation standards related to learner protection, health and institutional readiness (DBE, 2021b; UNESCO, 2024).

The literature cautions against viewing facilities solely as technical inputs assessed through compliance checklists. While minimum infrastructure standards are essential, scholars argue that accreditation systems must recognise the uneven distribution of resources across schooling contexts. Uniform facility benchmarks may inadvertently disadvantage schools operating in historically under-resourced or rural environments, conflating infrastructural adequacy with educational quality (Tikly, 2022; World Bank, 2022). This raises critical questions about equity and contextual responsiveness within accreditation regimes.

Overall, classrooms and ablution facilities constitute key infrastructural enablers through which accreditation influences teaching and learning. When facilities are safe, functional and learner-appropriate, they create conditions that support effective pedagogy, learner well-being and sustained engagement. However, where facility provision is inadequate and assessed without contextual sensitivity, accreditation processes risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than promoting inclusive and sustainable educational improvement (UNESCO, 2024).

3.8.9 Monitoring and Internal Quality Assurance

Monitoring of teaching and learning, together with robust internal quality assurance systems, constitutes a core accreditation factor influencing educational practice and

learner outcomes. Contemporary accreditation frameworks conceptualise monitoring not as episodic inspection but as an ongoing, systematic process through which schools evaluate instructional practices, curriculum implementation, assessment quality and learner progress. Internal quality assurance is therefore positioned as a mechanism for embedding continuous improvement, accountability and evidence-informed decision-making within schools (OECD, 2023a).

Within accredited institutions, effective monitoring of teaching and learning typically involves structured classroom observations, analysis of learner performance data, moderation of assessment practices and reflective professional dialogue among educators. Recent international evidence indicates that schools with coherent internal monitoring systems are better able to identify instructional weaknesses, support teacher development and adapt pedagogical strategies to learners' needs (OECD, 2022). In this sense, monitoring functions not merely as a compliance requirement but as a developmental tool that strengthens instructional coherence and pedagogical effectiveness.

Internal quality assurance systems further mediate the relationship between accreditation standards and classroom practice. Accreditation bodies increasingly expect schools to demonstrate that quality assurance processes are internally driven, systematically documented and aligned with improvement planning rather than being reliant solely on external evaluation. Studies conducted in post-pandemic education contexts emphasise that schools with strong internal quality assurance systems were more resilient in responding to disruptions in teaching and learning, as they possessed established mechanisms for tracking learner progress, adjusting instruction and supporting teachers through data-informed feedback (UNESCO, 2023a).

However, the literature also cautions that monitoring and IQA processes may generate unintended consequences when they are dominated by performative accountability imperatives. Where monitoring is narrowly focused on compliance indicators and documentation, it risks becoming bureaucratic, workload-intensive and disconnected from pedagogical improvement. Research highlights that excessive emphasis on record-keeping and reporting can divert teachers' attention away from instructional innovation and learner-centred teaching, particularly in resource-constrained contexts (Winstone & Carless, 2021; OECD, 2023b).

Scholars increasingly advocate for balanced and formative approaches to monitoring and internal quality assurance. Effective systems are characterised by trust-based professional cultures, collaborative analysis of evidence and feedback processes that support teacher learning rather than punitive judgement. When school leaders integrate monitoring activities with professional development and reflective practice, Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) becomes a mechanism for enhancing teaching quality and learner achievement rather than a symbolic compliance exercise (UNESCO, 2024).

Overall, monitoring of teaching and learning and internal quality assurance serve as critical conduits through which accreditation influences educational practice. When coherently designed and developmentally oriented, these processes can strengthen instructional quality, promote professional accountability and support-sustained school improvement. Conversely, when monitoring is compliance-driven and insufficiently contextualised, accreditation risks undermining pedagogical agency and widening inequalities in teaching and learning outcomes (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2024).

3.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter has critically reviewed contemporary scholarly and policy literature on accreditation and quality assurance, with particular emphasis on their implications for teaching and learning in independent schools, including those located in rural contexts. The review demonstrates that accreditation has evolved beyond a narrow compliance function to become a complex, multi-dimensional process that seeks to balance accountability with institutional development and continuous improvement. Recent literature consistently frames accreditation as a mechanism through which quality cultures are cultivated, provided that standards are interpreted and enacted in contextually responsive ways (OECD, 2023b; Hou et al., 2024).

Across international, African and South African perspectives, the literature highlights the centrality of institutional capacity in mediating accreditation outcomes. Key factors influencing teaching and learning through accreditation include governance and management effectiveness, curriculum alignment, teacher qualifications and professional development, resource allocation and infrastructure, pedagogical practices, assessment and accountability, learner support systems, leadership and

internal quality assurance mechanisms. Together, these factors underscore that accreditation influences teaching and learning indirectly, through organisational conditions, professional practices and institutional cultures, rather than through compliance alone (UNESCO, 2023b; UNESCO, 2024).

The review further reveals that while accreditation frameworks are often designed to promote equity and comparability across institutions, their standardised application can generate uneven effects in resource-constrained settings. Rural independent schools, in particular, face compounded challenges related to financial constraints, limited human resources, infrastructural deficits, teacher retention and administrative capacity. These constraints shape how accreditation requirements are understood and enacted, and may result in compliance-oriented engagement that risks diverting attention away from core teaching and learning processes (DBE, 2021b; Umalusi, 2023a). The literature, therefore, cautions against 'one-size-fits-all' accreditation models and calls for differentiated, developmental approaches that recognise contextual realities without compromising quality standards.

Importantly, recent studies emphasise the mediating role of leadership and internal quality assurance in translating accreditation expectations into meaningful pedagogical improvement. Where school leaders adopt instructional, participatory and learning-centred leadership approaches, accreditation is more likely to support teacher development, coherent curriculum implementation and learner support systems. Conversely, weak leadership and compliance-driven quality assurance practices may reduce accreditation to a bureaucratic exercise with limited educational impact (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2024).

Overall, the literature reviewed in this chapter establishes that accreditation is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently detrimental to teaching and learning. Its impact is contingent on institutional capacity, leadership practices, resource availability and the extent to which quality assurance processes are embedded within reflective and developmental school cultures. These insights underscore the need for empirically grounded inquiry into how accreditation processes are understood, enacted and experienced by rural independent schools. The chapter thus provides a conceptual and empirical foundation for the current study and directly informs the theoretical framework and research questions that guide the investigation.

Chapter 4 presents the research design and methodology adopted for the study, including the research paradigm, approach, sampling procedures, data-generation methods, data-analysis process, ethical considerations and measures employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 presents a comprehensive account of the research design and methodology employed to investigate the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo regarding the Umalusi accreditation process. A rigorous and transparent methodological framework is essential in qualitative research, as it provides the logical and philosophical foundation through which knowledge is generated, interpreted, and presented (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This chapter, therefore, explicates the philosophical paradigm underpinning the study, the research design, population and sampling procedures, data collection methods, data analysis strategies, ethical considerations and measures adopted to ensure methodological rigour and trustworthiness.

Contemporary qualitative research emphasises the alignment between a researcher's philosophical assumptions, methodological choices and the nature of the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Takona, 2024). In studies that seek to understand human experiences within specific social and institutional contexts, qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of meanings, perceptions and lived realities as constructed by participants themselves. This study, therefore, adopted a qualitative approach to capture the complex, context-bound experiences of school principals and SMT members as they navigate the accreditation requirements imposed by Umalusi.

At the core of this chapter is the articulation of the interpretivist research paradigm, which guides the study's ontological, epistemological and axiological positioning. Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge emerges through interactions between individuals and their social environments (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Nickerson, 2024). Rather than seeking universal laws or objective truths, interpretivist research prioritises understanding participants' subjective meanings and contextual interpretations. This paradigm is particularly relevant for educational research conducted in rural contexts, where institutional practices, resource constraints and accreditation processes are experienced differently across schools and communities.

Methodologically, the chapter outlines the adoption of an instrumental case study design, selected for its capacity to provide rich, holistic insights into a bounded system within a real-life context (Flores, 2025; Greenhalgh, 2025). Instrumental case studies are especially valuable when the aim is not merely to describe a case, but to use the case to gain deeper understanding of a broader phenomenon, in this instance, the impact of accreditation processes on teaching, learning and school management in rural independent schools. This design enables the study to move beyond surface-level descriptions and to interrogate processes, challenges and institutional responses in detail.

Furthermore, this chapter details the sampling strategy, data collection techniques and data analysis procedures employed in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants with direct involvement in the accreditation process, ensuring relevance and depth of data. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, allowing for methodological triangulation and a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Ethical considerations form an integral component of this chapter, reflecting contemporary scholarly emphasis on ethics as an ongoing, reflexive process rather than a once-off procedural requirement (McLeod, 2024b; Sobhanifar et al., 2026). The chapter outlines strategies used to enhance trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, which are central to ensuring methodological rigour in qualitative research (Connelly, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In addition, issues of informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation and participant well-being are addressed in line with national and institutional ethical standards.

In summary, Chapter 4 serves as a methodological roadmap for the study, demonstrating how the research was systematically and ethically designed to address the research questions. By grounding the study in contemporary qualitative scholarship and a clearly articulated interpretivist framework, this chapter establishes the foundation upon which the analysis and interpretation of findings are built.

4.2 PARADIGM PERSPECTIVES

A research paradigm refers to a coherent set of philosophical assumptions that shape how reality is understood, how knowledge is generated, and how research is conducted. Contemporary scholars describe a paradigm as a worldview or interpretive lens that guides the researcher's understanding of reality and informs decisions related to ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Pandey et al., 2025). Rather than being a purely technical choice, a paradigm frames how social phenomena are conceptualised, how evidence is interpreted, and how meaning is constructed within a particular research context.

In the context of this study, which explores the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo regarding the Umalusi accreditation process, the adoption of a clear paradigm was essential for understanding how schools perceive, interpret, and respond to accreditation requirements. Accreditation is not experienced uniformly across educational settings; instead, it is shaped by schools' contextual realities, institutional values, resource availability and prior interactions with regulatory bodies. The paradigm adopted in this study, therefore, enabled an examination of how school principals and SMT members interpret the significance of accreditation, how they construct meanings around quality assurance and how their beliefs influence evidence preparation, compliance practices and responses to accreditation challenges.

This study is located within the interpretivist research paradigm, which holds that reality is socially constructed and that multiple, context-dependent realities exist rather than a single objective truth (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Nickerson, 2024). Interpretivism emphasises understanding phenomena from the perspective of participants by exploring the meanings they attach to their experiences within specific social and institutional contexts. Knowledge, from an interpretivist standpoint, is generated through interaction between the researcher and participants and is inherently shaped by historical, cultural and situational factors (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Adopting an interpretivist paradigm enabled this study to prioritise the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of principals and SMT members involved in the accreditation process. The approach facilitated a holistic and nuanced

understanding of how participants make sense of Umalusi's accreditation requirements, how they experience compliance demands and how accreditation processes influence teaching, learning and school management practices. By recognising the existence of multiple realities, the interpretivist stance reduced the distance between the researcher and participants and supported an in-depth, context-sensitive exploration of the phenomenon under study. Ontologically, interpretivism assumes reality to be subjective and socially constructed, making it particularly suitable for research that seeks to understand complex human experiences within diverse educational settings (Pandey et al., 2025).

4.2.1 Social Constructivist Paradigm

Social constructivism provides a coherent philosophical framework for understanding how meaning is created through human interaction within specific social, cultural and historical contexts. Contemporary constructivist scholars argue that knowledge is not discovered as an objective reality but is actively constructed through dialogue, shared experiences and interpretive engagement between individuals and their social environments (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Pandey et al., 2025). From this perspective, reality is understood as plural, contextual and negotiated rather than fixed or universally applicable.

Within a social constructivist orientation, knowledge emerges through participants' interpretations of their lived experiences and the meanings they assign to social phenomena. Meaning-making is therefore viewed as a dynamic process influenced by historical conditions, institutional structures, cultural norms and power relations (Nickerson, 2024; Tanlaka & Aryal, 2025). This paradigm acknowledges that individuals make sense of their social worlds through interaction with others and that these interpretations may evolve as context and relationship changes.

Social constructivism assumes that social reality is continually produced and reproduced through social interaction. Individuals do not merely respond to pre-existing realities but actively shape their understandings through communication, reflection and shared meaning-making (Pandey et al., 2025). Truth, from a constructivist standpoint, is therefore regarded as relative and contingent upon perspective, context and social positioning. Rather than prioritising a single authoritative account, constructivist research embraces multiple viewpoints to

generate a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

In this study, working within a social constructivist paradigm enabled participants to construct and articulate meanings derived from their experiences of the Umalusi accreditation process in rural independent schools. Through their participation in the research process, principals and SMT members were required to reflect on and interpret their encounters with accreditation requirements, compliance demands and quality assurance expectations within their specific institutional contexts. Emphasising multiple perspectives rather than a singular “objective” account allowed the study to capture diverse interpretations and avoid overlooking critical dimensions of participants’ experiences.

Consistent with an interpretivist-constructivist stance, the researcher engaged closely with participants’ narratives, attending carefully to their descriptions and interpretations as situated within their everyday professional realities. Subjective meanings were understood as socially and historically negotiated through interaction, shaped by both individual experiences and broader educational, regulatory and socio-economic contexts (Nickerson, 2024). The researcher thus operated reflexively between the social world of the participants and the interpretive lens of the research process, acknowledging the co-construction of knowledge inherent in qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

In this research, participants were relied upon as the primary constructors of knowledge regarding the Umalusi accreditation process in rural independent schools. Findings were reported holistically from participants’ experiences, with interpretations grounded in their lived experiences and contextual realities. The overarching goal of the study was therefore to privilege participants’ views and meanings, recognising them as essential for understanding how accreditation processes are experienced, interpreted and enacted within rural educational settings.

Interpretivism and social constructivism together emphasise understanding how individuals and groups interpret social events and institutional practices within particular contexts. In adopting this combined philosophical stance, the study sought to construct meaning from participants’ experiences rather than impose predefined

interpretations, thereby ensuring a context-sensitive and methodologically coherent exploration of the phenomenon under investigation (Pandey et al., 2025).

4.2.2 Ontology

Ontology concerns the nature of reality and what is assumed to exist in the world being investigated. In qualitative research, ontological assumptions shape how social phenomena are understood and how meanings are attributed to human experiences. Contemporary scholars conceptualise ontology as a continuum ranging from objectivist views that assume a single, stable reality independent of human perception, to subjectivist views that regard reality as socially constructed, multiple and context dependent (Chafe, 2024; Pretorius, 2024).

This study is situated within a constructivist–interpretivist ontological stance, which holds that reality is not fixed or singular but is constructed through social interaction, institutional practices and contextual conditions. From this perspective, realities are understood as multiple and dynamic, shaped by the meanings individuals and groups assign to their experiences within particular social and organisational contexts (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Pandey et al., 2025). Rather than assuming the existence of one objective reality, interpretivist ontology recognises that different actors may experience and interpret the same phenomenon in diverse ways. Applied to this study, ontology refers to the multiple realities surrounding the Umalusi accreditation process as experienced by independent rural schools in Limpopo. Accreditation is not treated as a purely technical or objective process with uniform effects; instead, it is understood as a socially situated phenomenon whose meaning, significance and consequences are constructed through the interactions, perceptions and responses of school principals and SMT members. These realities are influenced by institutional histories, availability of resources, regulatory pressures and the broader rural educational context in which schools operate.

Recent educational research emphasises that interpretivist ontology is particularly appropriate for studies examining policy implementation and regulatory processes in complex educational settings, where experiences are shaped by local conditions and organisational cultures (Alhoussawi, 2023; Pretorius, 2024). In rural schooling contexts, accreditation processes may be perceived simultaneously as mechanisms for quality assurance, sources of administrative burden or instruments of

accountability, depending on participants' roles, expectations and institutional positioning. These varied interpretations underscore the existence of plural realities rather than a single, measurable truth. By adopting a constructivist ontological position, this study acknowledges that knowledge about the accreditation process emerges from the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of participants. Reality is therefore understood as co-constructed between the participants and the researcher through dialogue, reflection and interpretation. This ontological stance allows for a nuanced exploration of how accreditation influences teaching, learning and school management practices in ways that are meaningful within specific school contexts, rather than assuming uniform or generalisable outcomes.

In summary, the ontological assumption underpinning this study is that the realities of Umalusi accreditation in independent rural schools are socially constructed, context-bound and multiple. This position aligned conceptually with the interpretivist and social constructivist paradigm guiding the study and providing a coherent philosophical foundation for the instrumental case study design. The study aimed to uncover and describe the objective reality by examining how the accreditation process influences various aspects of the schools' operations and educational outcomes.

4.2.3 Epistemology

Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge and is concerned with how knowledge is generated, validated and understood within a particular research context. Contemporary qualitative scholars emphasise that epistemological assumptions are inseparable from a researcher's worldview, as they shape decisions about what counts as knowledge and how meaning is constructed from human experience (Pretorius, 2024). Within the social sciences, epistemology moves beyond questions of objective truth to consider how knowledge is produced through interpretation, interaction, and context-bound understanding.

This study adopted an interpretivist epistemological stance, which holds that knowledge is subjective, co-constructed and socially situated rather than objectively discovered. From an interpretivist perspective, knowledge does not exist independently of human consciousness; instead, it emerges through individuals' interpretations of their experiences within specific social and institutional contexts

(Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Pandey et al., 2025). Meaning is therefore not fixed but negotiated through interaction between participants and the researcher.

In line with this epistemological position, the study prioritises understanding the subjective experiences of principals and SMT members involved in the Umalusi accreditation process. These participants are regarded as knowledge holders, whose insights are shaped by their professional roles, institutional responsibilities and the rural contexts in which their schools operate. Knowledge in this study is generated through engagement with participants' narratives, reflections and interpretations of accreditation requirements, challenges and compliance expectations. Interpretivist epistemology further acknowledges the active role of the researcher in the knowledge construction process. Rather than assuming researcher neutrality, this stance recognises that understanding is co-produced through dialogue, reflexivity and interpretation (Pretorius, 2024). The researcher's positionality, prior knowledge and interpretivist lens inevitably influence how participants' accounts are understood and represented. As such, reflexivity is central to ensuring that participants' meanings are faithfully interpreted within their contextual realities.

Recent educational research highlights that interpretivist epistemology is especially appropriate for studies exploring policy enactment and regulatory processes, where stakeholders' perceptions and interpretations significantly shape how policies are experienced in practice (Alhoussawi, 2023; Pandey et al., 2025). In the context of Umalusi accreditation, schools may interpret quality assurance requirements differently depending on resource availability, administrative capacity and prior engagement with regulatory authorities. These diverse interpretations underscore the epistemological assumption that multiple forms of valid knowledge exist, each grounded in participants' lived experiences.

In summary, the epistemological position underpinning this study assumed that knowledge about the Umalusi accreditation process is contextual, interpretive and constructed through social interaction. By adopting an interpretivist epistemology, the study sought to generate rich, nuanced understandings of how accreditation is perceived and experienced by independent rural schools, rather than attempting to establish generalisable or objective truths. This epistemological stance is coherent with the study's constructivist ontology and qualitative instrumental case study design, ensuring philosophical alignment across the research framework. The goal

was to interpret these experiences within their specific context, understanding that the knowledge derived from the study is shaped by the experiences of the participants and the social context in which they operate.

4.2.4 Axiology

Axiology refers to the philosophical examination of values, ethics and moral principles and their influence on the research process. In qualitative research, axiology foregrounds the recognition that inquiry is not value-free, but rather shaped by the researcher's beliefs, ethical commitments, positionality and judgements at every stage of the study (Finn et al., 2022; Kara, 2024). Contemporary qualitative scholars increasingly conceptualise axiology as extending beyond procedural ethics to encompass the broader moral responsibilities of the researcher, including respect, care, justice and relational accountability toward participants and communities.

Within an interpretivist–constructivist framework, axiology explicitly acknowledges that the researcher is an active participant in the knowledge construction process and that values inevitably influence research design, data generation, interpretation and representation of findings. Recent authors argue that interpretivist axiology requires transparency regarding the researcher's values and a commitment to reflexivity as a means of critically examining how those values shape meaning-making (Sirris, 2022; Stagg, 2024). Rather than attempting to eliminate values, qualitative researchers are encouraged to make their axiological positions explicit to enhance the credibility, trustworthiness and ethical integrity of the study.

This study is explicitly value-laden, as it sought to explore the significance and impact of the Umalusi accreditation process on independent rural schools, an issue closely linked to educational quality, equity, accountability and social justice. Axiology in this context involves recognising the moral dimensions of researching schools that often operate under conditions of limited resources and heightened regulatory pressures. The study was guided by values of fairness, respect and inclusivity, ensuring that participants' voices were represented accurately and ethically, without distortion or marginalisation.

Recent research highlights that ethical responsibility in qualitative inquiry extends throughout the entire research lifecycle, from recruitment and data collection to analysis and dissemination (Taquette & da Matta Souza, 2022; Lim, 2024).

Accordingly, this study adopted an ethics-as-process approach, recognising ethics not as a one-time approval requirement but as an ongoing, reflexive practice. Ethical decision-making was guided by principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and sensitivity to power dynamics between the researcher and participants.

Axiological considerations in this study also included a strong emphasis on reflexivity. Reflexivity involves critically examining the researcher's positionality, assumptions and value commitments, and how these influence interactions with participants and the interpretation of data. Recent scholars identify reflexivity as a cornerstone of ethical qualitative research, particularly in studies involving policy, regulation and institutional accountability (Alejandro & Stoffel, 2024; Owusu Sarfo & Attigah, 2025). The researcher continuously reflected on personal beliefs regarding accreditation, quality assurance and rural education to mitigate potential bias and ensure that participants' meanings remained central to the analysis.

In valuing participants as co-constructors of knowledge, this study sought to conduct research with schools rather than on them. This participatory orientation aligns with contemporary axiological perspectives that emphasise relational ethics, reciprocity and respect for participants' agency in shaping how their experiences are interpreted and presented (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The findings are therefore presented in a manner that honours participants' lived realities and seeks to contribute constructively to discussions on improving accreditation processes in rural educational contexts.

In summary, the axiological position underpinning this study recognised that research is an ethically and morally situated practice. The study is grounded in values of educational equity, ethical responsibility, reflexivity and social relevance. By explicitly acknowledging and engaging with these values, the research aimed to produce findings that are not only methodologically sound but also ethically responsible and meaningful for policy, practice and future research. The researcher's values, including a commitment to educational equity and effectiveness, may have influenced the research focus, choice of methods and interpretation of findings.

4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

Research approach refers to the systematic and theoretically informed framework that guides how a study is designed, conducted and analysed in order to address specific research questions (Lim, 2024). It provides coherence between the philosophical assumptions of a study and the practical decisions made regarding research design, data generation and analysis. A clearly articulated research approach is particularly important in qualitative inquiry, as it ensures methodological rigour while remaining sensitive to context, meaning and participants' lived experiences. In line with the study's interpretivist–constructivist orientation, this research adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo with the Umalusi accreditation process.

Qualitative research is grounded in the assumption that social reality is complex, context-bound and constructed through human interaction. Rather than isolating variables or seeking causal relationships, qualitative inquiry aims to develop in-depth understanding of how people interpret and make sense of their experiences within natural settings (Asmawi & Alam, 2024; Lim, 2024). This approach was particularly suited to the present study, as the Umalusi accreditation process is embedded within specific institutional, regulatory and rural contexts that shape how accreditation requirements are perceived, enacted and experienced by school leaders.

By studying phenomena in their natural settings, qualitative research allows participants' perspectives to emerge without manipulation or experimental control. This enabled the study to capture the nuanced realities of principals and SMT members as they navigated accreditation demands related to teaching, learning, compliance and school management. Recent qualitative scholars emphasise that such naturalistic inquiry is essential when investigating policy enactment and institutional processes, where meanings are negotiated rather than uniformly applied (Tanlaka & Aryal, 2025).

Qualitative research is also particularly concerned with understanding subjective meaning. It seeks to explore not only what happens, but how and why actors interpret events in particular ways. This study relied on participants as key informants who possess experiential knowledge of accreditation practices in their schools. Through sustained engagement with participants' narratives and reflections, the study was

able to illuminate how accreditation influenced school practices, decision-making and perceptions of quality assurance. According to Braun and Clarke (2024), such depth-oriented inquiry strengthens qualitative research by foregrounding participants' voices and ensuring that analytic interpretations remain grounded in lived experience.

Qualitative inquiry encompasses a range of approaches, including ethnography, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, grounded theory and case study research. For this study, an instrumental case study design was selected, as the primary interest was not the case itself, but what the case could reveal about a broader phenomenon, namely, the impact of accreditation processes on rural independent schools. Contemporary case study scholars argue that instrumental case studies are particularly valuable for examining complex educational processes within real-life contexts, especially where institutional practices and contextual factors are closely intertwined (Greenhalgh, 2025).

An instrumental case study design enabled the study to examine accreditation as a bounded system, while still attending to the multiple perspectives and contextual conditions shaping participants' experiences. The blurred boundaries between accreditation procedures and everyday school operations made this design especially appropriate. Recent methodological literature highlights that case studies are well-suited to exploratory and interpretive research, as they allow for holistic analysis of processes, relationships and meanings over time (Flores, 2025).

In addition, the qualitative research approach facilitated the use of multiple data-generation methods, including semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The integration of these methods supported methodological triangulation, enhancing the richness and credibility of the findings. Qualitative researchers increasingly emphasise the value of combining interviews with documentary sources when studying regulatory and policy-driven processes, as documents provide insight into formal expectations while interviews reveal how these expectations are interpreted and enacted in practice (Lim, 2024).

In summary, the qualitative research approach provided an appropriate and coherent framework for exploring the complex, context-specific experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo with the Umalusi accreditation process. By prioritising meaning, context and participants' lived realities, this approach aligned with the

study's philosophical assumptions and enabled a nuanced examination of how accreditation influences teaching, learning and school management within rural educational settings.

4.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design constitutes a purposeful and coherent plan that integrates the study's research questions with appropriate methodological procedures to ensure systematic inquiry. In qualitative research, research design serves not only as a technical blueprint but also as an interpretive framework that enables the researcher to explore complex social phenomena while remaining sensitive to context, meaning, and participant perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2024). A well-articulated design, therefore, ensures methodological rigour while allowing adaptability in response to emerging insights during the research process.

4.4.1 Instrumental Case Study

This study adopted an instrumental case study research design, which is particularly suitable when investigating phenomena that are under-researched, poorly understood or context-specific. A case study is a qualitative research design that involves an in-depth, holistic and context-sensitive investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life setting. Recent methodological scholars define a case study as a detailed and contextualised account of a clearly bounded, real-world phenomenon, typically constructed using multiple sources of qualitative data (Greenhalgh, 2025). Unlike experimental or survey designs, case studies do not seek to control variables but instead embrace contextual complexity, allowing researchers to explore how social processes unfold in practice rather than in artificial conditions.

In educational research, a case study may focus on an institution, a group of participants, a policy implementation process or an organisational practice. Its defining feature is the integration of context, meaning and participant experience, enabling a rich understanding of both processes and outcomes as they occur within authentic educational environments (California Learning Resource Network, 2025).

The case study design is particularly suitable for research that seeks to address 'how' and 'why' questions, especially where the phenomenon under investigation is embedded within complex institutional, regulatory and social contexts. Contemporary literature emphasises that case studies are especially appropriate when the

boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly distinguishable and when understanding stakeholder perceptions and actions is central to the research purpose (Greenhalgh, 2025).

This study sought to explore how independent rural schools experience, interpret and respond to the Umalusi accreditation process and why accreditation affects schools differently depending on contextual conditions such as resources, governance capacity and regulatory engagement. Accreditation is not a purely technical procedure; rather, it is a policy-driven process that unfolds within specific institutional realities and is shaped by human interpretation and organisational decision-making. A case study design, therefore, provided an appropriate methodological framework for examining these processes in depth and in context.

Recent educational research highlights that qualitative case studies are especially valuable for investigating policy enactment, regulatory compliance and institutional accountability, as they allow researchers to trace how formal requirements are interpreted, negotiated and implemented at the local level (Distance Learning Institute, 2025). Given the regulatory nature of Umalusi accreditation, a case study enabled a nuanced examination of both formal compliance expectations and lived institutional experiences.

This study adopted an instrumental case study approach, in which the selected independent rural schools served as cases used to gain insight into a broader phenomenon, in this instance, the implementation and impact of the Umalusi accreditation process in rural independent schooling contexts. In an instrumental case study, the case itself is not the primary object of interest; rather, it is used as a means to illuminate a wider issue of educational significance (Greenhalgh, 2025).

The case was bounded by three defining criteria:

1. Geographical location (rural areas of Limpopo),
2. Institutional type (independent schools), and
3. Regulatory focus (Umalusi accreditation).

Clearly defining these boundaries ensured analytic focus while allowing for sufficient depth and contextual richness. Within these boundaries, the case study design supported the collection of data from multiple sources, including semi-structured

interviews with principals and SMT members, as well as accreditation-related documents. The use of multiple data sources is widely recognised as a core strength of rigorous case study research, as it enhances credibility through triangulation and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena (California Learning Resource Network, 2025).

By employing a case study design, the research was able to capture participants' subjective meanings, organisational practices and contextual constraints associated with accreditation, thereby aligning closely with the study's interpretivist–constructivist paradigm. The design facilitated a holistic exploration of accreditation as a lived institutional process, rather than reducing it to compliance outcomes or measurable indicators alone.

In summary, the case study design provided an appropriate, coherent and methodologically robust framework for exploring the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo with the Umalusi accreditation process. Its emphasis on contextual depth, multiple perspectives and real-life complexity ensured that the study generated rich, credible and analytically meaningful insights relevant to both policy and practice.

4.5 RESEARCH METHODS

This section details the procedures undertaken in selecting the sampling strategy, research sites and study participants, as well as the process followed to obtain permission to conduct the study. It also outlines the data collection methods employed and describes the approach used for data analysis.

4.5.1 Population, Sampling and Site Selection

In qualitative research, the population refers to the broader group of individuals or entities that share characteristics relevant to the phenomenon under investigation and from which participants may be drawn. Contemporary methodology literature emphasises that, in qualitative inquiry, populations are defined conceptually rather than statistically, with emphasis placed on relevance and information richness rather than numerical representation (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

In the context of this study, the population comprised all registered independent schools in Limpopo Province, encompassing both urban and rural contexts. However, the study deliberately focused on the rural subset of this population, as the research

aimed to explore how independent rural schools experience and respond to the Umalusi accreditation process within resource-constrained and context-specific environments. According to publicly available records at the time of the study, Limpopo had approximately 200 registered independent schools, a proportion of which are located in rural areas.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants for the study. Purposive sampling involves the intentional selection of information-rich cases based on their relevance to the research objectives and the researcher's judgement regarding their capacity to provide meaningful insight into the phenomenon under study (Saunders et al., 2023). In qualitative research, purposive sampling is widely regarded as appropriate when the aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences rather than to achieve statistical generalisation (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Using this approach, six (6) independent rural schools in Limpopo were selected from Umalusi's publicly available database. Selection criteria required that schools were either fully accredited or in the process of accreditation, ensuring that participants had direct and substantive experience of the Umalusi accreditation process. This criterion enhanced the relevance and credibility of the data by ensuring alignment between participants' experiences and the study's research focus.

From each selected school, two participants were purposively chosen:

- the school principal, and
- one member of the School Management Team (SMT), as indicated in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Demographic profile of participants

Participant Code	Role	Years in Current Role	School Location	School Characteristics
SMT 1	SMT Member	1 year (school since inception)	Rural village	Community-supported school Enrolment ±900
SMT 2	Vice Principal / SMT	4 years	Deep rural village	Expanded from daycare centre Enrolment ±193

Participant Code	Role	Years in Current Role	School Location	School Characteristics
SMT 3	Head of Foundation Phase / SMT	More than 10 years	Rural area	Enrolment ±583
SMT 4	SMT Member	6–7 years	Rural area	Small school, limited technology Enrolment ±300
SMT 5	Head of Curriculum / SMT	Since 2022	Deep rural area	Enrolment 1,111
SMT 6	SMT Member	3 years	Rural area	Established in 2008; learners from poor families Enrolment ±490
Principal 1	Principal	17 years	Rural area	Community-supported school Enrolment ±900
Principal 2	Principal	Since 2022	Rural village	Enrolment ±193
Principal 3	Principal	3 years	Rural area	Enrolment ±583
Principal 4	Principal	Since 2002	Deep rural area	Combined school with a hostel Enrolment ±300
Principal 5	Principal	Since 2015	Rural area	Enrolment 1,111
Principal 6	Principal	Since 2008	Very rural area	Enrolment ±490

These participants were selected based on their direct involvement in preparing for and engaging with the accreditation process, as well as their institutional knowledge of how accreditation influences teaching, learning and school management practices. Recent qualitative scholars highlight the importance of selecting participants who are closely positioned to the phenomenon under investigation, as this strengthens the depth and authenticity of the data generated (Lim, 2024).

The final sample, therefore, consisted of:

- Six (6) principals, one from each participating school; and
- Six (6) SMT members, one from each participating school.

No selection criteria were applied with respect to gender, race or age. Instead, participation was determined solely by professional role, experience and relevance to the research objectives. This approach is consistent with qualitative research principles, which prioritise experiential knowledge and contextual insight over demographic representativeness (Saunders et al., 2023).

Overall, the purposive sampling strategy proved effective in generating rich, contextualised data that illuminated how the Umalusi accreditation process is experienced, interpreted and enacted within rural independent school settings in Limpopo.

4.5.2 Exclusion Criteria

To ensure that the sample remained closely aligned with the research objectives and the interpretive focus of the study, a clearly defined set of exclusion criteria was applied. Schools located outside rural areas were excluded in order to maintain a deliberate focus on rural educational contexts, where institutional capacity, access to resources and regulatory interactions often differ significantly from those in urban settings. In addition, schools that were neither fully accredited nor in the process of seeking accreditation were excluded, as their inclusion would not yield relevant insights into the Umalusi accreditation process under investigation.

Participants who were not directly involved in accreditation activities, or who lacked sufficient familiarity with the practical, administrative and instructional implications of accreditation for teaching and learning, were also excluded. This ensured that data were generated from participants with experiential and decision-making proximity to the phenomenon, thereby strengthening the credibility and depth of the findings. Furthermore, only schools appearing on Umalusi's publicly available database were considered eligible for inclusion, in order to verify institutional legitimacy and alignment with national regulatory standards. Schools not listed on this database were excluded to avoid the inclusion of informal or unregistered institutions whose experiences may not reflect the formal accreditation framework.

Collectively, these exclusion criteria enhanced the methodological coherence of the study by narrowing the focus to information-rich cases that were directly relevant to the research questions. This deliberate delimitation supported analytic depth, reduced contextual variability unrelated to the research purpose and ensured that the findings were grounded in authentic experiences of accreditation within rural independent schooling contexts in Limpopo.

4.6 INSTRUMENTATION

Instrumentation refers to the tools, documents and protocols used to generate, record and manage data in a research study. In qualitative inquiry, instruments are not

neutral or purely technical devices; rather, they are deliberately constructed to facilitate deep, context-sensitive engagement with participants and to support the interpretive aims of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Instruments, therefore, play a critical role in shaping the nature, depth and quality of the data generated.

Consistent with the interpretivist–constructivist paradigm underpinning this research, the instruments employed were designed to elicit participants' meanings, perceptions and interpretations of their experiences with the Umalusi accreditation process. Qualitative instrumentation prioritises flexibility, reflexivity and responsiveness to participants' lived realities, allowing for the exploration of complex educational processes as they unfold within specific institutional and regulatory contexts (Lim, 2024).

Prior to data collection, the researcher developed detailed participant information sheets and informed consent forms (Appendix D). These documents provided comprehensive information regarding the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, data collection procedures, potential risks and benefits, and ethical safeguards. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw without penalty, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and secure data storage. Providing clear and accessible information supported ethical principles of autonomy, transparency, and informed consent, which are central to contemporary qualitative research practice (Taquette & da Matta Souza, 2022).

4.7 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Prior to the commencement of the study, the necessary ethical approval was obtained. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of South Africa (see Appendix A), and additional permission to conduct the study within schools was secured from the Limpopo Department of Education (see Appendix B). To gain an in-depth empirical understanding of the research phenomenon, qualitative data were collected from multiple sources using different methods and at various points during the data generation process. Two data collection techniques, semi-structured interviews and document analysis, were deliberately selected to enable methodological triangulation. The use of these complementary techniques strengthened the credibility of the study by allowing for the comparison and corroboration of data derived from participants' accounts and institutional documents.

The following sections describe each data collection technique and explain how they were applied in the study.

4.7.1 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are considered as the primary data collection technique for qualitative research, being widely recognised in contemporary qualitative research as an effective method for generating rich, in-depth data while allowing flexibility to explore participants' experiences in a systematic manner (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This approach involves the use of a guiding set of open-ended questions, while permitting the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and probing prompts based on participants' responses. Such flexibility is particularly valuable in interpretivist research, where understanding participants' meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences is central to the inquiry.

The primary data-generation instrument consisted of in-depth semi-structured interview guides and key informant interview schedules (Appendix E). These instruments were developed specifically for this study and aligned with the research questions and conceptual framework. Semi-structured interviews are widely regarded as appropriate for qualitative case study research, as they provide a balance between consistency across interviews and flexibility to pursue emergent issues raised by participants (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Open-ended questions and probing techniques were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences, clarify meanings, and reflect critically on the implications of accreditation for teaching, learning, and school management.

Interviews were conducted with school principals and one member of the SMT from each of the six selected independent rural schools in Limpopo. These participants were purposively selected because of their direct involvement in, and responsibility for, the Umalusi accreditation process at their respective schools. Recent qualitative scholars emphasise the importance of interviewing participants who hold experiential and decision-making proximity to the phenomenon under investigation, as this enhances the relevance, depth, and credibility of the data generated (Lim, 2024).

The semi-structured format enabled a flexible yet focused interview process, allowing the researcher to explore predetermined themes related to accreditation while also attending to issues that emerged organically during the interviews. This adaptability

was essential for capturing nuanced accounts of how accreditation requirements are interpreted, implemented, and experienced within rural school contexts. Contemporary methodological literature highlights that semi-structured interviews are particularly suited to studies examining policy enactment and institutional processes, as they allow participants to articulate both formal practices and informal, context-specific challenges (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

The interviews sought to elicit detailed insights into participants' daily experiences, challenges and decision-making processes related to Umalusi accreditation. Through sustained engagement with participants' narratives, the interviews aimed to develop thick descriptions of the realities of accreditation, including its implications for teaching, learning, school management and administrative workload. Such depth-oriented interviewing is regarded as essential for producing analytically meaningful qualitative findings that remain grounded in participants' lived realities (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six school principals and six SMT members, yielding a total of twelve participants. Following the approval of the study by the relevant authorities, potential participants were formally invited to take part in the research and were provided with detailed participant information sheets outlining the purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations of the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data generation, including explicit permission to audio-record the interviews. In addition, institutional permission to conduct interviews with principals, in their capacity as school managers, was obtained from each participating school, and official authorisation from the provincial education authorities was presented to school leadership.

All interviews were conducted on-site at the participants' respective schools, as familiar and professionally relevant settings are considered conducive to openness and reflective engagement in qualitative interviewing (Lim, 2024). Interviews were conducted on dates and times agreed upon with participants, in order to minimise disruption to school operations and to promote participant comfort. At the commencement of each interview, the researcher introduced himself, clarified his role, and reiterated the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. These preparatory steps are recognised in contemporary qualitative research as essential

for establishing trust, promoting ethical transparency, and creating conditions conducive to open and reflective dialogue (Owusu Sarfo & Attigah, 2025).

The interview questions were deliberately phrased in open-ended and non-directive language, enabling participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to adopt a conversational interviewing style, creating space for probing, follow-up questions, and clarification where necessary. This flexible approach is particularly suited to qualitative case study research, as it facilitates the exploration of complex organisational and policy-related experiences while remaining responsive to emergent issues raised by participants (Salmons, 2022).

During interviews, the researcher also maintained reflexive field notes, documenting contextual observations, non-verbal cues, and preliminary analytic reflections. Field notes complemented the audio-recorded data by capturing aspects of the interaction that may not be fully reflected in transcripts alone. All interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim, and the recording and transcription equipment were tested and prepared in advance to ensure technical reliability. Such procedural rigor is considered central to enhancing the dependability and transparency of qualitative interview data (Alejandro & Stoffel, 2024).

With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recording device to ensure accurate and complete capture of participants' responses. Audio recording enabled the researcher to engage fully with participants during the interview process while preserving a verbatim record of the interaction for subsequent transcription and analysis. The use of audio recording is widely regarded as best practice in qualitative interviewing, as it allows the researcher to engage attentively with participants while preserving a verbatim record of the interaction for rigorous analysis (Guest et al., 2023). Audio recordings also support the preservation of speech nuances such as emphasis, pauses, and intonation, which can be analytically significant in interpretive research. The use of audio recordings also enhances the dependability and confirmability of the study by ensuring that interpretations were grounded in an accurate account of participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes or longer, depending on participants' availability and willingness to elaborate on their experiences. Verbatim transcription

ensured accuracy and preserved the integrity of participants' accounts, thereby enhancing the dependability and confirmability of the data generated (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

4.7.2 Document Analysis

In addition to interviews, document analysis constituted a secondary source of data. To ensure systematic and rigorous examination of documentary evidence, the researcher developed a document analysis framework (Appendix 5). This framework guided the identification, selection and analysis of relevant accreditation-related documents, including accreditation reports, institutional policies, quality assurance records and internal documentation linked to compliance processes. Document analysis provided insight into formal expectations and institutional responses, complementing the experiential data generated through interviews (Lim, 2024).

In qualitative research, document analysis involves the systematic examination and interpretation of texts to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge relevant to the research phenomenon. Contemporary methodological literature positions document analysis as a rigorous qualitative method that enables researchers to interrogate both formally produced texts and organisational artefacts in order to contextualise participants' accounts and uncover institutional logics, practices, and assumptions embedded within documented records (O'Leary, 2021).

In this study, document analysis was used to generate contextual and corroborative data relating to the Umalusi accreditation process in independent rural schools. The documents analysed included Umalusi accreditation reports for the six participating schools, which provided detailed information on accreditation status, evaluation criteria, compliance judgements and areas of concern identified by external evaluators. These documents offered insight into the formal assessment of school quality and institutional readiness, thereby enabling comparison between official regulatory expectations and participants' lived experiences of accreditation.

In addition, Umalusi accreditation policies, procedures, and guidelines were examined to understand the regulatory framework governing accreditation and quality assurance processes. Analysing these policy documents made it possible to identify the standards against which schools are assessed, the procedural

requirements imposed on institutions, and the underlying assumptions guiding quality assurance practices (see Appendix G).

Relevant legislative and regulatory documents governing independent schools were also reviewed to situate Umalusi accreditation within the broader national education policy environment. Furthermore, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) related to accreditation, such as application processes, site visits, evidence submission requirements, evaluation procedures and reporting protocols, were analysed to gain insight into the operational dimensions of accreditation implementation.

The document analysis process was guided by a structured and iterative analytic approach, which involved careful reading, coding and categorisation of documentary content according to key themes aligned with the research questions. Notes and analytic memos were systematically recorded to capture emerging insights, patterns and points of convergence or divergence between documentary evidence and interview data. Recent scholars emphasise that such systematic documentation enhances analytic transparency and strengthens the credibility of document-based qualitative findings (Prior, 2023).

The document analysis required meticulous attention to detail and was conducted over an extended period due to the volume and complexity of the materials reviewed. This prolonged engagement enabled the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the accreditation process as both a formal regulatory mechanism and an institutional practice experienced differently across schools. Document analysis thus complemented the interview data by providing institutional, procedural, and policy-level perspectives that could not be accessed through participant narratives alone.

The integration of document analysis with semi-structured interviews enabled methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the study. By comparing participants' accounts with official documentation, the researcher was able to corroborate findings, identify inconsistencies, and develop a more nuanced and holistic interpretation of the Umalusi accreditation process. Contemporary qualitative researchers highlight that combining documentary and interview data is particularly valuable in policy and regulation-focused studies, as it allows researchers

to examine how formal requirements are interpreted, enacted, and experienced within specific institutional contexts (Rapley & Rees, 2023).

Together, the use of interviews and document analysis enabled a multi-faceted exploration of the Umalusi accreditation process and its implications for teaching, learning and school management in rural independent schools. This integrated approach ensured that the findings were grounded in both experiential accounts and documentary evidence, thereby strengthening the analytic depth and interpretive credibility of the study.

Overall, the instrumentation strategy adopted in this study ensured alignment between the research questions, philosophical stance and data-generation methods. The instruments were carefully designed to support in-depth exploration of the Umalusi accreditation process as experienced by principals and SMT members in rural independent schools, thereby providing a robust foundation for subsequent thematic analysis.

4.8 DATA STORAGE

Data storage refers to the systematic procedures used to secure, manage and preserve research data in a manner that protects participants' privacy and ensures compliance with ethical and institutional requirements. In qualitative research, responsible data storage is integral to safeguarding confidentiality and anonymity before, during and after data collection, as well as to maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

In this study, a comprehensive data management plan was implemented to ensure the secure storage and protection of all research data throughout the research lifecycle. Digital data, including audio recordings and interview transcripts, were stored on a password-protected, encrypted computer accessible only to the researcher. In addition, encrypted backup copies of all electronic files were created and saved on a secure external storage device to minimise the risk of data loss due to accidental deletion, device failure or corruption. Maintaining multiple secure backups is widely recognised as good practice in qualitative research data management (Lim, 2024).

Physical data, including handwritten interview notes and signed consent forms, were stored separately from identifying information in a locked filing cabinet located in a

secure location. Access to these hard-copy materials was restricted exclusively to the researcher. Participant identifiers were replaced with pseudonyms and a master list linking participant identities to their codes was stored separately from the data in a secure, password-protected file. This separation of identifying information from data is recommended to further reduce the risk of participant identification (Taquette & da Matta Souza, 2022).

Data storage procedures were applied consistently before, during and after data collection. All recordings were uploaded, labelled and secured immediately after interviews and no data were stored on portable devices for extended periods. These procedures ensured that data handling remained ethical, transparent and compliant with institutional ethical clearance conditions. According to contemporary qualitative research guidelines, such systematic and documented data storage practices enhance dependability and protect participant confidentiality, particularly in studies dealing with sensitive organisational and regulatory experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

All data generated during the study will be retained securely for the period stipulated by the University of South Africa's research ethics policy, after which electronic data will be permanently deleted and hard-copy materials securely destroyed. By following these data storage principles, the study ensured responsible data stewardship, protected the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, and upheld the ethical integrity of the research.

4.9 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis in qualitative research involves a systematic, iterative and interpretive process through which textual data are examined to generate meaning, identify patterns, and develop analytically grounded insights. Rather than treating analysis as a discrete technical stage, contemporary qualitative scholars conceptualise data analysis as a recursive process that begins during data generation and continues throughout interpretation and reporting (Miles et al., 2021). The purpose of qualitative data analysis is therefore not merely to summarise data, but to construct coherent explanations that address the research questions and illuminate the complexity of the phenomenon under study.

In this study, thematic analysis was employed as the primary method of data analysis. Thematic analysis is widely recognised as a flexible yet rigorous analytic approach that enables researchers to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It is particularly suitable for studies adopting an interpretivist orientation, as it supports in-depth engagement with participants' perspectives while allowing patterns to emerge inductively from the data. Given the study's aim to explore the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo with the Umalusi accreditation process, thematic analysis provided an appropriate framework for examining both convergence and divergence in participants' accounts.

The analysis incorporated data derived from semi-structured interviews and document analysis, allowing for analytic integration across data sources. According to Saldaña (2021), combining multiple qualitative data sources within a single analytic framework strengthens interpretive depth and supports the development of more nuanced themes. Interview transcripts and documentary materials were therefore analysed concurrently rather than in isolation, enabling the researcher to examine how institutional texts aligned with, reinforced, or contradicted participants' lived experiences of accreditation.

Thematic analysis proceeded through a series of systematic analytic phases, beginning with repeated reading of the data to achieve immersion and familiarity. This initial familiarisation enabled the researcher to identify preliminary ideas, sensitising concepts and recurring issues related to accreditation practices, compliance demands and contextual challenges. Following this phase, initial codes were generated inductively by segmenting the data into meaningful units that captured significant features relevant to the research questions (Saldaña, 2021). Coding was conducted manually to allow close engagement with the data and to support reflexive analytic decision-making.

Once initial codes were generated, they were examined and organised into broader candidate themes by identifying patterns, relationships and conceptual linkages across the dataset. This phase involved comparing codes across participants and schools to explore both shared experiences and context-specific variations. Themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and clear distinction

between themes, as recommended in contemporary thematic analysis guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The final phase involved defining, refining and naming themes, with careful attention to how each theme captured a central aspect of participants' experiences of the Umalusi accreditation process. Themes were interpreted in relation to the study's research questions and the broader educational and regulatory context. Illustrative extracts from interview transcripts and documents were selected to support analytic claims and to ensure that findings remained grounded in participants' voices and documentary evidence. According to Guest et al. (2023), the use of thick, illustrative data excerpts enhances analytic transparency and strengthens the credibility of qualitative findings.

Throughout the analysis process, the researcher engaged in reflexive memo-writing, documenting analytic decisions, emerging interpretations and assumptions underpinning theme development. Reflexive memos served as an audit trail that enhanced analytic transparency and supported confirmability by making the reasoning process visible (Miles et al., 2020). This reflexive engagement was particularly important given the interpretive nature of thematic analysis and the researcher's active role in meaning construction.

In summary, thematic analysis provided a methodologically coherent and analytically rigorous approach for examining the experiences of independent rural schools with the Umalusi accreditation process. Through systematic coding, theme development and reflexive interpretation, the analysis generated rich, contextually grounded insights into how accreditation is understood, enacted and experienced within rural independent school settings.

4.9.1 Data Analysis Process

The data analysis process in qualitative research involves a systematic, iterative and reflexive engagement with textual data in order to generate meaning, identify patterns and develop analytically robust interpretations. Rather than being a linear or isolated stage, contemporary qualitative scholars conceptualise data analysis as an integrative process that begins during data generation and continues throughout interpretation and reporting (Miles et al., 2021). In interpretivist qualitative studies, data analysis is centrally concerned with understanding how participants construct

and articulate meaning within their specific social, institutional and contextual environments. The analysis process, therefore, requires close immersion in the data, careful attention to context and reflexive consideration of the researcher's role in knowledge construction. In this study, the data analysis process was guided by principles of methodological transparency, analytic rigour and coherence with the study's research questions and qualitative case study design (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

4.9.1.1 Familiarisation with Data

- **Interviews**

The data analysis process commenced with thorough familiarisation with the interview data. This involved an initial reading of all interview transcripts to gain an overall sense of the content, context and scope of participants' responses. The transcripts were subsequently reread multiple times to deepen immersion in the data, allowing the researcher to identify preliminary meanings, recurring ideas and significant issues related to the research focus. This repeated engagement facilitated a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives and provided a strong foundation for the subsequent stages of coding and theme development.

- **Documents**

Documents, including accreditation reports, Umalusi accreditation policies, relevant regulations and standard operating procedures, were initially reviewed to develop a general understanding of their content and contextual relevance. These documents were subsequently examined in greater detail through repeated readings to enhance familiarity and to identify key information, recurring issues and notable patterns related to the research questions. This iterative engagement with the documentary data provided a deeper understanding of the formal requirements and regulatory processes underpinning accreditation, thereby informing the subsequent phases of coding and thematic analysis.

4.9.1.2 Generating Initial Codes

- **Interviews**

During this phase, meaningful segments of text within the interview transcripts were systematically identified and assigned initial codes. These codes consisted of concise, descriptive labels that captured the core idea or significance of each data segment. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing patterns, concepts and issues

to emerge directly from participants' accounts rather than being imposed a priori. This inductive approach enabled the researcher to remain closely aligned with participants' experiences and to preserve the contextual richness of their experiences.

- **Documents**

A similar inductive coding process was applied to the documentary data. Relevant sections of the documents were carefully examined and coded according to key ideas, concepts and processes related to the accreditation phenomenon. Coding focused on capturing substantive meanings embedded within policy texts, accreditation reports and procedural documents. Applying consistent inductive coding across both interview and documentary data facilitated analytic coherence and supported subsequent comparison and integration of themes across data sources.

4.9.1.3 Searching for Themes

- **Interviews**

At this stage of the analysis, the initial codes generated from the interview data were examined in greater depth to identify broader patterns of meaning. Related codes were compared, clustered and organised into potential themes that captured salient aspects of participants' experiences of the accreditation process. Theme development was guided by the coherence, relevance and explanatory potential of the grouped codes in relation to the research questions. This process enabled the researcher to move beyond descriptive coding towards more interpretive patterns that reflected shared experiences as well as points of variation among participants.

- **Documents**

Similarly, codes derived from the documentary data were reviewed and grouped to identify broader themes reflecting key issues and insights embedded within policy texts, accreditation reports and procedural documents. Codes were examined for recurring patterns and conceptual linkages that illuminated how accreditation requirements are formally articulated and operationalised. Themes generated from the document analysis were compared with those emerging from the interview data, supporting analytic integration and providing a foundation for subsequent theme review and refinement.

4.9.1.4 Reviewing Themes

- **Interviews**

In this phase, the preliminary themes derived from the interview data were systematically reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented participants' experiences. Each theme was examined for internal coherence, ensuring that the associated data extracts formed a meaningful and consistent pattern, as well as for external distinction, confirming clear boundaries between themes. The refined themes were then checked against the original interview transcripts to verify that they were firmly grounded in participants' accounts and adequately supported by the data.

- **Documents**

Themes generated from the documentary data were similarly reviewed and refined to ensure accurate representation of the content and contextual meanings embedded within the documents. This process involved re-examining the documentary extracts associated with each theme to assess their coherence and relevance. Themes were validated against the document data to confirm that they faithfully reflected the formal articulation, implementation and regulatory intent of the accreditation processes described in the documents, thereby strengthening analytic consistency across data sources.

4.9.1.5 Defining and Naming Themes

- **Interviews**

At this stage, each theme derived from the interview data was clearly defined and refined to articulate its core meaning and analytical significance. Detailed descriptions were developed for each theme to capture the central patterns of meaning across the data and to clarify how the theme related to participants' experiences of the accreditation process. Descriptive and conceptually grounded names were assigned to the themes to encapsulate their essence and to facilitate clarity, coherence and interpretive understanding.

- **Documents**

Themes generated from the documentary data were similarly defined and articulated through detailed descriptions that explained their significance in relation to the study's

aims and research questions. Particular attention was given to ensuring that theme definitions accurately reflected the content and intent of policy texts, accreditation reports and procedural documents. Themes were given clear and descriptive names that captured their substantive focus and their relevance to the formal articulation and implementation of the accreditation process. This careful definition and naming of themes supported analytic consistency and enabled meaningful integration across interview and documentary data sources.

4.9.1.6 Writing Up

- **Interviews**

The final stage of the analysis involved writing up the findings derived from the interview data. Each refined theme was presented in a structured and coherent narrative, supported by carefully selected illustrative quotations from participants. These quotations were used to exemplify key aspects of the themes, thereby grounding analytical interpretations in participants' own words. The thematic narratives were analytically integrated to provide a comprehensive and nuanced account of participants' experiences of the accreditation process. Data presentation was closely aligned with the research questions to ensure clarity, analytic depth and transparency in the reporting of findings.

- **Documents**

Findings from the document analysis were similarly written up in a structured and systematic manner. Themes were presented alongside relevant excerpts from accreditation reports, policy documents and procedural texts to illustrate how accreditation is formally articulated and regulated. The inclusion of documentary evidence served to contextualise and substantiate the thematic interpretations, highlighting points of convergence and divergence between institutional texts and participants' accounts. This approach ensured that the written analysis reflected both experiential and documentary dimensions of the phenomenon, thereby strengthening the credibility and coherence of the findings.

4.10 METHODOLOGICAL RIGOUR: TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the extent to which a study demonstrates methodological rigour, analytic transparency and interpretive integrity, thereby enabling confidence in the plausibility and usefulness of its findings. Within

the naturalistic paradigm, trustworthiness is commonly framed through the criteria advanced by Lincoln and Guba, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, which offer qualitative parallels to validity, generalisability, reliability and objectivity in conventional inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria are not treated as a procedural checklist; rather, they are established through deliberate strategies embedded across the research lifecycle, including design, data generation, analysis and reporting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2024). In this study, trustworthiness was pursued through a coherent set of strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's recommendations, including methodological triangulation, thick description and the maintenance of an audit trail to support a transparent evidentiary basis for interpretive claims (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In this study, trustworthiness was enhanced through systematic and transparent documentation of the research process, including the maintenance of an audit trail comprising interview audio files, verbatim transcripts, document sets, coding notes, reflexive memos and decisions made during theme development (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of interviews and documentary evidence, alongside sustained engagement with participants' accounts during iterative analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2022). Transferability was supported through thick description of the research setting, participants and accreditation context so that readers are able to judge the applicability of findings to similar rural or resource-constrained settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability and confirmability were supported through consistent use of data-generation procedures, careful record-keeping and reflexive documentation of analytic choices to demonstrate that interpretations were grounded in evidence rather than unduly shaped by researcher preference (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Braun & Clarke, 2024). Collectively, these strategies were intended to ensure that the findings concerning the role of Umalusi accreditation in teaching, learning and school management in rural independent schools in Limpopo are defensible, traceable and contextually meaningful.

4.10.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to confidence in the 'truth value' of qualitative findings, namely, whether the accounts and interpretations presented are believable and faithful to

participants' meanings within the context studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In contrast to positivist notions of validity, credibility is established through practices that strengthen the plausibility of interpretations, including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Contemporary qualitative scholarship similarly frames credibility as an outcome of methodological coherence, reflexivity, and transparent linkage between the data and interpretive claims (Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023; Noble & Smith, 2025).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that credibility is strengthened when the researcher demonstrates sufficient engagement with the phenomenon to reduce the risk of misinformation, misinterpretation or premature analytic closure. This requires sustained, iterative engagement with the data and a reflexive stance that makes the researcher's interpretive role visible rather than hidden. Recent literature similarly emphasises interpretive accountability through ongoing reflexive practice and critical interrogation of analytic decisions (Humphreys et al., 2021; Dahal, 2025).

In this study, credibility was enhanced primarily through triangulation, a strategy explicitly recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to examine a phenomenon from multiple vantage points and to test the robustness of emerging interpretations. Triangulation was achieved by integrating semi-structured interviews with school principals and SMT members alongside relevant documentary evidence, including accreditation reports and policy texts. By comparing experiential accounts with institutional documentation, the study was able to corroborate participants' narratives where appropriate, identify areas of divergence and refine interpretations in relation to the formal regulatory framework governing Umalusi accreditation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Arias Valencia, 2022; Marlina et al., 2025).

Credibility was further supported through sustained analytic engagement with the dataset (including repeated reading of transcripts and documents) and reflexive memo-writing, which documented emerging interpretations and the rationale for analytic decisions. In addition, peer engagement during analysis functioned as a form of peer debriefing, providing opportunities to challenge assumptions and test the coherence of theme development, an approach consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendations for enhancing credibility. Collectively, these strategies were intended to ensure that the findings are grounded in participants' articulated realities,

analytically coherent and credible within the context of rural independent schooling in Limpopo (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Dahal, 2025).

4.10.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings from a context-specific qualitative study may be applicable to other settings. In Lincoln and Guba's (1985) naturalistic framing, transferability is not achieved through statistical generalisation by the researcher; rather, it is enabled through the provision of sufficiently rich contextual information so that readers can make informed judgements about 'fittingness' to other contexts. Transferability, therefore, depends heavily on thick description of the setting, participants, and phenomena studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stalmeijer et al., 2024; Brown et al., 2025).

Consistent with this view, transferability is a shared responsibility: the researcher provides detailed contextual description and a transparent account of how the study was conducted, and the reader evaluates whether the similarities between contexts are sufficient to support cautious application of insights (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McLeod, 2024b). This interpretivist framing positions transferability not as a fixed attribute of a study but as a contextual judgement grounded in resonance and comparability.

In this study, transferability was supported through thick description, as advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), by providing detailed accounts of the research setting, institutional characteristics, participant roles and the regulatory environment within which the Umalusi accreditation process was experienced. Contextual information was included on the nature of rural independent schools in Limpopo, their governance structures, resource constraints and their engagement with accreditation requirements. Such description enables readers to judge whether the institutional, geographic and regulatory conditions align sufficiently with other contexts to justify analytic transfer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McLeod, 2024a; Stalmeijer et al., 2024).

Transferability was further enhanced through purposeful case selection intended to include information-rich cases and variation across rural independent schools (for example, differences in school size, organisational capacity and stages of accreditation), while still maintaining analytic coherence. By foregrounding such contextual variation, the study offers insights into both shared patterns and contextual

contingencies, supporting readers' consideration of how processes identified here may operate in analogous settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Brown et al., 2025).

Collectively, these strategies ensure that the findings of this study are presented with sufficient contextual richness, transparency and analytic clarity to enable informed judgement about their relevance to other rural or resource-constrained educational settings. Transferability is therefore achieved not through claims of general applicability, but through the provision of detailed, context-embedded knowledge that supports cautious and theoretically informed comparison across educational contexts.

4.10.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the research process over time, with emphasis on whether the inquiry is logical, traceable and clearly documented. In Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework, dependability is established through an 'inquiry audit', whereby an external reviewer can examine the process and products of the study to judge whether findings are grounded in systematically applied procedures. Dependability therefore depends on transparent documentation of design choices, data-generation procedures and analytic decisions, acknowledging that qualitative findings need not be exactly replicable but should be defensible in relation to the documented research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McLeod, 2024b).

Building on this position, dependability is demonstrated when the researcher provides a clear and sufficiently detailed record of methodological decision-making across design, data generation and analysis, allowing others to appraise the consistency and logic of the inquiry process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ahmed, 2024). Such documentation enables examination of how methodological choices shaped the study and whether interpretations followed coherently from the evidence base.

In this study, dependability was supported through the systematic development and maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail, consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendation that dependability be open to scrutiny via inquiry audit. Records were kept of sampling decisions, recruitment and consent procedures, interview scheduling and protocols, audio-recording and transcription procedures, document selection decisions, coding notes and thematic development.

Methodological and analytic memos documented refinements to coding structures and the rationale for interpretive shifts, enabling a clear account of how conclusions were reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McLeod, 2024b).

Dependability was further enhanced through structured peer engagement during analysis. While Lincoln and Guba (1985) primarily position peer debriefing as a credibility strategy, such external questioning also supports a disciplined and consistent analytic process by helping the researcher to justify coding choices, clarify theme boundaries and document revisions. Feedback from these engagements was recorded and incorporated into the audit trail, strengthening the transparency and traceability of the analytic pathway (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ahmed, 2024).

In addition, the dependability of the data collection instruments was strengthened through pilot testing of the semi-structured interview guide with a small group of participants who shared characteristics with the main study sample. This process enabled refinement of question wording, sequencing and prompts, thereby enhancing consistency across interviews while retaining flexibility for in-depth exploration. Feedback from the pilot phase informed minor revisions to the interview guide, which were documented as part of the audit trail. Such instrument testing is recognised as a key strategy for ensuring dependable qualitative data generation by promoting stability in data collection procedures across participants and sites (Nazar et al., 2022).

Collectively, the use of a detailed audit trail and documented peer engagement ensured that the research process remained transparent, coherent and systematically applied. In line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework, these strategies enable critical appraisal of the stability of the inquiry process and provide the documentation necessary for an inquiry audit, thereby supporting the dependability of the study's findings.

4.10.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which findings are grounded in the data rather than primarily reflecting the researcher's preferences, assumptions or motivations. In Lincoln and Guba's (1985) naturalistic framework, confirmability is supported through a confirmability audit, which examines whether interpretations, conclusions and recommendations are traceable to their evidentiary sources via the audit trail.

Confirmability therefore emphasises transparency and linkage between raw data, analytic products (codes, categories, themes) and the interpretive narrative presented in the report (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Eden, 2025.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight the audit trail as central to confirmability because it provides the documentation required for an external reviewer to trace how findings emerged from the data. The audit trail typically includes raw data, records of data reduction and analysis, methodological process notes, reflexive notes and evidence of how instruments and procedures were developed and applied. By making these materials available for audit, the researcher demonstrates that interpretations are evidence-based and internally coherent rather than idiosyncratic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In this study, confirmability was enhanced through a transparent and systematically documented process of data collection and analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the integrity of participants' accounts and transcripts were checked against recordings to strengthen fidelity between the data source and analytic material. During analysis, thematic development was documented through coding notes and analytic memos that recorded how codes were generated, merged, refined or discarded, thereby creating a clear evidentiary chain from participants' narratives and documentary sources to the final themes. These materials collectively constitute the documentation required for a confirmability audit, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Confirmability was further supported through reflexive practice. Reflexive journalling was used to document the researcher's positionality, emerging assumptions and the rationale for key interpretive decisions, thereby making the researcher's influence visible and open to scrutiny. This is consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) emphasis on reflexive notes as part of the audit trail and with contemporary arguments that transparency about the researcher's interpretive role strengthens, rather than weakens, confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erdmann & Potthoff, 2023).

In addition, confirmability was reinforced through methodological triangulation, whereby interview data were examined alongside relevant documentary sources to test the robustness of interpretations and reduce the risk of single-source bias.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that triangulation, together with the audit trail, strengthens confirmability by providing multiple forms of evidence for interpretive claims and by supporting traceability of conclusions to data. Collectively, the use of an audit trail, reflexive documentation and triangulated analysis ensured that the findings remain firmly grounded in the data and are open to verification through a confirmability audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical integrity constituted a foundational component of this study and was approached as a continuous and reflexive process rather than a once-off procedural requirement. Ethical clearance was formally obtained from the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the Limpopo Department of Basic Education, ensuring compliance with institutional, national, and professional ethical standards governing research involving human participants. In line with contemporary qualitative research ethics, particular attention was given to informed consent as an ongoing and dialogical process, enabling participants to make voluntary, informed decisions about their participation throughout the research lifecycle. Measures were also implemented to safeguard participants' privacy, confidentiality and anonymity, recognising the relational and context-sensitive nature of qualitative inquiry and the potential risks associated with disclosure in close-knit educational settings. Participation was strictly voluntary, with participants informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without negative consequence, thereby upholding principles of respect for persons, transparency and researcher accountability (Klykken, 2022; Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023; Sobhanifar et al., 2026).

4.11.1 Informed Consent

In this study, informed consent was conceptualised and implemented as a continuous, relational and ethically situated process, rather than a single procedural act conducted at the point of recruitment. Contemporary qualitative ethics scholars emphasise that valid informed consent requires participants to possess the legal and cognitive capacity to consent, exercise voluntariness free from coercion, and demonstrate meaningful understanding of the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of participation (Klykken, 2022; McGrath et al., 2025). This study aligned with these principles by ensuring that principals and SMT members were provided

with comprehensive, accessible information about the research and afforded sufficient time to consider their participation before any data generation commenced.

Prior to conducting interviews, each participant received a detailed information sheet and written consent form outlining the aims of the study, the nature of participation, data collection procedures, potential risks and benefits, data use and storage arrangements and measures to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to decline participation or to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or adverse consequence. In keeping with relational ethics approaches to qualitative research, consent was treated as ongoing and renegotiable, with participants being reminded of their rights throughout the research process and given opportunities to seek clarification or raise concerns at multiple points during engagement (Eeckhout et al., 2022; Klykken, 2022).

The adoption of this process-based approach to informed consent was particularly important given the interpretivist nature of the study and the professional context of the participants, where power dynamics and institutional accountability may inadvertently influence participation decisions. To mitigate these risks, the researcher adopted a dialogical consent strategy that prioritised transparency, mutual understanding and participant autonomy. This approach aligns with recent educational research ethics literature, which argues that informed consent in qualitative interviewing should be understood as a moral and relational commitment grounded in trust, respect and ongoing communication, rather than merely a signed document (Ederio et al., 2023; McGrath et al., 2025).

4.11.2 Privacy

Privacy is a central ethical concern in qualitative research, as the close, interactive and in-depth nature of qualitative inquiry may intrude upon participants' personal, professional and institutional boundaries at all stages of the research process. Contemporary ethics literature emphasises that privacy extends beyond the protection of identifiable data to encompass participants' rights to control when, how, and to what extent personal information is shared within the research context (TCPS 2, 2022; Ali, 2023). In qualitative educational research, where participants often occupy visible leadership roles within identifiable institutions, the potential for

unintended disclosure and reputational risk is heightened, necessitating heightened ethical vigilance.

In this study, participants' right to privacy was explicitly recognised and respected through transparent disclosure of the study's aims, procedures and data-handling practices prior to participation. Participants were informed that only information voluntarily disclosed during interviews would be used for research purposes and that they retained the right to decline to answer any question they considered intrusive or sensitive. Consistent with recent qualitative ethics guidelines, privacy was treated as a dynamic and relational obligation that required ongoing attentiveness to participants' comfort, boundaries and expectations throughout the research engagement (Scheytt & Pflüger, 2024).

To operationalise privacy protection, all interviews were conducted in private and professionally appropriate settings within the participating schools, predominantly in principals' offices, ensuring that conversations could not be overheard and that no unauthorised individuals were present. The selection of interview venues was negotiated with participants to ensure both physical privacy and psychological comfort, a practice recommended in recent qualitative research ethics literature to reduce power imbalances and promote open, candid dialogue (Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023).

During data handling and reporting, strict privacy safeguards were implemented to minimise the risk of both direct and deductive identification. These included the use of pseudonyms, removal or masking of identifying institutional details and cautious contextual description, particularly given the small and close-knit nature of rural school communities. Recent research highlights that even anonymised qualitative data may pose re-identification risks in such contexts, underscoring the need for deliberate and context-sensitive privacy protection strategies (Pascale et al., 2022). Collectively, these measures ensured that participants' privacy was respected throughout data collection, analysis and dissemination process, thereby upholding ethical integrity and fostering trust between the researcher and participants.

4.11.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are foundational ethical principles in qualitative research and are central to safeguarding participants' dignity, privacy and trust.

Contemporary qualitative ethics literature conceptualises confidentiality as the researcher's obligation to protect information shared in confidence from unauthorised access, disclosure or misuse, while anonymity refers to the systematic removal or masking of identifying information so that participants cannot be recognised in research outputs (Kang & Hwang, 2023). These principles are particularly salient in qualitative educational research, where participants often occupy identifiable leadership positions and where contextual detail is essential for analytic depth, yet simultaneously heightens the risk of deductive disclosure. In this study, confidentiality was upheld through rigorous data-handling and information-management procedures designed to ensure that participants' identities and institutional affiliations remained protected throughout data collection, analysis and dissemination. Interview data were stored in encrypted, password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher, in accordance with contemporary human research protection standards. Identifying information, including personal names, school names and location-specific descriptors, was systematically removed or coded during transcription to prevent direct or indirect identification (Tsan & Puglisi, 2023). Such measures are widely recognised as essential for upholding ethical responsibility and mitigating potential professional or reputational harm, particularly in small or close-knit educational communities.

Anonymity in this study was operationalised through the consistent use of pseudonyms and participant codes, replacing real names and institutional identifiers in transcripts, analytic documents and the final thesis. For example, references such as 'Principal A from School X' were replaced with neutral identifiers such as 'Principal P1 from School A', thereby preserving analytic coherence while preventing traceability. Recent methodological scholarship cautions that anonymity in qualitative research is not merely a technical exercise but requires careful judgement about which contextual details can be retained without increasing the likelihood of re-identification (Zhang et al., 2024). As such, identifying characteristics were selectively modified or omitted where necessary, without compromising the substantive meaning of participants' accounts.

In addition, confidentiality was understood not only as a data-management obligation but also as a relational ethical commitment that underpins participants' willingness to engage openly and honestly in qualitative interviews. Studies consistently

demonstrate that robust confidentiality and anonymity safeguards enhance participants' sense of security, thereby improving the credibility and depth of qualitative data (Kang & Hwang, 2023). Participants in this study were explicitly informed of the steps taken to protect their identities and were assured that no identifiable information would appear in publications or reports. These assurances contributed to an ethically sound research environment grounded in trust, transparency and respect.

Collectively, the confidentiality and anonymity strategies employed in this study align with contemporary human research protection frameworks, which emphasise proportional, context-sensitive approaches to identity protection in qualitative inquiry (Tsan & Puglisi, 2023; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025). By prioritising both technical data security and ethical reflexivity, the study ensured that participants' rights and interests were protected without undermining the richness or integrity of the qualitative findings.

4.11.4 Voluntary Participation

Voluntary participation constitutes a core ethical principle in qualitative research and is grounded in the respect for participants' autonomy and self-determination. Contemporary research ethics scholars emphasise that voluntariness extends beyond the mere absence of coercion to include participants' ability to make informed, independent decisions free from institutional pressure, hierarchical influence or perceived obligation (Scheytt & Pflüger, 2024). This principle is particularly salient in qualitative educational research, where participants often occupy professional roles within hierarchical organisational structures and may feel implicit pressure to participate due to authority relations or collegial expectations.

In this study, voluntary participation was explicitly upheld through clear, transparent communication during the recruitment process. Participants were informed that their involvement was entirely optional and that declining to participate would not result in any negative personal, professional or institutional consequences. Particular attention was paid to addressing potential power imbalances between the researcher and participants by emphasising that participation was not linked to institutional authority, performance evaluation or professional advancement. Such proactive

attention to power dynamics is increasingly recognised as an essential component of ethical qualitative practice (Ayrton, 2024).

The right to withdraw was articulated as an unconditional and ongoing entitlement rather than a one-time option exercised only at the outset of the study. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any stage, before, during or after interviews, without providing justification and without adverse consequences. Recent ethics-in-practice literature underscores that respecting withdrawal is central to maintaining ethical integrity, particularly in qualitative studies where relationships and data are developed over time (Dahal, 2024).

Importantly, voluntary participation was treated as a dynamic ethical commitment rather than a static procedural safeguard. Participants were periodically reminded of their right to disengage and interviews were conducted in a manner that allowed participants to pause, redirect or terminate the discussion if discomfort arose. This approach aligns with contemporary qualitative ethics frameworks that conceptualise voluntariness as an ongoing negotiation shaped by relational trust, reflexivity and ethical sensitivity to participants' lived experiences (Dahal, 2024; Scheytt & Pflüger, 2024). By embedding voluntary participation throughout the research process, the study sought to create an ethically responsive environment that prioritised participant agency, dignity, and wellbeing.

4.12 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This section critically examines the limitations and delimitations of the study by articulating the inherent methodological, contextual and scope-related constraints, thereby clarifying the boundaries within which the findings should be interpreted and their implications cautiously considered.

4.12.1 Limitations

All research designs are subject to constraints that may shape the scope, interpretation, and applicability of findings, particularly in qualitative inquiry, where depth and context are prioritised over breadth. In this study, one notable limitation relates to the restricted generalisability of the findings. As the research adopted an instrumental case study design focused on six independent rural schools in Limpopo, the findings are inherently context-bound and may not be directly transferable to independent schools in urban settings or other provinces. Contemporary

methodological scholars emphasise that qualitative case studies do not aim for statistical generalisation, but rather for analytic or conceptual generalisation, whereby insights are transferable to comparable contexts based on theoretical relevance rather than population representativeness (Gamble & Hewlett, 2025; Stevens, 2024). Nevertheless, the small and purposively selected sample limits the extent to which the findings can be broadly applied across the diverse landscape of independent schooling in South Africa.

A related limitation concerns the context-specific nature of rural schooling environments. Rural independent schools operate under unique institutional, socio-economic and regulatory conditions that shape how accreditation processes are experienced and enacted. While this contextual specificity enabled rich, in-depth analysis, it also constrains the applicability of the findings to settings with different governance structures, resource profiles or regulatory relationships. Recent qualitative research literature notes that such contextual embeddedness, while a strength for understanding complex phenomena, simultaneously limits the external applicability of findings beyond similar institutional contexts (Mwita, 2022; Gamble & Hewlett, 2025).

Another limitation pertains to participant self-disclosure and response candour. Despite comprehensive ethical safeguards and assurances of confidentiality, there was a risk that participants, particularly school principals and SMT members, may have withheld information or moderated their responses due to concerns about reputational risk, regulatory scrutiny or potential negative repercussions. Methodological research highlights that studies involving institutional accountability processes are especially susceptible to such guarded disclosures, which may influence the depth and completeness of the data generated (Noble & Smith, 2025). This limitation is difficult to eliminate entirely in qualitative research that examines sensitive regulatory experiences.

Furthermore, the interpretive role of the researcher constitutes a recognised limitation of qualitative inquiry. Given the subjective and co-constructed nature of qualitative data, the researcher’s positionality, prior assumptions and interpretive lens may have shaped decisions related to data collection, coding and theme development. Contemporary qualitative methodology acknowledges that researcher subjectivity is unavoidable and while reflexive practices can mitigate its influence, it cannot be

entirely eliminated (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Zahle, 2025). As such, interpretations presented in this study reflect one analytically grounded, yet perspectival, account of the accreditation phenomenon.

A principal limitation of this study is its deliberate focus on only two of the four criteria used in the accreditation of independent schools, namely Leadership, Management and Communication, and Teaching and Learning. This delimitation was adopted to maintain a coherent and analytically manageable scope and to permit an in-depth examination of the institutional processes most directly associated with the day-to-day implementation of accreditation requirements. Leadership, management and communication shape how schools interpret policy, allocate responsibilities, mobilise resources and coordinate accreditation-related activities, while teaching and learning constitute the core educational practices through which curriculum implementation and the quality of provision are realised. These criteria were therefore considered particularly relevant to an investigation of how independent rural schools experience, enact and integrate accreditation requirements within their operational contexts.

The School Ethos criterion was excluded because it encompasses broad and context-dependent dimensions such as institutional identity, values, culture, learner well-being, relationships and the character of the school community. A rigorous investigation of these dimensions would have required a distinct conceptual emphasis and a wider range of participants, potentially including learners, parents, governing structures and community representatives. It would also have required prolonged engagement and additional observational evidence to examine how stated values are enacted in everyday school life. Including this criterion within the present study could therefore have extended the inquiry beyond its primary concern with school management practices and curriculum-related implementation, while reducing the depth with which the selected criteria could be analysed.

The School Results criterion was excluded because learner performance is influenced by numerous interrelated factors that extend beyond the accreditation process, including learners' prior achievement, socioeconomic circumstances, language background, attendance, teacher availability, subject choices and access to educational resources. Establishing a credible relationship between accreditation experiences and school results would have required longitudinal performance data, consistent assessment records and comparative analysis across schools and over

time. Such an outcome-oriented investigation would have introduced a different methodological component and could have encouraged causal interpretations that the qualitative design of this study was not intended to support. The criterion was consequently excluded to retain methodological alignment with the study's emphasis on participants' experiences and on the organisational processes through which accreditation requirements are implemented.

The exclusion of School Ethos and School Results does not suggest that these criteria are less important to a comprehensive accreditation judgement. Rather, it reflects a necessary delimitation of the inquiry. The findings should therefore be interpreted as providing an in-depth but partial account of the accreditation experiences of independent rural schools and should not be generalised to all dimensions of institutional quality assessed through accreditation. Future research could examine the two excluded criteria independently or incorporate all four criteria through a broader mixed-methods or longitudinal design, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between institutional culture, learner outcomes and accreditation.

Finally, the time-intensive nature of qualitative instrumental case study research presented practical limitations. The processes of prolonged engagement, in-depth interviewing, document analysis and iterative thematic analysis required substantial time and analytic effort. Recent qualitative methodological scholars note that such intensive designs, while enhancing depth and credibility, may limit the scale of case inclusion and extend the overall research timeline (Wanat et al., 2024). These temporal demands constrained the number of participating schools and participants that could be feasibly included in the study.

Despite these limitations, the instrumental case study design employed was appropriate for the study's exploratory and interpretive aims. By prioritising contextual depth, analytic rigour and theoretical relevance, the study generated nuanced insights into how Umalusi accreditation is experienced within rural independent schooling contexts, offering meaningful contributions to policy, practice and future research.

4.12.2 Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the intentional and theoretically informed boundaries established by the researcher to define the scope of a study and ensure its feasibility, coherence and analytic focus. Unlike limitations, which arise from factors beyond the researcher's control, delimitations represent deliberate design choices that determine what is included and excluded in order to align the study with its research purpose and questions (Coker, 2022; Hassan, 2024). Explicitly articulating delimitations is regarded as a marker of methodological rigour, as it demonstrates reflexive decision-making and enhances transparency in the interpretation of findings.

In this study, a population delimitation was applied through the intentional selection of participants from the management of independent schools, specifically school principals and one member of the SMT per school. This decision was guided by the study's focus on institutional engagement with the Umalusi accreditation process, as these actors possess decision-making authority and direct responsibility for compliance, quality assurance and evidence preparation. While this delimitation enabled access to information-rich perspectives central to the research questions, it excluded the views of teachers, learners, parents, and non-management staff, whose experiences may offer alternative or complementary insights into how accreditation influences day-to-day teaching and learning practices (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024). The findings, therefore, reflect a leadership-level interpretation of the accreditation process rather than a whole-school perspective.

A geographical delimitation was applied by restricting the study to independent schools located in rural areas of Limpopo Province. This delimitation was intentional and analytically justified, as the study sought to explore accreditation experiences within resource-constrained rural contexts, where regulatory compliance, infrastructural limitations and institutional capacity differ markedly from those of urban schools. However, this geographical focus necessarily excludes independent schools in urban or peri-urban settings and limits the applicability of the findings to contexts with similar rural, socio-economic and administrative conditions (Coker, 2022). The delimitation thus supports contextual depth while constraining broader contextual transfer.

The study further adopted methodological delimitations through the exclusive use of semi-structured interviews and document analysis as primary data-generation methods. These methods were selected to facilitate in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and to enable triangulation between experiential accounts and formal accreditation documentation. Other potential methods, such as surveys, focus groups or classroom observations, were intentionally excluded in order to maintain analytic coherence and align with the interpretivist, case-study orientation of the research (Villamin et al., 2024). While this delimitation enhanced the depth and richness of qualitative data, it limited the breadth of perspectives and precluded quantitative comparison or observational corroboration of reported practices.

In addition, a conceptual delimitation was applied by focusing specifically on the impact of the Umalusi accreditation process on teaching, learning and school management practices within the selected schools. The scope deliberately did not extend to other dimensions of school performance, such as learner academic outcomes, financial sustainability, governance reform or long-term institutional growth. This conceptual narrowing enabled focused analysis of accreditation as a regulatory and pedagogical process, but it necessarily excluded broader systemic or outcome-based evaluations that may have been relevant to understanding whole-school effectiveness (Hassan, 2024).

Collectively, these delimitations define the analytic boundaries of the study and provide an essential framework for interpreting the findings. By clearly articulating what the study intentionally set out to examine, and what it deliberately did not, the delimitations enhance the study's methodological clarity, feasibility and credibility, while guiding readers in making contextually appropriate judgments about the relevance and transfer of the findings to comparable educational settings.

4.12 CONCLUSION

Chapter 4 described in detail the research design and methodological procedures employed in this study. The chapter explained and justified the qualitative research approach and instrumental case study design adopted to investigate the experiences of independent rural schools regarding the Umalusi accreditation process. The rationale for the selection of the research sites, participants and purposive sampling strategy was clearly articulated.

The chapter further described the data-collection methods utilised, namely semi-structured interviews and document analysis, as well as the procedures followed to analyse the data. Attention was given to ethical considerations and to measures implemented to ensure methodological rigour and trustworthiness throughout the research process, in accordance with institutional and scholarly requirements.

By providing a coherent and systematic account of the methodological framework, this chapter has established a sound foundation for the study. The next chapter presents and analyses the research findings derived from the data collected through the methods described in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of the study, which explored the experiences of independent rural school management in Limpopo Province with regard to the Umalusi accreditation process. The chapter draws on qualitative data generated through semi-structured interviews conducted with six principals and six members of School Management Teams (SMTs) from selected independent rural schools. In addition, a range of relevant documents, including Umalusi accreditation reports, accreditation policies, legislative frameworks and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), were analysed to complement and corroborate the interview data. The integration of interview and documentary evidence enabled a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how accreditation is experienced, interpreted and enacted within rural independent school contexts.

The chapter adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to the presentation of findings, foregrounding participants' voices while situating their accounts within the broader regulatory and policy environment governing independent school accreditation in South Africa. The analysis remains primarily descriptive at this stage, focusing on participants' lived experiences and meanings as they emerged from the data, while also providing interpretive commentary to illuminate patterns, relationships and contextual influences. This approach ensures that the findings accurately reflect the realities of independent rural schools and avoid imposing predetermined interpretations that might obscure participants' experiences.

To provide sufficient contextual grounding for the findings, the chapter begins with a demographic profile of the participating schools and individuals. This overview outlines participants' roles, years of experience, school locations and key school characteristics, thereby situating the findings within the specific rural and institutional contexts in which the study was conducted. Understanding these contextual factors is essential, as they shape both the capacity of schools to comply with accreditation requirements and their experiences of the accreditation process.

The presentation of findings is organised thematically, using a thematic approach as an analytical method, based on patterns that emerged through iterative coding and analysis of the data. The identified themes reflect central aspects of participants' experiences and include the background and contextual conditions of independent rural schools; key characteristics of these schools; school management and administration following accreditation; preparation for the accreditation process; understanding and experiences of accreditation; leadership responsibilities during accreditation; the role of accreditation in school improvement; and the rewarding aspects of accreditation. Each theme is further elaborated through relevant sub-themes, with illustrative quotations from participants used to enhance authenticity and credibility.

Document analysis is integrated throughout the chapter to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings through triangulation. Documentary evidence is used to confirm, extend and, where relevant, complicate participants' accounts, particularly in relation to compliance requirements, accreditation outcomes and institutional expectations. By comparing interview data with accreditation reports and policy texts, the study illuminates both alignment and tension between formal quality assurance frameworks and the lived experiences of independent rural schools.

Overall, this chapter responds directly to the central research question: *What are the experiences of independent rural school management in Limpopo of the Umalusi accreditation process?* By systematically presenting and discussing the findings, the chapter provides insight into the complexities, challenges and developmental possibilities associated with accreditation in resource-constrained rural contexts. These findings form the empirical foundation for the discussion and interpretation presented in the subsequent chapter.

The following critical research questions were answered by this study:

1. How is the Umalusi accreditation process applied to independent schools?
2. How does the accreditation process influence teaching and learning in independent rural schools?
3. What impact does the accreditation process have on the effective management of independent schools?

4. Why is accreditation important for independent schools?
5. What role do independent schools play during the accreditation process?

5.2 FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

The study was conducted in Limpopo Province, with participating schools drawn from the Vhembe East and Vhembe West districts, specifically within the Mutshindudi and Nzhelele East circuits. These districts are characterised by predominantly rural and deep-rural settlement patterns, limited infrastructure development and persistent socio-economic challenges, which significantly shape schooling conditions and institutional capacity. All participating schools were independent institutions operating in deep rural contexts, serving learner populations largely drawn from disadvantaged households. Locating the study within these settings was critical to understanding how geographical location, resource constraints and socio-economic conditions intersect with regulatory and quality assurance processes such as accreditation.

Data were generated primarily through semi-structured interviews, conducted with one principal and one member of the SMT from each participating school. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognised as an appropriate qualitative method for exploring participants' lived experiences, meanings and interpretations, particularly in studies that seek to examine complex organisational and policy-related phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2022). This method enabled the researcher to pursue depth and richness of data while allowing participants to articulate their experiences of the Umalusi accreditation process in their own words.

The interview guide consisted of pre-determined, open-ended questions aligned with the research questions, ensuring consistency across interviews while maintaining sufficient flexibility to probe emergent issues, clarify responses and explore unanticipated insights. Such flexibility is a defining strength of semi-structured interviewing, as it supports both comparability across cases and sensitivity to context-specific realities (Maree, 2016; Guest et al., 2020). In this study, probing was particularly valuable in eliciting detailed reflections on accreditation challenges, leadership responsibilities, compliance pressures and perceived benefits, all of which varied across schools depending on contextual conditions.

The inclusion of both principals and SMT members was a deliberate methodological choice to capture multiple leadership experiences within each school. Principals

typically engage directly with external regulatory bodies and carry ultimate accountability for accreditation outcomes, while SMT members are responsible for translating accreditation requirements into daily management, teaching and administrative practices. Engaging both roles enhanced the depth of the data and strengthened internal triangulation by allowing comparison of perceptions across leadership positions (Yin, 2018; Flick, 2022). This approach also aligns with contemporary qualitative research practice, which emphasises the value of capturing diverse yet interconnected perspectives within organisational studies.

Furthermore, conducting interviews within the natural settings of the schools allowed participants to ground their reflections in their everyday institutional realities. This contributed to the generation of contextually embedded data, enhancing the ecological validity of the findings (Tracy, 2020). Overall, the use of semi-structured interviews provided a rigorous and context-sensitive means of generating rich qualitative data capable of illuminating how independent rural schools experience, interpret and respond to the Umalusi accreditation process.

5.3 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Table 4.1 presents the demographic information of the study participants, including their roles, years of experience, school location and school characteristics. School sizes varied, with some institutions enrolling small numbers of learners while others reported enrolments exceeding 1,000 learners. Some schools also had boarding facilities, which attracted learners from surrounding villages and distant rural areas. This information provides important contextual background for interpreting the findings presented in this chapter.

Table 4.1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant Code	Role	Years in Current Role	School Location	School Characteristics
SMT 1	SMT Member	1 year (since inception)	Rural village	Community-supported school Enrolment ±900
SMT 2	Vice Principal / SMT	4 years	Deep rural village	Expanded from daycare centre Enrolment ±193 learners

Participant Code	Role	Years in Current Role	School Location	School Characteristics
SMT 3	Head of Foundation Phase / SMT	More than 10 years	Rural area	Enrolment ±583 learners
SMT 4	SMT Member	6–7 years	Rural area	Small school, limited technology Enrolment ±300
SMT 5	Head of Curriculum / SMT	Since 2022	Deep rural area	Enrolment 1,111 learners
SMT 6	SMT Member	3 years	Rural area	Established in 2008; learners from poor families Enrolment ±490 learners
Principal 1	Principal	17 years	Rural area	Community-supported school Enrolment ±900
Principal 2	Principal	Since 2022	Rural village	Enrolment ±193 learners
Principal 3	Principal	3 years	Rural area	Enrolment ±583 learners
Principal 4	Principal	Since 2002	Deep rural area	Combined school with a hostel, Enrolment ±300
Principal 5	Principal	Since 2015	Rural area	Enrolment 1,111 learners
Principal 6	Principal	Since 2008	Very rural area	Enrolment ±490 learners

The following themes emerged from the data:

- Background and context of the schools
- Key characteristics of independent rural schools
- School management and administration after accreditation
- Preparation for the accreditation process
- Understanding and experiences of the accreditation process
- Leadership responsibilities during accreditation
- Role of accreditation in school improvement
- Rewarding aspects of accreditation

Each main theme has a number of sub-themes which are outlined in Table 4.2. below:

Table 4.2: Summary of the main themes and sub-themes

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Background and Context of the School	• School Establishment and Sustainability • School Growth and Infrastructure Characteristics • Rural Context and Resource Constraints
2. Key Characteristics of Independent Rural Schools	• Faith-Based Orientation • Socio-Economic Challenges and COVID-19 Impact • Parental Migration and Limited Home Support
3. School Management and Administration after Accreditation	• Strengthened Governance Structures • Improved Financial Accountability • Clear Role Allocation and Organisational Structure • Policy-Driven Management and Administrative Systems
4. Preparation for the Accreditation Process	• Stakeholder Engagement and Planning • Compliance Activities and Documentation Preparation
5. Understanding and Experiences of the Accreditation Process	• Perceived Strictness and Administrative Pressure • Financial, Staffing, and Infrastructure Challenges • Views on Accreditation Criteria for Rural Schools
6. Leadership Responsibilities during Accreditation	• Operational and Supervisory Leadership Roles • Teacher Development and Capacity Building • Emotional Pressure and Leadership Burden
7. Role of Accreditation in School Improvement	• Institutional Performance and Reputation Improvement • Policy Compliance and Organisational Strengthening • Negative Unintended Outcomes • SMT Leadership Development and Teaching Improvements

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
8. Rewarding Aspects of Accreditation	• Institutional Recognition and Financial Benefits • Professional Learning and Skills Development

5.3.1 Theme 1: Background and Context of the Schools

This theme presents the background and contextual conditions within which the participating independent rural schools operate. Understanding the establishment, growth and daily realities of these schools is essential for contextualising their experiences of the Umalusi accreditation process. Participants described their schools as largely community-initiated and self-funded institutions. These schools were established in response to limited access to quality education in rural and deep-rural areas. Many have existed for several years and have evolved gradually, often without consistent external support. Their development trajectories have been shaped by local socio-economic conditions, fluctuating enrolments and the need to provide schooling to learners from disadvantaged households. The findings further show considerable variation in school size, infrastructure and resources, with some schools expanding to accommodate large learner populations and boarding facilities, while others continue to operate with limited physical and technological resources. Participants consistently highlighted the influence of the rural context on school operations, noting challenges such as poverty, underdeveloped infrastructure, limited access to water and electricity and constrained access to teaching and learning resources. These contextual realities form the foundation upon which accreditation preparation and compliance activities take place and provide important insight into how independent rural schools experience, interpret and respond to quality assurance requirements. The sub-themes that follow elaborate on the ways in which school establishment, growth patterns, infrastructure conditions and rural resource constraints shape the broader context of these schools.

5.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1: School Establishment and Sustainability

The rationale for the establishment of the school is part of the accreditation requirements. Independent schools (also known as private schools) are established for a variety of educational, social and economic reasons. One major reason is the need to provide high-quality education and improved academic performance, often

with smaller class sizes and better resources than public schools (DBE, 2020a). Parents may choose independent schools because they offer specialised curricula, such as religious-based education or international programmes, which are not always available in public schools (UNESCO, 2015). Another reason for establishing independent schools is to address gaps in the public education system, such as overcrowding, limited infrastructure or lack of access in certain areas. Independent schools can increase educational access and provide alternatives where public schooling is under pressure (World Bank, 2018). In some cases, they are also created to promote innovation in teaching methods and school management.

In terms of sustainability, independent schools rely heavily on financial stability, mainly through tuition fees, donations and sponsorships. Effective financial management is essential to ensure long-term operation and growth (OECD, 2017a). Sustainability also depends on maintaining quality education standards, attracting and retaining qualified teachers and ensuring consistent student enrolment. In this regard, accreditation plays a critical role in enhancing the credibility and legitimacy of schools, particularly in rural contexts.

Furthermore, independent schools must comply with government regulations and maintain accreditation to remain operational. Building strong relationships with parents and communities also contributes to their sustainability, as community support helps ensure continued demand and reputation (DBE, 2020b).

Participants described their schools as independent rural institutions that were mostly self-funded and established through community initiatives. The schools have existed for several years and serve learners from poor and low-income households. The data revealed that most schools started as small-scale institutions such as creches or single-grade schools, frequently operating from churches or rented buildings.

‘The school was established in 1990 as a small church-based crèche offering Grades R to 3. It operated with very limited resources, relying on community donations, minimal school fees and personal financial contributions from the owner to pay teachers and provide food for learners, as there was no government subsidy. Over time, the school expanded to Grade 7, grew in enrolment from about 100 to nearly 600 learners, and developed 15 classrooms largely built through community support.

*However, enrolment has recently declined due to ongoing challenges with school fee affordability." (*Participant 1)

Participant 6 also weighed in and indicated that: *"The school was established in 2008 in response to community demand, initially operating from a church with basic resources. With support from community leaders, land was later allocated, and the school gradually relocated to its current site. It began with 48 learners and four teachers, growing steadily in enrolment and infrastructure. By 2010, five classrooms had been built, and the school has since expanded to approximately 490 learners, with ongoing development of additional classrooms and administrative facilities.* (Participant 6)

Community involvement was central to the establishment and survival of these schools, particularly in the absence of sustained government support. Independent rural schools are often initiated by local communities as a response to limited access to quality public schooling, overcrowding in nearby schools and inadequate educational infrastructure in rural and deep-rural areas (UNESCO, 2015; DBE, 2020b). In many rural contexts, communities mobilise available resources such as churches, community halls and local land to establish schools that meet the immediate educational needs of their children (World Bank, 2018). This form of community-driven schooling reflects a broader pattern in which local stakeholders assume responsibility for educational provision when state capacity is constrained or unevenly distributed (OECD, 2017a). Community participation also plays a critical role in sustaining these schools through financial contributions, voluntary labour, governance involvement and social support, thereby strengthening a sense of ownership and accountability (Bush & Glover, 2014). Within this context, the participating schools were established not only as educational institutions but also as community assets aimed at addressing persistent educational gaps and promoting access, continuity and stability in rural education provision.

Participant 1 said: "*These buildings that you can see, they have been donated by the community… It's like a community school."* (Participant 1)

Another principal explained how the school was established and sustained without external support, highlighting the significant role of personal commitment and community involvement in ensuring the school's survival. The participant described

how, in the absence of government subsidies or formal financial assistance, the school relied on minimal school fees, community donations and the personal financial contributions of the school owner to meet operational costs such as teacher salaries, learner meals and basic resources. This experience reflects broader patterns in rural independent schooling, where schools are often initiated and sustained through self-funding and community-driven efforts due to limited state support and uneven access to public education in rural areas (UNESCO, 2015; DBE, 2020a). Studies indicate that independent rural schools frequently depend on informal funding mechanisms, voluntary labour and strong community partnerships to remain operational, particularly during their formative years (World Bank, 2018). Such arrangements place substantial financial and managerial pressure on school leaders, who are often required to assume multiple roles to ensure institutional continuity (OECD, 2017a). Despite these challenges, community-supported models of schooling have been shown to enhance local ownership, accountability and resilience, contributing to the sustainability of schools serving disadvantaged rural communities (Bush & Glover, 2014).

"By then, as the owner of the school, you do as you wish. There was not even a subsidy by then. You drive the school by your own, sometimes you pop out your own money, just to pay the salaries for the teachers. And then, as I indicated, there were only 2 support staff, who were cooking for the learners. There was no food from the department. I know, here, you have to pop up to yourself, you go and buy groceries for yourself, then you feed your learners. Then, when I came here myself, that was way back then. Then, when I arrived here, I started." (Participant 1)

Another participant highlighted the longevity of the school, emphasising its sustained operation over several decades despite persistent challenges associated with rural contexts. The participant described the school's long-term existence as evidence of institutional resilience, adaptability and continued relevance within the local community. Longevity in rural independent schools is often linked to strong community support, consistent leadership and the ability to respond to changing educational and socio-economic conditions over time (Bush & Glover, 2014). Research indicates that schools serving disadvantaged rural communities frequently rely on long-standing relationships with parents and local stakeholders to maintain enrolment, secure resources and ensure institutional stability (UNESCO, 2015). In

addition, sustained operation over many years reflects a school's capacity to navigate regulatory requirements, financial constraints and shifts in policy environments while continuing to meet learners' educational needs (DBE, 2020). Studies further suggest that the longevity of independent schools is closely associated with leadership continuity and organisational learning, which enable schools to refine management practices and strengthen governance structures over time (OECD, 2017b; World Bank, 2018). In this regard, the participant's account illustrates how prolonged existence is not merely a measure of age, but an indication of the school's embeddedness within its community and its ability to endure within challenging rural conditions.

"The school was established in the year 2000. When it first started, it offered only three grades: Grade R, Grade 1 and Grade 8. The initial plan was to expand incrementally. However, in 2003, the school management decided to roll out all grades. That same year, the school produced its first Grade 12 class, which consisted of only three learners. During that period, learner enrolment was low, with fewer than 100 learners in total. Over the years, however, the school has grown significantly. Today, 25 years later, the school has an enrolment of 1,111 learners, from Grade R to Grade 12. Despite this growth, the journey has been challenging, particularly since my appointment between 2011 and 2015, with the school experiencing numerous ongoing challenges throughout the years." (Participant 5)

The findings show that the establishment, sustainability and longevity of independent rural schools in this study are deeply rooted in community initiative, self-funding and strong leadership commitment. Participant accounts reveal that these schools were often founded in response to unmet educational needs in rural areas and have been sustained over time through collective community support, personal financial sacrifice and adaptive management practices. Despite operating in contexts characterised by poverty, limited infrastructure and minimal external assistance, the schools demonstrated resilience and continuity, with some functioning successfully for several decades. This thought has been supported by literature that indicates that, without sustained investment, particularly in rural and underserved contexts, quality assurance efforts risk reinforcing existing inequalities between institutions rather than reducing them (Zickafoose et al., 2024; Sumida & Kawata, 2024). These background and contextual conditions provide an important foundation for understanding how

independent rural schools approach regulatory requirements such as accreditation. The realities of school establishment, growth and long-term survival shape not only institutional capacity but also schools' preparedness, expectations and experiences of the Umalusi accreditation process, which are explored further in the sections that follow.

5.3.1.2 Sub-theme 2: School Growth and Infrastructure Characteristics

School growth and infrastructure development are key components in understanding the operational capacity of independent schools, particularly within rural contexts. Growth in learner enrolment is often associated with increased demand for access to education, while infrastructure development reflects a school's ability to accommodate such expansion and provide a conducive learning environment. In many developing contexts, however, school growth does not always correspond with adequate infrastructural investment, resulting in disparities between enrolment size and available resources (Bashir et al., 2021; Spaull, 2021). This is particularly evident in rural independent schools, where expansion is frequently driven by community demand rather than formal planning or sustained financial support (DBE, 2021d).

Participants in this study described their schools as having experienced gradual growth over time, often beginning with very small enrolments and expanding into larger institutions. One SMT member reflected on this trajectory: "*The school started in 1984 with three learners. I joined in 1996. It grew gradually and now has over 550 learners."* (SMT 3)

This account illustrates a pattern of incremental growth that is characteristic of many independent rural schools. Such growth is often indicative of community trust and the perceived quality or accessibility of the school. However, as noted in the literature, this type of organic expansion can place significant strain on existing infrastructure, particularly where development is not supported by proportional financial investment (Nguyen & Raju, 2020). In this regard, the participant's account reflects not only institutional success in attracting learners but also potential pressure on physical resources and service delivery.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that some schools have diversified their infrastructure to include boarding facilities. One participant explained: "*It's a rural,*

deep rural area. We are having different students. Some of them are staying here because they are attracted by the hostel." (Participant 4)

The inclusion of hostels demonstrates how schools adapt to the geographical realities of rural contexts, where learners often travel long distances to access education. Research suggests that boarding facilities can improve access and retention, particularly in underserved areas (UNESCO, 2020; du Plessis & Mestry, 2021). However, such infrastructural developments also introduce additional responsibilities related to learner accommodation, safety and welfare. Without adequate resources, these expansions may strain school capacity and pose challenges to maintaining quality standards (Maringe et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the findings suggest that infrastructure development in these schools is often uneven and shaped by available resources rather than long-term planning. This aligns with broader evidence indicating that schools in disadvantaged contexts frequently expand in response to immediate needs, resulting in fragmented or insufficient infrastructure (Bashir et al., 2021). As a result, while growth reflects institutional relevance and community demand, it may simultaneously expose gaps in infrastructure that affect teaching and learning conditions.

It is therefore indicated that school growth in independent rural contexts is both an indicator of success and a source of challenge. While increasing enrolment and infrastructural expansion demonstrate responsiveness to community needs, they also place pressure on schools to maintain adequate facilities and meet regulatory requirements. These dynamics are particularly significant in relation to accreditation, where infrastructure adequacy is a key criterion for quality assurance (Umalusi, 2021b). As such, the relationship between growth and infrastructure emerges as a critical factor shaping the operational realities and compliance capacity of independent rural schools.

5.3.1.3 Sub-theme 3: Rural Context and Resource Constraints

The rural context within which schools operate plays a significant role in shaping their access to resources, infrastructure and overall functionality. Rural and deep-rural areas in South Africa are often characterised by underdevelopment, poverty and limited access to basic services such as water, electricity and technology (Amnesty International, 2020; DBE, 2021c). These conditions have direct implications for the

quality of education provision, as well as schools' ability to meet regulatory and accreditation requirements.

Participants consistently described their schools as being located in deep rural areas and serving learners from multiple surrounding villages. One SMT member stated: *"It is in a rural village, a deep rural area. We have learners from various villages and a mix of good, average and slow learners."* (SMT 2)

This description highlights the complexity of rural schooling environments, where geographic dispersion is combined with diverse learner needs. As noted by Hlalele (2021), rural schools often operate within contexts of 'multi-layered disadvantage', where socio-economic challenges intersect with educational demands. In such settings, schools are required to address not only access to education but also variations in learner preparedness and ability, often with limited pedagogical support.

Another SMT member further emphasised the infrastructural limitations associated with rural settings: *"The school is situated in a rural village, not in an urban area and lacks many facilities."* (SMT 1)

This reflects broader systemic inequalities in the distribution of educational resources between rural and urban areas. Studies have shown that rural schools are more likely to experience inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms and limited access to learning materials and digital technologies (Sayed & Ahmed, 2021a; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025). These constraints are not merely operational but structural, rooted in historical patterns of inequality and uneven development.

From an analytical perspective, the rural context can be understood as a structural determinant that shapes both opportunities and limitations within the schooling environment. Schools operating in such contexts are often required to meet the same standards as their urban counterparts, despite having significantly fewer resources. This creates a disparity between policy expectations and practical realities, which may disadvantage rural schools in processes such as accreditation (Sayed & Ahmed, 2021b).

Moreover, the findings suggest that resource constraints affect not only infrastructure but also the broader functioning of schools, including teaching and learning processes, access to technology and overall school management. As Hlalele (2021)

argues, rurality should be understood as a socio-economic condition that influences the distribution of educational opportunities and institutional capacity.

The findings, therefore, demonstrate that the rural context constitutes a critical structural factor shaping the experiences of independent schools. Resource constraints arising from underdevelopment and limited-service delivery not only affect daily school operations but also undermine long-term sustainability. These contextual limitations have significant implications for how schools engage with accreditation processes, as they directly influence their capacity to meet prescribed standards. Consequently, an understanding of these contextual challenges is essential for interpreting the experiences of independent rural schools within the broader framework of quality assurance and educational equity.

5.3.2 Theme 2: Key Characteristics of Independent Rural Schools

Independent rural schools operate within complex socio-economic, cultural and institutional environments that fundamentally shape their identity, functioning and sustainability. These schools are not only educational institutions but also social systems embedded within the lived realities of the communities they serve. In South Africa, particularly in rural provinces such as Limpopo, schools are often influenced by historical inequalities, persistent poverty and uneven access to resources, all of which contribute to variations in school capacity, learner support and educational outcomes (DBE, 2021a; Spaull, 2021). As a result, understanding the characteristics of independent rural schools requires a contextual approach that considers both internal organisational features and external socio-economic conditions.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, research shows that schools in rural and disadvantaged contexts tend to develop distinctive features shaped by necessity, community dynamics and resource constraints. These characteristics often include strong community involvement, reliance on informal support systems and adaptive strategies to address limited infrastructure and funding (UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018; Maringe et al., 2020). In many cases, schools assume expanded roles beyond formal education, including providing social support, moral guidance and stability within communities affected by economic hardship and social disruption.

In the context of this study, participants consistently described their schools as operating within rural, resource-constrained environments characterised by socio-

economic vulnerability, parental migration and strong value-based orientations. These contextual realities shape not only school operations but also learner experiences and institutional priorities. The findings further indicate that independent rural schools are shaped by a combination of structural challenges and adaptive practices, which together influence their capacity to deliver education and respond to external demands such as accreditation. This theme therefore explores the key characteristics of independent rural schools as reported by participants, focusing on faith-based orientation, socio-economic challenges and patterns of parental migration and home support. These characteristics provide critical insight into the broader context within which schools function and are essential for understanding how accreditation processes are experienced and interpreted in rural settings.

5.3.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Faith-Based Orientation

Faith-based orientation is a defining characteristic of many independent schools, particularly in rural contexts where religious values often shape institutional identity, governance and daily practices. Faith-based schools are typically established to provide education that aligns with specific moral, spiritual and cultural values, while also addressing gaps in access to quality education (Grace, 2020; McLaughlin, 2021; UNESCO, 2020. In many cases, such schools serve disadvantaged communities and position themselves as institutions that offer both academic and moral development. Participants in this study consistently described their schools as rural, faith-based institutions serving learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Learners were reported to come from households characterised by high levels of poverty, unemployment and limited access to educational resources. One principal explained the Christian foundation of the school: *"Yes, if you apply for the school, we have to tell you it's a pattern when you apply, but this is a Christian school. And then whatever we do, it must be based on Christianity."* (Participant 1)

This account illustrates how religious orientation is embedded in both the identity and everyday functioning of the school. This suggests that faith-based values operate as an internal governance mechanism, shaping behavioural expectations, discipline and institutional culture. According to Grace (2020), faith-based schools often rely on shared belief systems to promote cohesion and a sense of purpose, particularly in contexts where material resources are constrained. In this regard, religious

orientation may serve as both a moral framework and a stabilising force within resource-limited environments.

The findings, therefore, indicate that faith-based orientation is not only a defining institutional feature but also a mechanism through which schools navigate contextual challenges. By embedding religious values into school practices, these institutions are able to reinforce identity, maintain discipline and foster a sense of community among learners and staff.

5.3.2.2 Sub-theme 2: Socio-Economic Challenges and COVID-19 Impact

Socio-economic conditions constitute a fundamental structural determinant shaping school enrolment, institutional sustainability and equitable access to education. In contexts characterised by entrenched poverty and inequality, such as rural South Africa, schools are not isolated institutions but are deeply embedded within the socio-economic realities of the communities they serve. High levels of unemployment, income insecurity and limited access to basic services constrain households' ability to prioritise and sustain educational expenditure (Maharaj & Chauke, 2025). As a result, school functionality, enrolment stability and long-term viability become closely tied to the economic resilience of the surrounding community. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these structural vulnerabilities, intensifying existing inequalities and exposing the fragility of both household livelihoods and educational systems (Archer, 2021; Van der Berg, 2021).

"Before COVID, the enrolment was 200 - 300 plus. Okay. But as soon as COVID, our enrolment went down. It was because the parents were losing jobs. Some even died during that pandemic. So, our enrolment went down, and generally, the type of learners that we have are poor." (Participant 2)

This account reflects the broader socio-economic disruptions associated with the pandemic, including job losses, household instability and increased mortality. Basically, independent rural schools are highly vulnerable to external economic shocks, particularly because their sustainability is closely tied to parental financial capacity. Van der Berg (2021) notes that the pandemic had disproportionate effects on poorer households in South Africa, leading to increased educational exclusion and disruption.

Furthermore, declining enrolment highlights the fragile financial model of many independent schools, which rely heavily on school fees. When households experience economic hardship, education expenditure is often reduced, directly affecting school viability (Archer, 2021). This creates a compounding effect, where reduced enrolment limits revenue, which in turn constrains the school's ability to maintain operations and quality standards.

The findings therefore demonstrate that socio-economic vulnerability, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly shapes both enrolment patterns and institutional sustainability. These conditions highlight the dependence of independent rural schools on the economic stability of their communities and underscore the broader structural inequalities affecting education access.

5.3.2.3 Sub-theme 3: Parental Migration and Limited Home Support

Parental involvement is widely recognised as a key factor influencing learner performance, educational attainment and overall school engagement (Shebani et al., 2025). It includes activities such as monitoring academic progress, assisting with homework and maintaining communication with schools. However, in many African contexts, particularly in rural areas, patterns of labour migration significantly disrupt family structures and limit parental presence in children's daily lives. Across countries such as South Africa, Lesotho and Mozambique, economic pressures often compel parents to migrate to urban centres in search of employment, leaving children in the care of extended family members, most commonly grandparents (Arlini et al., 2019; Hall & Sambu, 2021; Mokomane, 2022). While these extended family systems provide continuity of care, they also reshape the nature and extent of academic and emotional support available to learners. Participants reported that rural-to-urban migration has led to reduced parental involvement in learners' education. One participant stated: *"Most of the parents, those who are working-class parents, are not around … 80% or the working-class people are not around. They are working somewhere in towns. My learners are staying with their grannies. And the grannies are the ones who are controlling. And the grannies are not that educated. Therefore, they don't have any support at home."* (Participant 6)

This reflects broader socio-economic patterns across rural Africa, where livelihood strategies are often spatially dispersed, resulting in fragmented family units. In essence, learner support systems are disproportionate and, in many cases,

insufficient to meet academic demands. Although extended family members provide essential caregiving, their ability to support formal schooling may be constrained by limited educational attainment, generational gaps in curriculum knowledge and physical limitations associated with age (Shebani et al., 2025). As a result, the home environment may not adequately support critical learning processes such as homework completion, revision and the development of effective study habits.

Hall and Sambu (2021) argue that children living in extended care arrangements often experience gaps in supervision and educational guidance, particularly where caregivers lack the resources or educational background to engage with schooling demands. Similarly, research across sub-Saharan Africa indicates that parental absence due to migration can negatively affect learners' academic motivation, emotional well-being and school performance, as consistent parental monitoring and encouragement are reduced (Ansell, 2016). In such contexts, learners may also experience a diminished sense of accountability, as the authority structures within extended households may differ from those of nuclear families.

Mokomane (2022) further highlights that labour migration continues to shape family organisation across Africa, with significant implications for child well-being and educational engagement. The reconfiguration of households often results in what can be described as 'distributed parenting', where responsibility for child upbringing is shared across multiple caregivers. While this arrangement can provide social and emotional support, it may lack the consistency and academic focus required to support sustained educational achievement.

The findings position parental migration as a structural socio-economic factor contributing to educational inequality (Arlini et al., 2019). Schools in rural contexts are often required to compensate for limited home-based support by assuming additional roles, including providing academic guidance, monitoring learner progress, and offering psychosocial support (Arlini et al., 2019). This expands the functional scope of schools beyond traditional teaching and learning, placing additional pressure on already resource-constrained institutions.

The findings therefore indicate that parental migration and limited home support are significant contextual factors shaping learner experiences and educational outcomes. These challenges extend beyond the classroom and reflect broader patterns of socio-

economic inequality and labour mobility across African contexts. Consequently, understanding the impact of household dynamics is essential for interpreting learner performance and the broader functioning of schools, particularly within rural and disadvantaged settings.

5.3.3 Theme 3: School Management and Administration After Accreditation

Accreditation is widely recognised as a critical mechanism for strengthening institutional management, governance and accountability within schools. It requires institutions to align their operations with formal standards, policies and regulatory frameworks, thereby promoting improved organisational practices, transparency, and accountability (Materu, 2020; Eaton, 2021b). Beyond compliance, accreditation can be understood as a process of institutional transformation, particularly in contexts where management systems were previously informal, fragmented or underdeveloped. In rural independent schools, where administrative practices are often shaped by resource constraints and limited formal training, accreditation introduces structured systems that enhance organisational coherence and professionalisation.

Across African contexts, however, research indicates that while quality assurance frameworks contribute to improved governance and accountability, they are often compliance-driven and constrained by limited institutional capacity (Zakwe, 2020). This suggests that institutions may prioritise meeting external requirements rather than embedding sustainable internal systems of improvement.

In many rural and independent school contexts, management and administrative systems are shaped by resource constraints, limited formal training and community-driven practices. Evidence from Limpopo Province indicates that SGBs often face challenges related to financial management, lack of expertise and insufficient training, which can undermine effective governance (Selamolela, 2019). As a result, schools may rely on informal decision-making processes, flexible role allocation and ad hoc financial practices. While these systems enable schools to function, they often lack the consistency and structure required for long-term sustainability.

From a theoretical perspective, accreditation aligns with quality assurance and continuous improvement frameworks, which emphasise standardisation, monitoring and accountability as key drivers of institutional effectiveness. For example, the

Umalusi accreditation framework requires schools to demonstrate compliance across multiple domains, including governance, financial management, teaching and learning and infrastructure (Fowler, 2023). This framework is underpinned by principles of accountability, transparency and continuous improvement, requiring schools to formalise policies, document processes and establish clear lines of responsibility. Similarly, Materu (2020) highlights that effective quality assurance systems function as regulatory and developmental tools, guiding institutions toward improved performance while ensuring that minimum standards are met.

Accreditation, therefore, plays a transformative role by introducing formalised systems that standardise operations, clarify responsibilities and enhance accountability. Participants in this study consistently reported that accreditation had a significant and positive impact on school management and administration. These changes extend beyond compliance to broader institutional improvements, including strengthened governance, improved financial systems, clearer organisational structures and policy-driven practices.

5.3.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Strengthened Governance Structures

Governance structures encompass the formal and informal systems, frameworks and processes through which schools are directed, managed and held accountable. These structures regulate how decisions are made, how authority and responsibilities are distributed and how transparency and accountability are maintained within the institution. Effective school governance is inherently collaborative, involving multiple stakeholders such as principals, SMTs, governing bodies, parents and, in some cases, community representatives. The interaction among these actors requires clear communication, shared understanding of roles and coordinated decision-making to ensure that governance functions effectively. However, governance processes are rarely straightforward. They are shaped by differing interests, power dynamics, levels of capacity and contextual constraints, which can complicate implementation and consistency in practice. As a result, governance in schools is often characterised by negotiation and adaptation rather than linear decision-making, making its effective enactment particularly challenging, especially in complex and resource-constrained environments (Mifsud & Wilkins, 2025).

Participants indicated that accreditation strengthened governance by introducing structured and consistent practices: *“We now have meetings frequently, as this is a*

requirement for accreditation." (Participant 3) and *"Our governance has also improved. We now meet regularly to discuss matters about our school."* (Participant 5)

These findings indicate that accreditation serves to institutionalise governance practices by formally embedding regular meetings, structured communication channels and collective decision-making processes within school operations. Through these mechanisms, governance becomes less dependent on the discretion and capacity of individual leaders and more distributed across multiple role players, thereby promoting shared responsibility and collaborative accountability. This shift reflects a transition from largely informal, personality-driven governance arrangements toward more structured, policy-aligned systems that are guided by clear procedures and regulatory expectations. In rural South African contexts, where governance practices have often been fragmented or inconsistently applied due to capacity constraints and limited oversight, such institutionalisation is particularly significant. The introduction of formal governance routines enhances transparency, strengthens accountability mechanisms and contributes to greater organisational stability. However, the effectiveness and sustainability of these governance improvements remain contingent on stakeholders' capacity to implement them meaningfully. In particular, the skills, training and institutional knowledge of governing bodies and school leadership structures are critical determinants of whether policy-aligned governance practices move beyond compliance to become embedded aspects of everyday school functioning (Selamolela, 2019).

5.3.3.2 Sub-theme 2: Improved Financial Accountability

Financial accountability refers to the systems, procedures and controls through which schools plan, manage, monitor and report the use of financial resources in a transparent and responsible manner. These mechanisms are fundamental to ensuring sound governance, preventing misuse of funds and supporting the long-term sustainability of educational institutions. In the South African schooling system, financial accountability is closely linked to broader governance and compliance frameworks that require schools to demonstrate prudent financial management, accurate record-keeping and effective oversight (Mestry, 2017; DBE, 2021b).

In rural and resource-constrained school contexts, however, effective financial management often presents a significant challenge. Rural schools frequently operate

with limited financial expertise, inadequate training among governing bodies and insufficient access to professional financial support. Research indicates that school governing bodies and management teams in rural areas often lack the technical skills required to develop budgets, interpret financial statements and implement internal financial controls, resulting in informal or inconsistent financial practices (Spaull, 2021; Rammbuda & Arko-Achemfuor, 2025). These capacity limitations are further compounded by unstable income streams, high levels of poverty within school communities and heavy reliance on school fees, donations or subsidies.

Participants in this study reported that the accreditation process has led to notable improvements in financial management practices within their schools. Accreditation requirements have compelled schools to formalise financial systems through the introduction of written financial policies, structured budgeting processes, regular financial reporting and clearer accountability lines. Such formalisation has enhanced transparency, strengthened oversight by governing bodies and reduced reliance on ad hoc or person-dependent financial decision-making. These findings align with broader research indicating that accreditation and quality assurance processes often function as catalysts for the professionalisation of school management by requiring compliance with standardised financial governance practices (Allais, 2021; Materu, 2020).

Moreover, improved financial accountability following accreditation has contributed to greater institutional credibility and organisational stability. For independent rural schools, demonstrating sound financial management is particularly significant, as accreditation-linked compliance is often a prerequisite for accessing government subsidies and external support (DBE, 2021c). However, while accreditation can strengthen financial systems, the sustainability of these improvements remains dependent on continued capacity-building, training, and support for school leaders and governing bodies. Without such support, there is a risk that financial accountability practices may remain compliance-driven rather than becoming embedded features of everyday school governance (Sayed & Ahmed, 2021a; Ehren et al., 2023).

Participants reported significant improvements in financial management following accreditation: *“We now have improved financial accountability… it is policy driven.”*

(Participant 1) and *“We have also developed budgeting guidelines, which resulted in good financial management.”* (Participant 6)

There is thus a shift towards formal financial systems, including budgeting, record-keeping and adherence to financial policies. Recent South African research however, highlights that financial mismanagement and lack of training among school governing bodies remain persistent challenges in rural schools, particularly in resource-poor communities (Rammbuda & Arko-Achemfuor, 2025). Issues such as limited financial expertise and inadequate training can undermine effective fund management. Improved financial accountability enhances transparency, institutional credibility and sustainability. It also supports better resource allocation, which is critical in resource-constrained environments. However, without adequate capacity-building, these improvements may not be sustained beyond the accreditation process.

5.5.3.3 Sub-theme 3: Clear Role Allocation and Organisational Structure

Clear role allocation refers to the explicit definition and distribution of responsibilities among different stakeholders within the school, while organisational structure provides a formal framework that enables coordination, supervision and accountability. Clearly defined roles help to ensure that tasks are executed efficiently, reporting lines are understood and decision-making responsibilities are appropriately distributed across leadership and management structures. Organisational structures, in turn, support coherence by linking individual roles to broader institutional goals, policies and procedures.

In many rural schools, however, role allocation often overlaps and is informally assigned due to limited staffing, constrained financial resources and the need for staff members to perform multiple functions simultaneously. As a result, individuals may assume several responsibilities beyond their formal positions, leading to role ambiguity, increased workload and potential inefficiencies in school operations. Such informal arrangements, while enabling schools to function under challenging conditions, can undermine accountability and create uncertainty regarding authority and responsibility. In this context, the absence of clearly defined organisational structures may place excessive pressure on school leaders and complicate coordination among staff. Strengthening role clarity and organisational structuring is therefore essential for improving efficiency, accountability and institutional stability, particularly in rural school environments characterised by resource constraints.

Participants highlighted that accreditation has introduced clearer organisational systems: *"It came with structured roles where everyone knows what to do."* (Participant 1) and *"It has also assisted with structured roles where everyone knows what to do."* (Participant 5)

This reflects a transition to formalised organisational structures, where responsibilities are clearly defined and aligned with institutional policies. As a result, clear role allocation improves efficiency, coordination and accountability. It ensures that tasks are properly distributed and reduces ambiguity within the institution. Governance literature further emphasises that clearly defined roles are essential in managing complex institutional environments involving multiple stakeholders (Mifsud & Wilkins, 2025).

In addition, participants linked role clarity to improved staff welfare: *"This has resulted in the introduction of a retirement fund and medical aid for our staff."* (Participant 5) This suggests that accreditation contributes to a process of institutional professionalisation, whereby schools move away from informal, ad hoc employment arrangements towards more formalised and regulated human resource practices. Through accreditation requirements, schools are encouraged to clarify staff roles, formalise appointment procedures and introduce structured conditions of service that align with recognised labour and education standards. This often includes the development of written employment contracts, clearly defined job descriptions, standardised remuneration practices and access to employment benefits such as medical aid, pension or retirement funds and regulated leave provisions. Improving working conditions in this manner enhances staff security, professional identity and morale, while also strengthening accountability and organisational coherence. In rural independent schools, where employment practices have historically been shaped by financial constraints and limited regulatory oversight, accreditation therefore functions as a catalyst for embedding professionalism within institutional operations. This professionalisation not only improves staff welfare but also supports teacher retention, institutional credibility and the long-term sustainability of schools operating in resource-constrained contexts.

5.5.3.4 Sub-theme 4: Policy-Driven Management and Administrative Systems

Policy-driven management refers to the use of formal rules, procedures and guidelines to govern school operations. Accreditation requires schools to develop and

implement policies across key areas, including governance, finance and administration. Participants emphasised this shift: *"Whatever we do… it is policy driven."* (Participant 1) and *"It helped us to introduce policies at our school."* (Participant 6)

These findings indicate that accreditation promotes the formalisation of institutional practices, ensuring consistency and alignment with regulatory standards. However, across African contexts, studies suggest that quality assurance systems often emphasise compliance with policies rather than meaningful institutional improvement (Zakwe, 2020) This creates a tension between policy adherence and practical implementation, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Policy-driven systems enhance accountability and standardisation, but their effectiveness depends on institutional capacity. Without adequate training, resources and support, policies may remain symbolic rather than fully implemented.

Furthermore, these changes can be linked to systems theory, which views schools as interconnected systems where improvements in one component, such as governance or financial management, positively influence other areas, including teaching and learning, staff motivation and institutional stability. For example, improved financial accountability enables better resource allocation, while clear role definition enhances coordination and reduces operational inefficiencies. In rural independent schools, where resources are often limited, such improvements are particularly significant, as they contribute to institutional resilience and sustainability.

The findings therefore demonstrate that accreditation plays a transformative role in strengthening school management and administration. By introducing structured governance systems, enhancing financial accountability, clarifying roles and promoting stakeholder participation, accreditation contributes to improved organisational coherence and institutional sustainability. These changes are especially important in rural independent schools, where management practices may have previously been informal and resource-constrained. Ultimately, accreditation not only ensures compliance with external standards but also facilitates institutional development, enabling schools to operate more effectively within complex and challenging contexts.

5.3.4 Theme 4: Preparation for the Accreditation Process

Preparation for the accreditation process represents a critical phase in which schools are required to align their internal systems, practices, and resources with externally defined quality assurance standards. Within education systems, accreditation preparation is not merely a procedural requirement but a complex organisational process that involves planning, coordination and institutional self-evaluation. In the South African context, accreditation processes governed by Umalusi require schools to demonstrate compliance across multiple domains, including governance, teaching and learning, infrastructure and assessment practices (Umalusi, 2021b). As such, preparation becomes a comprehensive institutional exercise that extends beyond administrative tasks to encompass broader organisational transformation.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, research indicates that preparation for external evaluation processes often serves as a catalyst for institutional development, prompting schools to formalise policies, improve documentation systems and strengthen internal coordination (UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018; Kis, 2022). However, this process is not without challenges. In resource-constrained environments, schools may face difficulties in meeting extensive compliance requirements due to limited administrative capacity, inadequate infrastructure and gaps in institutional knowledge (Sayed & Ahmed, 2021b; Spaull, 2021). Consequently, preparation for accreditation is often characterised by both developmental opportunities and significant operational pressures.

In the context of this study, participants described accreditation preparation as a structured yet demanding process involving multiple stakeholders, extensive documentation and the alignment of school practices with prescribed standards. The findings further indicate that preparation involves both collaborative planning and intensive compliance activities, reflecting a dual process of institutional strengthening and regulatory engagement.

This theme, therefore, explores how independent rural schools prepare for accreditation, focusing on stakeholder engagement and planning, as well as compliance activities and documentation preparation. These dimensions provide insight into the organisational processes, challenges and adaptive strategies that

shape schools' readiness for accreditation within resource-constrained rural contexts.

5.3.4.1 Sub-theme 1: Stakeholder Engagement and Planning

Stakeholder engagement is a critical component of accreditation preparation, as it ensures that all members of the school community are actively involved in the process and have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Within quality assurance frameworks in South Africa, effective school functioning is closely linked to participatory governance, collaborative planning and shared accountability among stakeholders (DBE, 2021a). In this regard, accreditation preparation extends beyond administrative compliance and becomes a collective institutional process that requires coordination, communication and strategic alignment across different actors.

Participants described accreditation preparation as a structured and inclusive process involving multiple stakeholders, including SMTs, educators, heads of department (HoDs), parents and learners. This reflects a whole-school approach, where responsibility for meeting accreditation standards is distributed rather than centralised. One participant explained: *"As soon as we were informed about accreditation, there were steps that we followed. Followed steps were guided by the monitoring tool that came, and what Umalusi would require from us."* (Participant 3)

This highlights the structured nature of accreditation preparation, where schools rely on prescribed tools, monitoring instruments and regulatory guidelines to organise their activities. The use of such tools often provided by Umalusi serves as a roadmap for compliance, guiding schools through key domains such as governance, documentation, safety and curriculum delivery (Fowler, 2023). This shows that external frameworks play a formative role in shaping internal institutional processes by standardising expectations and reducing ambiguity. In contexts where schools may previously have operated with informal systems, these frameworks introduce order, predictability and accountability.

Another participant highlighted the importance of inclusive stakeholder engagement: *"Well, it was, it was a collective preparation because we had to engage all the stakeholders, number one, parents. We had to engage, actually, all the stakeholders of the school, the educators, and then the HoDs as well, and learners as well."* (Participant 5)

Involving a broad range of stakeholders fosters a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, which is critical for successful implementation. From an analytical perspective, this aligns with participatory governance models in African education systems, where collaboration between schools, families and communities is essential for improving school effectiveness (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015). When stakeholders are actively engaged, they are more likely to contribute to decision-making processes, support institutional goals and ensure that required standards are met.

Furthermore, stakeholder engagement can be understood as a capacity-building process. Through involvement in planning and preparation activities, stakeholders develop a better understanding of accreditation requirements, institutional policies and quality standards. This enhances institutional readiness and reduces reliance on a small group of individuals, such as school principals or administrators. In rural contexts, where schools often face human resource constraints, such distributed responsibility is particularly important for ensuring sustainability.

From a systems perspective, stakeholder engagement strengthens the interconnections among the various components of the school. Effective communication and collaboration between management, staff and the broader community improve coordination, reduce duplication of effort and facilitate more efficient implementation of accreditation requirements. For example, educators may focus on curriculum alignment and learner records, while management oversees policy compliance and financial documentation and parents support learner attendance and school initiatives. This coordinated approach enhances organisational efficiency and contributes to a more cohesive institutional response to accreditation demands.

However, while stakeholder engagement offers significant benefits, it may also present challenges. Coordinating multiple stakeholders requires time, effective leadership and clear communication channels, which may be difficult to sustain in resource-constrained environments. In some cases, limited stakeholder capacity particularly among parents or community members may affect the depth and quality of participation. Despite these challenges, the findings suggest that inclusive engagement remains a critical enabling factor in successful accreditation preparation.

The findings demonstrate that stakeholder engagement and structured planning are central to effective accreditation preparation. By involving multiple actors, utilising guided frameworks and distributing responsibilities, schools are able to coordinate efforts, strengthen internal systems and align their practices with required standards. This collective approach not only enhances compliance but also contributes to institutional learning, capacity-building and long-term sustainability, particularly within the rural independent school context.

5.3.4.2 Sub-theme 2: Compliance Activities and Documentation Preparation

Compliance with accreditation standards requires schools to undertake extensive preparatory activities, including documentation, policy development and infrastructure readiness. In the South African context, these requirements are aligned with national quality assurance expectations, which emphasise proper record-keeping, adherence to safety regulations and the maintenance of functional school environments (DBE, 2013; Umalusi, 2020). As such, accreditation preparation is both an administrative and operational process, requiring schools to demonstrate evidence of compliance across multiple domains, including governance, teaching and learning and institutional management.

Participants reported that preparation involved a wide range of activities, including organising learner and administrative records, developing or updating school policies and improving the physical condition of school facilities. One SMT member explained: *"We worked hard to prepare learner files, principal files and ensured classrooms and grounds were clean. We worked overnight to make everything ready."* (SMT 3)

This reflects intensified compliance pressure during accreditation preparation, where schools are required to mobilise significant effort within limited timeframes. Such conditions may contribute to increased stress and workload, particularly in resource-constrained environments where administrative capacity is limited (Sayed & Ahmed, 2021b; Spaull, 2021*).* This account highlights the intensity and urgency associated with the preparation process, which suggests that accreditation can create significant pressure on schools, particularly where systems were not previously aligned with required standards. The need to *"work overnight"* indicates reactive compliance, where schools attempt to meet expectations within limited timeframes.

“It was hectic initially; we lacked knowledge and policies. We visited other accredited schools for guidance.” (SMT 2)

This finding reflects a lack of initial preparedness and highlights the role of peer learning in the accreditation process. From an analytical perspective, this suggests that knowledge gaps and limited access to information can hinder effective preparation, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Kis (2022) notes that capacity-building and knowledge-sharing are critical components of successful quality assurance processes. In addition, participants emphasised the importance of meeting safety and infrastructural requirements: *“We looked at all the safety measures that we need to take as a school, and we made sure that we checked everything down up to fire extinguishers to make sure that they are well serviced before accreditation is done.”* (Participant 3)

This illustrates the comprehensive scope of accreditation requirements, which extends beyond documentation to include physical infrastructure, safety compliance and environmental readiness. From a regulatory perspective, these requirements are intended to ensure that schools provide safe and conducive learning environments. However, from an analytical standpoint, they also reveal the material demands of accreditation, particularly for rural independent schools that may lack adequate infrastructure or financial resources. Ensuring compliance with safety standards may require financial investment, technical expertise and ongoing maintenance, all of which can be challenging in resource-constrained settings.

The findings suggest that documentation plays a central role in the accreditation process. Schools are required to produce evidence of compliance through records such as learner files, staff records, policy documents and financial reports. The emphasis on documentation reflects broader trends in quality assurance systems, where accountability is demonstrated through formalised records and verifiable evidence. While such practices enhance transparency and standardisation, they may also place an administrative burden on schools, particularly those with limited staff and administrative capacity.

From a broader analytical perspective, compliance activities can be understood as part of a process of institutional formalisation, where schools transition from informal or ad hoc practices to structured, policy-driven systems. This transition is critical for

improving organisational efficiency and accountability. However, it also introduces new demands that may strain existing resources. In this sense, accreditation embodies a dual dynamic; it acts as a developmental tool that strengthens institutional systems, while simultaneously imposing regulatory pressures that may be difficult to meet.

The findings therefore demonstrate that compliance activities and documentation preparation are central to the accreditation process, but they are also resource-intensive and demanding. Schools are required to mobilise significant time, effort and limited resources to meet standards, often under considerable pressure. These dynamics highlight a fundamental tension between compliance and capacity, where the expectations of accreditation frameworks may not always align with the realities of resource-constrained school environments.

Accreditation preparation can be seen as both an opportunity and a challenge. On one hand, it promotes improved organisational practices, enhances accountability and strengthens institutional systems. On the other hand, it exposes capacity gaps, increases administrative workload and places additional pressure on schools already operating under constrained conditions. Understanding this dual nature is essential for interpreting the experiences of independent rural schools and for assessing the broader implications of accreditation within unequal educational contexts.

5.3.5 Theme 5: Understanding and Experiences of the Accreditation Process

Accreditation processes are widely implemented across African education systems as key mechanisms for ensuring quality assurance, institutional accountability and standardisation of educational provision. In countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Ghana and Tanzania, accreditation and quality assurance frameworks are designed to regulate institutional performance, ensure compliance with minimum standards and promote ongoing improvement in teaching, learning and governance (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007; Allais, 2021; Kis, 2022). These systems play an important role in safeguarding the credibility of education systems and protecting learners by ensuring that institutions meet specified quality thresholds.

However, while accreditation frameworks are intended to enhance educational quality, their implementation often places significant demands on schools, particularly

those operating in rural and resource-constrained environments. Recent research highlights that accreditation processes tend to be highly procedural, evidence-driven and compliance-oriented, requiring schools to demonstrate conformity through extensive documentation, formalised policies and audited systems (Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Materu, 2020; Kis, 2022). For schools with limited administrative capacity, such requirements may be experienced as burdensome rather than supportive. In rural contexts, where staffing shortages, infrastructural deficits and financial instability are common, accreditation can therefore represent not only a quality assurance mechanism but also a substantial organisational challenge.

The findings from this study indicate that participants experienced accreditation as both beneficial and demanding, reflecting its dual nature as a developmental tool and a source of institutional pressure. On the one hand, accreditation was perceived as a catalyst for organisational strengthening, prompting improvements in governance structures, policy compliance and management practices. On the other hand, participants described the process as administratively intensive, time-consuming and stressful, particularly during preparation and evaluation phases. This dual experience aligns with broader scholarship across African and global contexts, which suggests that quality assurance systems often strengthen institutional systems while simultaneously exposing capacity constraints and structural inequalities (Allais, 2021; Sayed & Ahmed, 2021b; Ehren et al., 2023).

Recent studies emphasise that in rural and disadvantaged settings, accreditation requirements may unintentionally amplify existing inequalities. Schools located in under-resourced areas are generally expected to meet the same standards as their urban counterparts, despite significant disparities in infrastructure, access to professional support and financial resources (Spaull, 2021; UNESCO, 2023b). As a result, accreditation may be experienced as unevenly demanding, placing disproportionate pressure on rural school leaders who are required to manage compliance alongside routine instructional and operational responsibilities. Research by Elken and Stensaker (2018) and Allais (2021) cautions that such contexts often encourage short-term, compliance-driven behaviours, where schools focus on meeting inspection requirements rather than embedding sustainable quality improvement practices.

Furthermore, the high-stakes nature of accreditation intensifies the experience of pressure. Failure or provisional outcomes may carry financial, reputational, and operational consequences, particularly for independent schools that rely on accreditation for legitimacy and access to subsidies (Materu, 2020; DBE, 2021c). In rural independent schools, where financial margins are already fragile, the risk associated with non-compliance may heighten stress levels among principals and SMT members. Recent literature on school leadership in constrained environments shows that such pressures contribute to leadership overload, emotional strain and role intensification, as principals assume responsibility for both instructional leadership and regulatory compliance (Bush, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2023).

At the same time, participant experiences reflect the developmental potential of accreditation. Engagement with accreditation standards exposed schools to clearer expectations, structured quality indicators and formal accountability mechanisms. Studies across sub-Saharan Africa suggest that when accreditation processes are accompanied by adequate guidance, feedback and support, they can promote organisational learning, professional development and long-term improvement (Ehren et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023a). The findings of this study therefore reinforce the view that accreditation functions as a complex and ambivalent process: it can drive institutional improvement while simultaneously generating pressure and strain, particularly in environments characterised by resource scarcity and structural inequality.

5.3.5.1 Sub-theme 1: Perceived Strictness and Administrative Pressure

Participants consistently described the accreditation process as strict, demanding and administratively intensive. These perceptions reflect the structured and compliance-driven nature of accreditation systems, which require schools to meet clearly defined standards and provide extensive evidence of compliance. Accreditation processes in education systems are generally designed to ensure accountability, standardisation and quality assurance across institutions. In South Africa, independent schools seeking accreditation through Umalusi are required to demonstrate compliance across multiple domains, including governance, curriculum delivery, assessment practices and infrastructure (Umalusi, 2021b). These requirements are often highly detailed and evidence-based, requiring schools to produce documented proof for each criterion.

Within rural contexts, however, such structured and evidence-intensive processes may be experienced as particularly demanding due to limited administrative capacity. Studies in South Africa indicate that schools in under-resourced settings often operate with minimal administrative personnel, placing additional responsibility on principals and SMT members to manage compliance-related tasks (Sayed & Ahmed, 2021a; Spaull, 2021). This increases the likelihood that accreditation is perceived not only as a quality assurance process but also as a high-pressure administrative exercise.

"They are very strict. They need, if they need things, they need them accurately. You cannot judge them, let me put it this way. Mind you if you fail accreditation, you have to reapply, pay all other fees or whatever." (Participant 1)

This account highlights the high-stakes nature of accreditation, where failure carries financial and operational consequences. In other words, the accreditation functions not only as a quality assurance mechanism but also as a regulatory instrument that enforces compliance through accountability measures. According to Blackmur (2020), accreditation systems often rely on stringent evaluation criteria to maintain standards, which can increase pressure on institutions.

In addition, the emphasis on accuracy and completeness of documentation reflects the administrative intensity of the process. From an analytical perspective, this indicates that schools must develop strong administrative systems to meet accreditation requirements, which may be challenging in contexts with limited human and material resources. Shah and Jarzabkowski (2021) argue that such compliance-driven processes can shift focus from educational practice to administrative performance, particularly during evaluation periods.

Evidence from across Africa supports this observation, showing that school leaders often spend significant time preparing documentation, organising files and ensuring compliance ahead of evaluation visits (World Bank, 2018). This administrative burden may divert attention from core teaching and learning activities, particularly in schools where staffing is limited.

The findings therefore suggest that while strictness is essential for maintaining quality standards, it also contributes to increased administrative pressure, particularly for schools that may lack the capacity to meet these demands efficiently. Furthermore,

this pressure may disproportionately affect rural schools, reinforcing existing inequalities in institutional capacity.

5.3.5.2 Sub-theme 2: Financial, Staffing and Infrastructure Challenges

Participants highlighted multiple challenges associated with financial constraints, staffing shortages and infrastructural limitations, all of which affected their experience of the accreditation process. These challenges are particularly pronounced in rural contexts, where schools often operate with limited resources and face difficulties in sustaining operations.

Rural schools in South Africa are widely documented as operating under conditions of financial constraint, often relying heavily on school fees and limited external support. In many cases, parents in rural communities have low and unstable incomes, which directly affect schools' ability to generate consistent revenue (DBE, 2021a). This creates a fragile financial base that limits investment in infrastructure, teaching resources and staff development.

In addition to financial challenges, staffing remains a persistent concern in rural education systems. Research indicates that rural schools experience difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified teachers due to factors such as geographic isolation, lack of incentives and limited professional growth opportunities (Hlalele, 2021; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025). These challenges are not unique to South Africa but are widely observed across sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2015).

One participant explained: *"By the virtue of being in a rural area, yes, we did experience a lot of challenges with regard to school fees."* (Participant 1)

Another participant added: *"The obstacles that I can say we faced, is that we are in a rural area, when it comes to teachers, retaining them is a challenge."* (Participant 3)

These issues highlight the interconnected nature of financial and human resource challenges. The limited financial capacity affects not only infrastructure and resources but also the ability to attract and retain qualified staff. Bengtsson (2020) notes that rural schools often experience persistent teacher retention challenges due to geographic isolation and limited incentives. In addition to principals' experiences, SMT members reported similar experiences, describing the process as demanding

but ultimately beneficial. One SMT member stated: *"It was hectic initially; we lacked knowledge and policies."* (SMT 2)

Another added: *"Very intense. We worked until 3–4 a.m. before the visit to ensure everything was in order."* (SMT 3)

These views reflect the intensity of preparation and the pressure to meet accreditation requirements within constrained timeframes. From an analytical perspective, this suggests that schools may engage in reactive compliance, focusing their efforts on inspection periods rather than embedding them in continuous practice. Elken and Stensaker (2018) argue that quality assurance processes can sometimes lead to short-term compliance behaviours rather than sustained institutional improvement. Participants also highlighted infrastructural and technological challenges: *"Major challenges included lack of computers, financial constraints and technical issues with second-hand laptops."* (SMT 2)

One SMT member highlighted sanitation challenges: *"We had no running water and had to negotiate with the community and later drill a borehole."* (SMT 2)

These findings illustrate the extent of material deprivation in some rural schools, which suggests that meeting accreditation standards related to infrastructure and resources may be particularly difficult in such contexts. The need to secure basic services such as water further indicates that schools operate under conditions that extend beyond typical educational challenges, reflecting broader systemic inequalities in the South African education system. In many rural areas, schools continue to face persistent infrastructure backlogs, including inadequate sanitation, unreliable water supply and limited access to electricity, all of which directly affect their ability to function effectively (DBE, 2021b; Spaull, 2021).

Reports by Amnesty International (2020) confirm that many rural schools in South Africa continue to face challenges related to water, sanitation and basic infrastructure. Similarly, research by Hoadley (2018) and Muyambi and Ahiaku(2025) highlights that resource inequalities remain a defining feature of the South African schooling system, with rural schools disproportionately affected. Such conditions highlight structural inequalities that shape schools' ability to comply with accreditation requirements, particularly when standards assume a baseline level of infrastructure that may not be present in disadvantaged contexts.

Therefore, this demonstrate that financial, staffing and infrastructure constraints significantly shape schools' experiences of accreditation. These challenges highlight the tension between standardised requirements and disparate resource conditions, raising critical questions about the feasibility and fairness of applying uniform accreditation expectations across schools with vastly different levels of capacity. This underscores the need for more context-sensitive approaches to quality assurance that recognise structural disparities, while still maintaining minimum standards for educational quality (Allais, 2021; Sayed & Ahmed, 2021a).

5.3.5.3 Sub-theme 3: Views on Accreditation Criteria for Rural Schools

Participants expressed differing views regarding the suitability of accreditation criteria for rural schools. While some supported maintaining uniform standards to ensure quality education, others argued for flexible criteria that consider contextual limitations such as resource shortages and infrastructure challenges.

Quality assurance systems are typically designed around the principle of standardisation, ensuring that all institutions meet the same minimum requirements regardless of location. In South Africa, accreditation frameworks developed by Umalusi emphasise consistency, comparability and credibility of qualifications (Umalusi, 2021b). This approach is intended to protect the integrity of the education system and ensure that all learners receive education of comparable quality.

However, in highly unequal education systems, the application of uniform standards can generate tension between equality and equity. While equality implies treating all schools the same, equity requires recognising contextual differences and providing differentiated support (Allais, 2021; Sayed & Ahmed, 2021b). This tension is particularly pronounced in rural contexts, where schools operate under significantly different conditions compared to urban institutions. One principal stated: *"Uh, to me, the criteria shouldn't be different because the results are the same, even if we were in a rural area or in an urban area."* (Participant 3)

This perspective reflects a commitment to standardisation and equality in educational outcomes. This suggests that uniform criteria are viewed as necessary for maintaining credibility and ensuring that all learners receive comparable quality education. Young (2020) argues that standardised frameworks can promote fairness by holding all institutions to the same benchmarks. However, another participant

expressed a contrasting view: *“There should be a different criterion for independent schools like ours in the rural area. The reason for this is simple. Schools in rural area lack resources.”* (Participant 1)

This account highlights the perceived mismatch between accreditation requirements and contextual realities. From an analytical perspective, this suggests that uniform standards may not adequately account for structural inequalities between rural and urban schools. Across Africa, similar debates have emerged regarding the appropriateness of applying uniform quality assurance standards in unequal contexts (UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018).

These studies suggest that while standardisation is important, flexibility may be necessary to ensure that disadvantaged schools are not unfairly penalised. The findings, therefore, reveal a tension between the need for consistent standards and the recognition of contextual disparities. While standardisation is important for ensuring quality and accountability, flexibility may be necessary to accommodate the unique challenges faced by rural schools. This tension is central to understanding how accreditation is experienced and interpreted within diverse educational contexts.

Leadership plays a central role in shaping how schools respond to external accountability processes such as accreditation. Effective school leadership is associated with improved organisational functioning, instructional quality and the successful implementation of policy requirements (Leithwood et al., 2020; Bush, 2021). In the context of accreditation, leadership extends beyond routine management to include coordination, compliance oversight and capacity-building to ensure that schools meet required standards.

Within the South African education system, school leadership operates within a complex environment characterised by policy demands, resource inequalities and diverse stakeholder expectations. The Department of Basic Education emphasises that principals are responsible for ensuring effective governance, instructional leadership, and accountability within schools (DBE, 2021c). In rural and independent school contexts, these responsibilities are often intensified due to limited administrative support and resource constraints, requiring principals to adopt multi-functional leadership roles.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, leadership in resource-constrained schools is frequently characterised by adaptive practices, where principals must balance instructional leadership with administrative and compliance responsibilities (UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018). In the context of accreditation, these demands become more pronounced, as leaders must ensure alignment with externally defined standards while maintaining the day-to-day functioning of the school.

This theme therefore explores the leadership responsibilities undertaken by principals during the accreditation process, focusing on operational roles, teacher development and the emotional burden associated with compliance demands. It highlights how leadership is enacted within resource-constrained environments and how principals navigate the complexities of meeting accreditation requirements while sustaining school functionality and quality.

5.3.6 Theme 6: Leadership Responsibilities during Accreditation

Leadership plays a central role in shaping how schools respond to accreditation processes, particularly in contexts where institutional capacity and resources are unevenly distributed. In South Africa and across the African continent, school leadership is widely recognised as a key driver of school effectiveness, influencing curriculum delivery, staff performance and overall organisational functioning (DBE, 2021a; Hompashe, 2024). During accreditation, these responsibilities become more complex, as school leaders are required to manage internal school operations while ensuring compliance with externally defined quality assurance standards.

Accreditation introduces structured expectations related to governance, teaching and learning, financial management and administrative systems. As a result, leadership shifts from routine management to a more intensive and coordinated process that involves planning, monitoring and continuous oversight. Principals are often required to translate policy requirements into practical actions, ensuring that staff understand expectations and that evidence of compliance is systematically generated and maintained. In African contexts, leadership during periods of reform and evaluation has been shown to require adaptability, coordination and the ability to mobilise limited resources effectively (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010; Naicker et al., 2013).

In rural independent schools, these demands are further intensified by structural constraints such as limited staffing, inadequate infrastructure and restricted access

to professional support. Under such conditions, principals frequently assume multiple roles that extend beyond traditional leadership responsibilities, including administrative coordination, instructional support and resource management. This positions leadership as both operational and strategic, requiring principals to balance immediate compliance demands with longer-term institutional development goals.

As reflected in participants' accounts, leadership during accreditation is not only central to the process but also highly demanding and multifaceted. It requires sustained engagement, coordination across stakeholders and the ability to manage both technical requirements and human dynamics within the school. These complexities highlight the pivotal role of leadership in navigating accreditation processes, particularly in resource-constrained rural contexts.

5.3.6.1 Sub-theme 1: Operational and Supervisory Leadership Roles

Operational and supervisory leadership refers to the day-to-day management of school activities, including staff supervision, curriculum oversight, resource allocation and coordination of institutional processes. Within the South African context, these responsibilities are closely linked to school functionality and accountability, requiring principals to ensure that teaching and learning processes are effectively implemented and aligned with policy expectations (DBE, 2020b; Hompashe, 2024). During accreditation, however, these responsibilities become more structured and intensified, as schools are expected to demonstrate compliance with clearly defined standards across governance, curriculum delivery and administrative systems. This shifts leadership from routine management to a more coordinated and evidence-driven process, where principals must ensure that all school activities are aligned with accreditation requirements and supported by appropriate documentation. In this context, principals work closely with SMTs to organise teaching responsibilities, monitor implementation and address gaps in compliance. Participants described their roles as highly active and central to coordinating accreditation-related activities: *"I sit with the SMT, and we are responsible for allocating teachers to classes and acquiring resources for teaching and learning."* (Participant 3) and *"Now, my main role is to supervise the members of the staff in implementing what needs to be done at the school."* (Participant 6)

These accounts illustrate that principals are deeply involved in both the operational and strategic dimensions of school management, encompassing responsibilities

such as supervising staff, coordinating curriculum delivery, managing resources and overseeing compliance with accreditation requirements. In rural contexts, where staffing levels and administrative support structures are often limited, these responsibilities tend to be concentrated disproportionately within the principal's role. As a result, principals are required to perform multiple functions simultaneously, frequently extending beyond traditional instructional leadership to include administrative coordination, policy implementation and regulatory compliance. This concentration of responsibilities significantly increases workload and places principals at the centre of institutional coordination, positioning them as the primary drivers of accreditation readiness. Consequently, principals must balance day-to-day school operations with the demands of accreditation preparation, monitoring and documentation, often under conditions of resource scarcity and time pressure. This intensified leadership role underscores the centrality of the principal in navigating accreditation processes within rural school contexts and highlights the heightened managerial and emotional demands associated with leading schools through externally imposed accountability frameworks.

5.3.6.2 Sub-theme 2: Teacher Development and Capacity Building

Teacher development and capacity building refer to the processes through which school leaders support and enhance educators' professional skills to improve teaching quality and learner outcomes. In South Africa, continuous professional development is recognised as essential for strengthening curriculum delivery and addressing gaps in teaching practice, particularly in under-resourced schools (Sayed & Ahmed, 2021a; Spaull, 2023). During accreditation, this responsibility becomes more prominent, as schools are required to demonstrate that educators are competent, supported, and capable of delivering the curriculum effectively. Participants highlighted their role in supporting and developing teachers: *"I also ensure that teachers have the necessary skills to teach. I also workshop the teachers, showing them the way and the quality that we want for this school."* (Participant 1)

This indicates that principals take an active role in mentoring, training and guiding teachers. Workshops and ongoing support are used to ensure that teaching practices meet required standards. In South Africa, instructional leadership is recognised as a key responsibility of school principals, particularly in improving learner outcomes and ensuring curriculum implementation (DBE, 2021a). Across African contexts, studies

have shown that continuous professional development is essential for improving teaching quality, especially in schools with limited access to formal training opportunities (Abakah, 2023).

Within the accreditation context, teacher development becomes both a compliance requirement and a strategic priority for schools. Accreditation frameworks require institutions to demonstrate that educators are appropriately qualified, professionally supported and capable of implementing the prescribed curriculum effectively and consistently. This places pressure on schools to ensure that teachers meet minimum qualification standards, engage in ongoing professional development and adhere to curriculum, assessment and quality assurance expectations. As a result, teacher development activities such as mentoring, workshops, lesson planning supervision and performance monitoring become closely aligned with accreditation demands.

At the same time, building teacher capacity serves a broader developmental purpose that extends beyond immediate compliance. Investment in teacher development strengthens instructional quality, enhances curriculum coverage and supports more effective learner engagement, thereby contributing to sustained institutional improvement. In this sense, accreditation acts as a catalyst for professional learning by prompting schools to formalise support systems and prioritise capacity building as part of routine practice. Particularly in rural and resource-constrained contexts, where access to external training opportunities may be limited, internally driven teacher development initiatives play a critical role in strengthening school performance over time. These efforts contribute not only to successful accreditation outcomes but also to long-term improvements in teaching and learning, institutional stability and organisational resilience beyond the accreditation process.

5.3.6.3 Sub-theme 3: Emotional Pressure and Leadership Burden

Leadership during accreditation is not limited to operational and instructional responsibilities; it also involves managing significant emotional and psychological demands. Accountability-driven processes, such as accreditation, often place school leaders under pressure to meet strict requirements within limited timeframes, contributing to increased workload and stress.

“The pressure of putting together documentation in the last minutes was too much. I really felt pressure.” (Participant 3) and *“The stress was too much because we heard that Umalusi accreditation is coming.”* (Participant 6)

These accounts highlight the intensity of the preparation process, particularly the demands associated with documentation, coordination, and compliance. The need to ensure that all requirements are met within tight deadlines creates a high-pressure environment for school leaders (Naicker et al., 2013). In rural independent schools, these pressures are further compounded by limited resources, staffing constraints and reduced administrative support (Ajani, 2023). Principals often absorb multiple responsibilities, which increases workload and contributes to emotional strain (Ajani, 2023). This suggests that leadership during accreditation requires not only technical competence but also resilience and the ability to manage competing demands.

The emotional burden associated with accreditation also has important implications for how schools engage with and respond to the process. The intensity of compliance demands, tight timelines and the high-stakes nature of accreditation outcomes often generate significant stress for school leaders, particularly principals who carry primary responsibility for coordination and accountability. In such circumstances, schools may adopt short-term, reactive strategies aimed at meeting immediate accreditation requirements rather than pursuing sustained institutional development. This can result in a compliance-driven approach, where effort is concentrated on producing documentation and evidence for evaluation visits, sometimes at the expense of embedding long-term quality improvement practices into everyday school operations.

In resource-constrained and rural contexts, where leadership capacity is already stretched, this reactive orientation may further exacerbate workload pressures and emotional strain, reinforcing cycles of crisis management rather than reflective planning. These dynamics highlight the importance of supportive accreditation structures that go beyond evaluation and enforcement to include guidance, ongoing communication and capacity-building. Supportive mechanisms such as mentoring, phased implementation timelines, constructive feedback and sustained engagement from accrediting bodies can help alleviate leadership burden and enable schools to engage with accreditation as a developmental process. By reducing excessive pressure and promoting shared understanding of quality standards, such support can

facilitate more sustainable and meaningful engagement with accreditation, allowing schools to balance compliance with long-term institutional growth and improvement.

5.3.7 Theme 7: Role of Accreditation in School Improvement

Leadership is a critical determinant of how schools interpret, respond to and implement external accountability processes such as accreditation. Within education systems, school leadership is widely recognised as a key driver of organisational effectiveness, instructional improvement and policy implementation. In the South African context, school leaders are expected to manage complex institutional environments characterised by resource disparities, policy demands and diverse stakeholder expectations (DBE, 2021b; Bush, 2021). As a result, leadership extends beyond routine administrative functions to encompass strategic coordination, capacity building and the ability to navigate external regulatory pressures.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, research indicates that leadership in resource-constrained school contexts is often intensified by systemic challenges, including limited administrative support, infrastructure deficits and high accountability demands. School leaders are therefore required to adopt adaptive and multi-dimensional leadership approaches, balancing instructional leadership with managerial and compliance responsibilities (UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020). In the context of accreditation, these demands become more pronounced, as leaders must ensure that schools meet prescribed standards while maintaining everyday school operations.

In this study, participants described leadership during accreditation as both central and demanding, involving a combination of operational management, teacher support and emotional labour. The findings suggest that principals play a pivotal role in coordinating accreditation processes, supporting staff development and managing the pressures associated with compliance and evaluation. Leadership is therefore not only a technical function but also a relational and emotional process shaped by the high-stakes nature of accreditation.

This theme, therefore, explores the leadership responsibilities undertaken by principals during the accreditation process, focusing on operational and supervisory roles, teacher development and capacity building, and the emotional pressure associated with leadership in resource-constrained contexts.

5.3.7.1 Sub-theme 1: Institutional Performance and Reputation Improvement

Accreditation is widely regarded as a mechanism for enhancing institutional performance and strengthening the public credibility of schools. By requiring schools to meet defined standards, accreditation processes promote improvements in teaching quality, infrastructure and overall organisational effectiveness. In many contexts, accredited schools are perceived as more reliable and capable of delivering quality education, which can positively influence enrolment patterns and stakeholder confidence (Bruns et al., 2020).

Participants in this study reported that accreditation contributed significantly to improvements in school performance and reputation. These improvements were reflected in areas such as infrastructure development, academic outcomes, financial management and increased learner enrolment. One participant stated: *"As a school, we benefited because now we have better infrastructure, academic performance, financial management, and enrolment growth."* (Participant 1) Another participant said: *"One thing for sure is that the accreditation process improved the reputation of our school, situated in a rural area."* (Participant 4)

These responses suggest that accreditation serves as a form of institutional validation, enhancing the credibility of schools within their communities. In rural contexts, where access to quality education may be limited, such recognition can play a significant role in attracting learners and building trust among stakeholders. Improved reputation is also closely linked to perceptions of quality, as accreditation signals that a school meets established standards. The findings therefore indicate that accreditation contributes to both internal improvements and external recognition. By enhancing performance and strengthening institutional reputation, accreditation supports the sustainability and competitiveness of independent rural schools.

5.3.7.2 Sub-theme 2: Policy Compliance and Organisational Strengthening

Policy compliance and organisational structure are central components of effective school management. Accreditation processes typically require schools to formalise policies, standardise procedures and demonstrate accountability in their operations. This contributes to the development of more structured and consistent management practices, which are essential for long-term institutional stability (Hoadley & Ward, 2020).

Within the South African education system, policy compliance is a critical component of school governance, as schools are required to align with national frameworks that regulate curriculum delivery, assessment, financial management and institutional accountability. The Department of Basic Education emphasises that effective school management depends on clearly defined policies, well-structured administrative systems and adherence to governance standards that guide decision-making and operational processes (DBE, 2021c). In this regard, policy frameworks serve not only as regulatory tools but also as mechanisms for promoting consistency, transparency and accountability within schools.

In addition, research across Africa highlights that many schools, particularly those in rural and low-resource contexts, often operate with informal or underdeveloped organisational systems prior to external evaluation processes. Accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms therefore play a critical role in institutionalising formal governance structures, ensuring that schools adopt standardised procedures and documented policies (De Grauwe, 2005; UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018). Studies in countries such as Tanzania and Uganda further show that formalisation of school systems improves administrative coherence and strengthens accountability mechanisms (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Chapman et al., 2016).

Participants reported that accreditation strengthened policy compliance and improved organisational functioning within their schools. One participant explained: *“It also ensures policy compliance and makes management and administration of the school easier.”* (Participant 2)

This account reflects a shift towards more formalised systems of governance and administration. Prior to accreditation, some schools may have operated with informal or loosely defined structures; however, the accreditation process requires alignment with clearly defined policies and procedures. This promotes consistency in decision-making and enhances accountability across different levels of the organisation. In addition, structured management practices contribute to improved coordination of school activities, as roles and responsibilities become more clearly defined. This reduces ambiguity and supports more efficient implementation of tasks. The emphasis on policy-driven management also reflects a broader move towards professionalisation within schools, where institutional practices are aligned with recognised standards.

Evidence from South Africa supports this observation, showing that schools with well-developed policy frameworks and organisational systems are more likely to demonstrate effective management, improved accountability, and better educational outcomes (Mestry, 2017; Bush et al., 2020; Hoadley & Ward, 2020). Similarly, international research suggests that organisational structuring and policy alignment are key drivers of school effectiveness, particularly in systems undergoing reform (Fullan, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020). The findings therefore demonstrate that accreditation plays a key role in strengthening organisational systems and promoting policy compliance. These improvements contribute to more efficient management and support the overall functioning of the school.

5.3.7.3 Sub-theme 3: Negative Unintended Outcomes

Despite these improvements, some negative outcomes were also reported. Quality assurance and accreditation processes are generally designed to improve institutional standards; however, research indicates that they may also produce unintended consequences, particularly in resource-constrained environments. These consequences often include increased administrative workload, pressure on staff and the exclusion of individuals who do not meet formal qualification requirements (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Allais, 2021). In contexts where schools already face resource limitations, such demands may create additional strain rather than purely positive transformation.

In South Africa, the professionalisation of teaching and school management has been strongly emphasised through policy frameworks that require formal qualifications and adherence to regulatory standards. While this contributes to improving quality and accountability, it may also result in the marginalisation of experienced but unqualified educators, particularly in rural and independent schools where such individuals often play a critical role (Mncube & Harber, 2013; DBE, 2021a;). Across Africa, similar patterns have been observed, where formalisation processes associated with quality assurance can lead to both institutional improvement and unintended exclusion (Akyeampong et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2015).

“There were negative unintended consequences that were brought by the accreditation process in our school. We experienced an administrative burden. We have also lost very good but unqualified teachers.” (Participant 1)

This account highlights the dual nature of accreditation as both a developmental and regulatory process. While it strengthens institutional systems, it may also increase administrative demands and lead to the loss of valuable human resources. This suggests that the process of standardisation may inadvertently disadvantage schools that rely on locally available but formally unqualified staff. The administrative burden described by the participant further reflects the intensity of compliance requirements, which may place additional strain on school leadership and staff. This aligns with broader findings that accountability systems can shift institutional focus toward compliance activities, sometimes at the expense of teaching and learning (Perryman, 2009; Sayed & Ahmed, 2021b; Spaull, 2021).

The findings therefore suggest that while accreditation contributes to organisational improvement, it may also produce unintended consequences that affect staffing, workload and institutional dynamics. These outcomes highlight the importance of balancing regulatory requirements with contextual realities, particularly in rural and resource-constrained schools.

5.3.7.4 Sub-theme 4: SMT Leadership Development and Teaching Improvements

School Management Teams (SMTs) play a critical role in translating policy into practice and ensuring the effective functioning of schools. Within accreditation processes, SMTs are often required to take on expanded responsibilities related to planning, monitoring and quality assurance. This contributes to the development of leadership capacity and strengthens internal governance structures (Bush, 2020).

In the South African context, SMTs are expected to support school leadership through distributed leadership practices, where responsibilities are shared across different roles to improve efficiency and accountability. Research indicates that strengthening SMT capacity is associated with improved school management, better coordination of activities and enhanced teaching and learning outcomes (Naicker & Mestry, 2016; Grant, 2019; DBE, 2021b). Across Africa, leadership development within schools is increasingly recognised as a key factor in improving education quality and institutional effectiveness (Bolden, 2011; World Bank, 2018).

SMT members further reported institutional and leadership improvements following accreditation. They reported that accreditation strengthened their strategic leadership

roles, enabling them to contribute more effectively to school planning, monitoring and quality assurance.

One SMT member stated: *"It changed because I now have a structure for my department. I administer and manage well because of what I have learnt from the accreditation process."* (SMT 2)

Another added: *"We now manage our school effectively and our management is now based on policies and procedures."* (SMT 3)

Another added: *"SMT is now functional and strategic, focusing on quality learners and resource alignment."* (SMT 5)

These responses indicate a shift towards more structured and strategic leadership practices and reveal that accreditation contributes to the development of leadership capacity by providing frameworks and guidelines that support effective management. SMT members also highlighted improvements in teaching, learning, and infrastructure: *"Infrastructure improved with new classrooms, roads, security systems, and laboratory equipment."* (SMT 2)

Another SMT member added: *"It improved supervision, lesson planning, and syllabus completion. Standards became higher."* (SMT 3)

These findings reflect broader evidence that strengthened leadership and organisational systems are closely linked to improvements in teaching and learning processes. In South Africa, effective instructional leadership has been associated with better curriculum coverage, improved learner outcomes and enhanced school performance (Hoadley, 2018; Taylor, 2019; Spaull, 2021). Internationally, research shows that leadership and organisational coherence are among the strongest predictors of school improvement (Fullan, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020).

The findings therefore demonstrate that accreditation contributes not only to policy compliance and organisational strengthening but also to leadership development and improvements in teaching and learning. This highlights the potential of accreditation processes to drive institutional growth, provided that schools are adequately supported in meeting the associated demands.

5.3.8 Theme 8: Rewarding Aspects of Accreditation

Although accreditation processes are frequently experienced as demanding and administratively intensive, participants in this study also identified a range of rewarding outcomes associated with successful completion of the Umalusi accreditation process. These rewarding aspects were described in both tangible and intangible terms, encompassing institutional recognition, financial benefits, professional growth and improved organisational confidence. In quality assurance literature, accreditation is increasingly conceptualised not only as a regulatory mechanism but also as a developmental process that can yield positive institutional outcomes when schools are able to navigate compliance requirements successfully (Kis, 2022; Ehren et al., 2023). Within this framework, accreditation serves as both a gatekeeping function and a catalyst for institutional strengthening.

For independent rural schools, the rewarding aspects of accreditation carry particular significance due to the vulnerable operating contexts in which the schools function. Unlike well-resourced urban institutions, rural independent schools often rely heavily on accreditation outcomes for legitimacy, sustainability and access to state support. Recent studies indicate that successful accreditation can enhance institutional credibility, improve stakeholder trust and support long-term viability, especially for schools operating outside mainstream public provision (Allais, 2021; UNESCO, 2023a). Accreditation thus represents not only formal recognition of compliance but also validation of schools' efforts to provide quality education in challenging contexts.

Participants in this study highlighted that one of the most rewarding aspects of accreditation was the sense of institutional recognition derived from receiving official accreditation status. The accreditation certificate symbolised external acknowledgment that the school met nationally prescribed quality standards, which enhanced its standing within local communities. Research suggests that external validation through accreditation can strengthen public confidence in school quality, particularly in rural settings where parents may have limited information about institutional standards (Bruns et al., 2020; Ehren et al., 2023). For independent schools, this recognition is especially important, as accreditation differentiates compliant institutions from unregistered or non-accredited providers, thereby protecting their reputation and legitimacy.

Closely linked to institutional recognition are the financial benefits associated with accreditation. In the South African context, Umalusi accreditation enables independent schools to qualify for government subsidies, provided that additional registration and compliance requirements are met (DBE, 2021b). Participants viewed access to subsidies as a critical incentive and a tangible reward for the demanding accreditation process. Recent policy analyses highlight that accreditation-linked funding plays a crucial role in supporting operational costs, improving infrastructure and enhancing teaching and learning resources in fee-dependent schools (World Bank, 2022; OECD, 2023a). For rural independent schools serving low-income communities, such financial support may contribute significantly to institutional sustainability and learner retention.

Beyond institutional and financial rewards, participants also described accreditation as beneficial in terms of professional learning and skills development. Engagement with accreditation standards required principals, SMT members and educators to engage deeply with policies, procedures, curriculum requirements, and quality indicators. This process facilitated reflective practice, skills acquisition and improved understanding of effective school management and instructional leadership. Contemporary research positions accreditation as a form of organisational learning, where institutions develop internal capacity through engagement with evaluation criteria and feedback mechanisms (Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Fullan, 2022). In this study, participants reported that accreditation contributed to improved lesson planning, strengthened supervision practices and increased professional confidence among staff.

Participants further indicated that accreditation fostered a sense of organisational pride and achievement. Successfully meeting rigorous external requirements generated feelings of accomplishment, resilience and confidence in the school's ability to operate within regulated educational frameworks. This aligns with international findings that accreditation can enhance institutional self-efficacy, particularly in previously marginalised or under-resourced schools (Ehren et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023b). For rural school leaders who often operate under conditions of uncertainty and constraint, such affirmation may serve as a powerful motivational factor, reinforcing commitment to continuous improvement despite ongoing challenges.

However, while participants emphasised the rewarding aspects of accreditation, these benefits were not perceived as automatic or evenly distributed. The findings suggest that rewards were often realised only after enduring substantial pressure, resource mobilisation and administrative effort. This underscores the ambivalent nature of accreditation outcomes, where benefits coexist with costs. Recent scholarship cautions that without adequate support and contextual sensitivity, the rewards of accreditation may remain uneven, privileging schools with greater capacity to absorb compliance demands (Allais, 2021; Sayed & Ahmed, 2021b). Nevertheless, for the participating independent rural schools, the perceived rewards outweighed the challenges, reinforcing accreditation as a worthwhile, albeit demanding, process.

Overall, the rewarding aspects of accreditation identified in this study demonstrate that accreditation extends beyond compliance to influence institutional legitimacy, financial stability, professional development, and organisational confidence. These outcomes highlight the developmental potential of accreditation when schools are able to engage meaningfully with quality assurance processes. At the same time, the findings underscore the importance of supportive accreditation models that enable rural schools to realise these benefits without exacerbating existing inequalities.

5.3.8.1 Sub-theme 1: Institutional Recognition and Financial Benefits

Participants described accreditation as rewarding despite its challenges. Rewards included receiving the accreditation certificate, improved standards and access to subsidies. Accreditation processes are widely recognised as mechanisms for enhancing institutional legitimacy, credibility and public trust in education systems. In South Africa, accreditation by Umalusi serves as formal recognition that a school meets established quality standards, thereby strengthening its reputation among parents, communities and stakeholders (Umalusi, 2021a). This recognition is particularly important for independent schools, as it validates their operations within the broader national education framework.

In addition to institutional legitimacy, accreditation is often linked to financial benefits, including access to government subsidies. The Department of Basic Education provides subsidies to qualifying independent schools based on compliance with regulatory standards and quality assurance requirements (DBE, 2021c). For rural independent schools operating under financial constraints, such subsidies play a

crucial role in supporting operational costs, improving infrastructure and enhancing teaching and learning resources. Across Africa, similar models have shown that accreditation-linked funding can improve school sustainability and reduce financial vulnerability (Tooley & Longfield, 2015; World Bank, 2018).

One principal noted: *"Now that we are accredited, we can now receive a subsidy from the Department."* (Participant 1)

Another participant shared: *"The most rewarding thing is getting the accreditation certificate at the end of the day."* (Participant 2)

These highlight the dual significance of accreditation as both a symbolic and material achievement. This might mean accreditation not only enhances institutional status but also provides tangible benefits that support school sustainability. The accreditation certificate represents formal recognition of quality, while access to subsidies addresses critical financial needs. Furthermore, these rewards may serve as motivation for schools to engage with accreditation processes despite their challenges. Research indicates that external recognition and financial incentives are key drivers of institutional participation in quality assurance systems (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Allais, 2021). In this regard, accreditation can be understood as both a regulatory requirement and a developmental opportunity that supports school growth and stability.

5.3.8.1 Sub-theme 2: Professional Learning and Skills Development

Participants also highlighted institutional learning and professional development. Accreditation processes are not only evaluative but also developmental, as they expose schools to structured standards, guidelines and best practices. Through engagement with these processes, school leaders and teachers are required to reflect on their practices, identify gaps and implement improvements. This aligns with broader literature that conceptualises quality assurance as a mechanism for organisational learning and capacity building (Fullan, 2016; Elken & Stensaker, 2018).

In the South African context, professional development is a key component of school improvement, with an emphasis on continuous learning, reflective practice and instructional enhancement. Accreditation processes contribute to this by encouraging schools to align their practices with national standards and improve areas such as

curriculum delivery, assessment and lesson planning (DBE, 2021c). Across Africa, similar findings indicate that engagement with quality assurance processes often leads to improved teacher competence and institutional learning (UNESCO, 2015). One principal explained: *"During this process, we learnt a lot. The standards at our school are no longer the same."* (Participant 2)

Another added: *"It has assisted us with our lesson preparations. Going through accreditation made our teachers more skilled."* (Participant 6)

These suggest that accreditation contributes to both individual and institutional learning. This indicates that the process facilitates skill development, enhances professional practice and promotes a culture of continuous improvement within schools. In addition, improvements in lesson preparation and teaching practices reflect the strengthening of instructional quality, which is a key determinant of learner outcomes. Research in South Africa shows that teacher development and instructional leadership are closely linked to improved curriculum coverage and learner performance (Hoadley, 2018; Spaull, 2021). The findings therefore demonstrate that accreditation serves as a platform for professional learning and skills development, contributing to improved teaching practices and overall school performance.

5.3.9 Recommendations from Participants

While accreditation processes are often associated with significant administrative demands and institutional pressures, they also offer important benefits that contribute to school development and sustainability. In education systems globally, accreditation is not only a regulatory mechanism but also a developmental tool that enhances institutional quality, credibility and organisational capacity. In the South African context, accreditation through Umalusi plays a critical role in recognising schools that meet established standards, thereby strengthening their legitimacy within the broader education system (Umalusi, 2021b).

Beyond regulatory compliance, accreditation is associated with a range of institutional and professional benefits. Research indicates that accredited schools often experience improvements in organisational performance, increased stakeholder trust and enhanced access to resources, including financial support and infrastructure development (Harvey & Williams, 2010; DBE, 2021a; World Bank,

2018;). In addition, accreditation processes contribute to professional learning by exposing educators and school leaders to structured standards, reflective practices and opportunities for capacity building (Fullan, 2016; Elken & Stensaker, 2018).

In the context of this study, participants highlighted that despite the challenges associated with accreditation, the process yielded several rewarding outcomes. These included formal recognition through accreditation certification, access to financial subsidies, improvements in school standards and enhanced professional competencies among staff. The findings suggest that accreditation serves both symbolic and practical functions, reinforcing institutional credibility while also supporting internal development.

This theme, therefore, explores the rewarding aspects of accreditation as experienced by participants, focusing on institutional recognition and financial benefits, as well as professional learning and skills development. These dimensions provide insight into how accreditation contributes to both organisational growth and capacity enhancement within independent rural schools.

5.3.9.1 Support and Flexibility for Rural Schools

Participants recommended more support, flexibility and better communication from Umalusi, particularly for rural schools. Quality assurance systems are most effective when they are accompanied by adequate support mechanisms that enable institutions to meet required standards. In contexts characterised by inequality, such as South Africa, there is increasing recognition of the need for context-sensitive approaches that consider the unique challenges faced by rural and under-resourced schools (Allais, 2021; Sayed & Ahmed, 2021a). Without such support, accreditation processes may reinforce existing disparities rather than promote equitable improvement.

In rural education contexts, flexibility in implementation and targeted support are particularly important due to structural constraints such as limited infrastructure, financial challenges and staffing shortages. Across Africa, studies have shown that quality assurance frameworks that incorporate support, mentorship and ongoing engagement are more effective in promoting sustainable improvement than those that rely solely on compliance and evaluation (UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018).

One participant suggested: *"I feel that the schools are supposed to be categorised by income when they are subjected to the accreditation process."* (Participant 1)

Another stated: "*Umalusi should maintain constant communication and support schools to stay on the right track."* (SMT 1)

These accounts highlight the need for differentiated and supportive approaches to accreditation that consider variations in school contexts. Analytically, this suggests that a uniform accreditation model may not adequately address the realities of rural schools, particularly those operating with limited financial and administrative capacity. Categorising schools based on income or resource levels may therefore provide a more equitable basis for evaluation, ensuring that standards are applied in ways that are both fair and contextually appropriate, as emphasised in equity-focused education frameworks (Tikly & Barrett, 2011; OECD, 2017a).

The emphasis on ongoing communication and support reflects the importance of sustained engagement between accrediting bodies and schools, particularly in contexts where institutional capacity is uneven. Rather than viewing accreditation as a once-off evaluative process, participants' recommendations point toward a more continuous and developmental model of quality assurance, which has been shown to be more effective in improving institutional performance than compliance-driven inspection models (Ehren et al., 2013; UNICEF, 2020). Such an approach enhances institutional learning, improves compliance over time and reduces the pressure associated with high-stakes evaluation.

The findings therefore suggest that strengthening support mechanisms, improving communication and introducing greater flexibility within accreditation processes are essential for ensuring that rural schools are not disadvantaged. This underscores the importance of balancing standardisation with contextual responsiveness, so that accreditation processes contribute not only to accountability but also to equitable and sustainable school improvement.

5.3.9.2 Process Improvement Suggestions

Additional recommendations included improved communication, document templates and reduced administrative burden. Administrative efficiency is a key factor in the effectiveness of accreditation processes. Where requirements are unclear, repetitive or overly complex, schools may experience unnecessary strain, particularly

in contexts with limited administrative capacity. Research indicates that simplifying processes, providing clear guidelines and offering practical tools can significantly improve institutional engagement with quality assurance systems (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Elken & Stensaker, 2018). In South Africa, challenges related to administrative burden in schools have been widely documented, with school leaders often reporting excessive paperwork and compliance demands that detract from instructional leadership (Mestry, 2017; Spaull, 2021). Providing templates and structured guidance can therefore support schools in meeting requirements more efficiently while reducing workload pressures.

One SMT member stated: *"More face-to-face visits, templates for required documents, and better communication."* (SMT 2)

More concerns were raised regarding the duplication and repetition of documentation requirements within the accreditation process, which were perceived as time-consuming and unnecessarily burdensome for school staff. Another added: *"Shorten the process. Reduce repetitive evidence requests."* (SMT 5)

These recommendations reflect a clear desire for a more streamlined, supportive and contextually responsive accreditation process. The current design of accreditation procedures may place disproportionate emphasis on compliance and documentation, rather than on meaningful quality improvement (Stander & Herman, 2017). Where processes are overly complex or repetitive, schools particularly those with limited administrative capacity may prioritise meeting procedural requirements over engaging with substantive educational development (Stander & Herman, 2017). This reflects broader concerns in quality assurance literature, where accountability systems are sometimes criticised for encouraging compliance-driven behaviour rather than genuine institutional improvement (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Allais, 2021).

Improving process design could therefore enhance both efficiency and effectiveness by reducing unnecessary administrative burdens and enabling schools to allocate more time and resources to core functions such as teaching, learning and learner support. In this regard, simplifying documentation requirements, reducing duplication, and providing structured tools such as templates and clear guidelines may facilitate more meaningful engagement with accreditation processes. This aligns with literature

which emphasises that quality assurance systems should be developmental rather than purely regulatory, supporting continuous improvement rather than short-term compliance (Fullan, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the emphasis on improved communication and increased face-to-face engagement highlights the importance of relational support within accreditation processes. Regular interaction between accrediting bodies and schools can enhance clarity, build trust, and provide ongoing guidance, particularly for rural schools that may lack access to consistent institutional support. Such approaches shift accreditation from a once-off evaluative exercise to a continuous, collaborative process of institutional development.

5.4 DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

This study also used document analysis to explore how independent rural schools in Limpopo experienced the Umalusi accreditation process. Document analysis was appropriate because accreditation is a formal, compliance-driven process that is communicated, implemented, and evaluated primarily through written artefacts. In practice, the process generates a substantial documentary trail, including policy frameworks, procedural guidelines, application and monitoring tools, correspondence, site-visit records and accreditation and feedback reports. These documents are not only administrative outputs; they also reflect how quality assurance expectations are constructed, standardised and translated into measurable indicators against which schools are judged.

Analysing these records enabled the study to examine (a) how accreditation requirements are represented in official texts (for example, how compliance domains, evidence expectations, and timelines are described) and (b) how the outcomes of these requirements are reflected in schools' accreditation results (for example, recorded strengths, areas of non-compliance, conditions attached to accreditation, and recommended corrective actions). The analysis, therefore, supported a comparison between what the accreditation system prescribes and what schools are reported to have demonstrated during evaluation. In addition, document evidence was used to corroborate and contextualise interview accounts by checking whether participants' descriptions of challenges, administrative demands and improvement

actions were also visible in the written feedback and decisions issued during the accreditation process.

The documents were purposively selected because they directly inform, regulate or record the accreditation process:

5.4.1 Accreditation Reports

Analysis of the Umalusi accreditation reports for the participating independent rural schools revealed that five (5) of the six (6) sampled institutions were granted full accreditation. This outcome indicates that the majority of schools were able to meet Umalusi's minimum quality assurance standards across the evaluated domains, which typically include governance and management, teaching and learning, assessment practices, infrastructure, learner support and institutional sustainability. The achievement of full accreditation by most schools is particularly significant given their rural and deep-rural locations, which are commonly associated with limited institutional capacity and systemic disadvantage.

The accreditation reports further demonstrate that these schools were able to achieve compliance while operating under persistent rural constraints, including limited financial resources, uneven access to infrastructure and technology and ongoing staffing and administrative pressures. Despite these challenges, the reports suggest that schools mobilised existing resources strategically, strengthened internal systems and aligned their practices with prescribed quality standards in order to satisfy accreditation requirements. This finding highlights a level of organisational resilience and adaptive capacity among the participating schools, indicating that rural context, while challenging, does not inherently preclude compliance with national quality assurance frameworks. The reports also revealed variation in accreditation outcomes, with one school receiving provisional accreditation for a period of two (2) years. Provisional accreditation indicates that the school has met most of the required criteria but was unable to demonstrate full compliance in certain specified areas at the time of evaluation. As reflected in the accreditation reports, this outcome was accompanied by clearly articulated conditions and recommendations, which the school was required to address within a defined timeframe before full accreditation could be granted. This conditional outcome illustrates the differentiated nature of

accreditation decisions and reflects Umalusi's approach to balancing accountability with developmental support.

Overall, the accreditation outcomes documented in the reports suggest that while independent rural schools face substantial contextual and structural challenges, many are nonetheless capable of meeting national quality assurance standards when supported by clear criteria, structured processes and sustained internal effort. The findings from the accreditation reports therefore provide important corroborative evidence to participants' interview accounts, reinforcing the view that accreditation functions both as a regulatory mechanism and as a developmental process that can strengthen institutional systems, even within resource-constrained rural schooling environments.

5.4.2 Umalusi Accreditation Policy

Analysis of the Umalusi accreditation policy indicates that accreditation is conceptualised as a standardised quality assurance mechanism through which independent schools are required to demonstrate compliance with clearly articulated minimum criteria. Within this policy framework, educational quality is predominantly defined in terms of what can be formally evidenced, verified and audited through documentation, structured procedures and external evaluation processes. As a result, strong emphasis is placed on the existence and consistent application of formal governance and management systems, curriculum and assessment controls, learner support and safety mechanisms and the availability of adequate human, financial and physical resources. Schools are therefore not only expected to provide teaching and learning in practice, but also to produce auditable records that demonstrate that relevant policies, procedures and internal controls are established, documented and systematically implemented.

Accountability is consequently constructed through clearly specified evidence requirements, prescribed timelines and categorised accreditation outcomes (such as full or provisional accreditation), which enable comparability and consistency across institutions. While this standardised approach promotes transparency and system-level accountability, it simultaneously increases the administrative and organisational demands placed on schools, particularly small independent institutions operating in rural and deep-rural contexts. For schools with limited staffing, infrastructure and

administrative capacity, the expectation to generate and maintain extensive documentary evidence can be especially burdensome. The policy analysis further reveals that the accreditation framework is designed for uniform application across all independent schools, irrespective of geographical location or contextual conditions. As such, no explicit differentiation is made between rural and urban schools, which may contribute to tensions between standardised quality assurance expectations and the practical realities faced by under-resourced rural institutions.

5.4.3 Applicable Regulations Governing Independent Schools and Quality Assurance/Accreditation Requirements

Analysis of the regulatory framework shows that accreditation operates within a broader legal environment that simultaneously enables the establishment of independent schools and subjects them to public accountability obligations. At a general level, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) affirms the right to basic education and permits the establishment of independent educational institutions, provided that minimum standards are maintained. More specifically, the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) requires independent schools to be registered with the relevant Provincial Education Department (PED) and to comply with applicable provincial laws and regulations governing registration, governance, staffing, and the provision of safe learning environments. In parallel, Umalusi's mandate under the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act 58 of 2001 positions the Council as the quality assurance body responsible for setting and monitoring standards in general and further education and training, including the quality assurance of assessment and the accreditation of institutions in specified contexts. Read together, these regulations clarify that accreditation is not an isolated administrative event; rather, it is part of an interlinked compliance system in which registration (as a lawful site of teaching and learning) and accreditation/quality assurance (as confirmation of compliance with minimum standards and, where relevant, examination-related requirements) reinforce one another. Again, there are no separate regulations for rural schools. This means that schools in rural areas are subjected to the same quality assurance standards similar to the schools in urban areas.

5.4.4 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

SOPs were used to guide accreditation activities, such as application steps, site visits, evidence requirements, evaluation processes and reporting. This Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) functions as a procedural translation of Umalusi's legislative mandate into an operational, auditable accreditation pathway for independent schools on the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-framework (GFETQSF). The document is structured to foreground compliance and standardisation: it explicitly anchors accreditation in prior provincial registration (via the Education Management Information System (EMIS), defines accreditation as an outcome of quality assurance rather than a once-off administrative approval and then sequences the process into discrete, fee-gated steps (letter of intent, self-evaluation submission, desktop evaluation, verification site visit, and committee-based decision-making). This stepwise design clarifies accountability by allocating responsibilities across units (for example, finance verification, evaluation teams, Accreditation Committee of Council), while simultaneously creating points at which an application may be paused, returned or terminated, thereby prioritising procedural consistency and risk management for the quality council. For rural independent schools, however, the SOP's emphasis on documentary evidence, up-front payments and compliance verification may have differentiated effects: requirements such as audited financial statements, health-and-safety certification, staffing credentials and evidence of curriculum delivery can be more burdensome where institutional capacity, professional support and infrastructure are limited. Although the SOP includes provisions that potentially mitigate exclusion (for example, fee rebates for eligible not-for-profit schools linked to socio-economic context), its overall logic positions accreditation as conditional on demonstrable organisational capacity and sustained administrative performance, which may reproduce existing inequalities unless accompanied by accessible guidance, realistic timelines and supportive quality-promotion interventions. In this respect, the SOP not only regulates entry into accredited provision but also signals how the state's quality assurance regime defines 'fitness to provide' schooling, through measurable compliance indicators, standardised evaluation procedures and ongoing post-accreditation monitoring intended to safeguard credibility of qualifications and public trust.

5.4.5 Document Selection Criteria

Documents were included if they:

- Related directly to accreditation of independent schools (rather than general schooling policy);
- Covered the same period as the schools' accreditation process (or were the versions in use at the time);
- Contained evaluative criteria, procedures or findings relevant to school compliance, capacity and improvement requirements.

5.4.5 Data Extraction Procedure

All documents were read repeatedly to gain familiarity and to identify content relevant to the research question: the experiences of independent rural schools after undergoing the Umalusi accreditation process. A document extraction matrix was developed and applied consistently across documents. The matrix captured:

- Accreditation requirements and standards (what schools must demonstrate);
- Evidence demanded from schools (documents, records, policies, resources, staffing, governance evidence);
- Process requirements (steps, timelines, roles, site visit expectations, communication);
- Reported strengths, non-compliance areas and conditions in accreditation reports;
- Recommended actions and follow-up requirements (improvement plans, deadlines, monitoring).

5.4.6 Coding and Analysis

The documents were analysed using thematic analysis supported by both deductive and inductive coding (see Appendix G). Deductive codes were derived from recurring accreditation domains in the policy, regulations and SOPs (for example, governance, teaching and learning, assessment, resources, learner support, safety and compliance documentation). Inductive codes were generated from patterns that emerged in the accreditation reports, especially wording used to describe school-level realities in rural contexts.

Codes were then clustered into themes that reflected the experiences of rural independent schools with accreditation. Themes that emerged include:

- Administrative and evidence burden (extent and complexity of required documentation);
- Resource and infrastructure constraints (facilities, learning materials, connectivity, staffing);
- Interpretation of criteria and fairness (clarity/consistency of expectations and judgements);
- Post-accreditation implications (conditions imposed, timelines, support needs, reputational impact);
- Alignment and gaps between policy and practice (what policy expects vs what reports show is feasible).

5.4.7 Trustworthiness and Triangulation

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study adopted systematic strategies aligned with contemporary qualitative research standards. Trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry refers to the extent to which research findings are credible, dependable, confirmable and transferable, rather than statistically generalisable (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Given the interpretive and context-specific nature of this study, particular attention was paid to methodological transparency, analytic rigour and the corroboration of findings across multiple data sources.

5.4.7.1 Triangulation of Data Sources

Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation, achieved by systematically comparing findings from multiple sources, namely semi-structured interviews, accreditation reports, policy documents, regulatory frameworks and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Document triangulation involved comparing schools' reported experiences with formal accreditation requirements, as articulated in official texts and with recorded outcomes contained in accreditation reports. This process enabled the study to examine convergence, divergence and nuance across data sources, thereby reducing reliance on a single account or perspective (Flick, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Triangulation was not used to seek uniformity across data sources; rather, it was applied analytically to identify areas where documents confirmed participants' accounts as well as areas where documentary evidence complicated or qualified personal experiences. Recent qualitative methodologists emphasise that such productive tension between data sources enhances credibility by revealing the layered and sometimes contradictory nature of social experience (Tracy, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2024). In this study, triangulation enabled a deeper understanding of how accreditation is both formally structured and subjectively experienced by independent rural schools.

5.4.7.2 Audit Trail and Analytic Transparency

To enhance dependability and confirmability, a detailed audit trail was maintained throughout the research process. This included the systematic storage of raw data (interview transcripts and documents), coding frameworks, document extraction matrices, analytic memos and theme development records. Maintaining an audit trail allows external reviewers to trace how interpretations were generated and to assess the consistency of analytic decisions over time (O'Cathain, 2019; Guest et al., 2020). This practice is increasingly emphasised in recent qualitative scholarship as a cornerstone of methodological rigour.

Analytic transparency was further supported through the iterative documentation of decisions made during coding and theme refinement. Codes derived from policy texts and accreditation domains were distinguished from inductively generated codes arising from participants' accounts. This separation helped to clarify the relationship between externally defined accreditation standards and locally experienced realities, thereby strengthening confirmability by demonstrating that findings were grounded in data rather than researcher assumptions (Saldaña, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

5.4.7.3 Triangulation with Participant Accounts

Interview data were triangulated with documentary evidence to confirm, extend or problematise participant narratives regarding accreditation experiences. Where participants described administrative burden, infrastructural challenges or leadership pressure, these claims were cross-checked against accreditation reports and written feedback to determine whether such issues were acknowledged, recorded or addressed within formal evaluation outcomes. This form of triangulation enhanced

credibility by ensuring that reported experiences reflected institutional realities rather than isolated perceptions (Flick, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Importantly, divergence between participant accounts and documentary records were retained and analytically examined rather than treated as inconsistencies to be resolved. Recent methodological literature argues that such divergence is analytically valuable, as it reveals how formal quality assurance systems may represent institutional realities differently from those experienced by school leaders and staff (O'Cathain, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2024). In this study, such divergence deepened understanding of how accreditation is simultaneously enacted as a bureaucratic process and experienced as a lived institutional challenge.

5.4.7.4 Reflexivity and Interpretive Integrity

Although this chapter remains primarily descriptive, reflexivity was embedded in the analytic process through continuous reflection on how data were interpreted and organised. Reflexive engagement with the data involved acknowledging the researcher's role in interpreting accreditation experiences and remaining attentive to power relations inherent in regulatory systems and institutional evaluation. Recent qualitative frameworks emphasise that reflexivity strengthens trustworthiness by making the analytic process visible and accountable (Tracy, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

5.4.7.5 Summary

Overall, trustworthiness in this study was enhanced through systematic triangulation of interviews and documents, maintenance of a transparent audit trail, careful documentation of analytic decisions and reflexive engagement with the data. These strategies collectively ensured that the findings provide a credible, dependable and confirmable account of how independent rural schools experience the Umalusi accreditation process, while remaining grounded in both participant voices and formal institutional evidence.

5.5 CONCLUSION

The findings of the study showed that independent rural schools operate within complex and challenging environments characterised by limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure and persistent socio-economic constraints. These conditions not only affected daily school operations such as teaching, administration

and resource allocation but also created significant barriers to meeting accreditation requirements, particularly those related to infrastructure, staffing and compliance. In many cases, schools were required to navigate challenges that extended beyond typical educational responsibilities, including securing basic services and sustaining operations within economically constrained communities.

Despite these challenges, the findings demonstrate that the accreditation process played a significant role in strengthening institutional functioning. Accreditation contributed to improvements in school management, leadership practices, teaching and learning processes and overall organisational structure. Schools reported more formalised systems, clearer roles and responsibilities and increased alignment with policy and regulatory standards. In addition, accreditation enhanced accountability mechanisms, encouraging schools to adopt more consistent and structured approaches to governance, documentation and performance monitoring.

The findings further indicate that, although the accreditation process was demanding and administratively intensive, it served as a catalyst for institutional development and professional growth. School leaders and teachers reported improved skills, enhanced instructional practices and a stronger focus on quality assurance. This suggests that accreditation functions not only a regulatory mechanism but also as a developmental tool that supports continuous improvement within schools. However, the study also highlights that significant challenges remain, particularly in relation to resource constraints, administrative burden and the suitability of standardised accreditation criteria for rural contexts. Participants emphasised the need for greater support, improved communication and more flexible approaches that consider the realities of under-resourced schools. These recommendations point to the importance of adopting context-sensitive accreditation models that balance accountability with support, ensuring that quality assurance processes contribute to both equity and sustainable school improvement.

Chapter 6 presents a consolidated summary of the study's principal findings, draws conclusions in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework, and advances recommendations for policy, practice and future research.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 5 presented and analysed the empirical findings of this study, drawing on participants' narratives and relevant literature to illuminate the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo during the Umalusi accreditation process. This chapter builds on those findings by critically providing a conclusion.

The purpose of Chapter 6 is to conclude the study by synthesising the key findings and discussing their significance in relation to the study's research questions and aims. This chapter integrates the empirical evidence presented and discussed in the preceding chapters, highlighting how the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the Umalusi accreditation process as experienced by independent rural schools in Limpopo.

Specifically, the chapter summarises the main insights regarding school context, leadership experiences, accreditation processes and their influence on school management and teaching and learning. It reflects critically on the extent to which the study has addressed the research problem and advances knowledge in the field of quality assurance in education, particularly within resource-constrained rural environments.

In addition, Chapter 6 outlines the practical and policy implications of the study for independent school leadership, accrediting bodies and policymakers. The chapter concludes by presenting recommendations for policy and practice, acknowledging the limitations of the study and identifying areas for future research. In so doing, the chapter positions the study within broader debates on educational quality, equity and contextual responsiveness in accreditation systems.

This study was guided by one overarching research question, supported by five subsidiary research questions. The main research question sought to understand: *What are the experiences of independent rural school management in Limpopo of the Umalusi accreditation process?* To address this question comprehensively, the study explored the following subsidiary research questions:

1. How is the Umalusi accreditation process applied to independent schools?
2. How does the accreditation process influence teaching and learning in independent rural schools?
3. What impact does the accreditation process have on the effective management of independent schools?
4. Why is accreditation important for independent schools?
5. What role do independent schools play during the accreditation process?

By engaging critically with these questions, this chapter demonstrates how the accreditation process both enables and constrains school improvement in rural independent schools. The discussion highlights the complex interplay between accreditation requirements and contextual realities such as poverty, limited infrastructure, leadership capacity and resource availability. Ultimately, this chapter situates the study's findings within broader debates on educational quality assurance and equity, thereby contributing to scholarly and policy-oriented discourse on how accreditation frameworks can better respond to the needs of rural independent schools without compromising educational standards.

6.2 RATIONALE FOR THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS OF UMALUSI

The accreditation process administered by Umalusi is a central mechanism through which the quality, credibility and public trust of general and further education and training provision in South Africa are safeguarded. As the quality council for General and Further Education and Training (GFET), Umalusi derives its mandate from the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act (Act 58 of 2001, as amended) and the National Qualifications Framework Act (Act 67 of 2008, as amended). These legislative frameworks formally require Umalusi to quality assure qualifications registered at Levels 1–4 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), including those offered by independent schools.

At its core, the rationale for Umalusi's accreditation process is to ensure that learners enrolled in independent schools receive education that meets nationally benchmarked standards, regardless of whether such provision occurs in public or private contexts. Accreditation functions as a quality assurance mechanism that verifies an institution's capacity to deliver an approved curriculum, assess learners

validly and reliably and implement appropriate systems of governance, leadership, financial management and learner support. Through this process, Umalusi seeks to protect learners and parents, particularly those who may be vulnerable to substandard provision from institutions that lack the requisite capacity to offer credible education and certification.

Furthermore, accreditation serves an important systems-level function within South Africa's education architecture. By enforcing common minimum standards across providers, Umalusi promotes national coherence, comparability and portability of qualifications. This contributes to public confidence in certificates such as the National Senior Certificate (NSC), which must carry the same meaning and value regardless of the type of institution from which they are issued. Without such external oversight, the risk of variability in quality and assessment integrity across independent schools would undermine the credibility of the national education system.

Another key rationale underpinning Umalusi's accreditation process is its emphasis on institutional self-evaluation and continuous improvement. The process requires schools to engage in structured self-evaluation against clearly defined input, process and output criteria, followed by external validation. This reflects Umalusi's quality assurance approach, which seeks not only to enforce compliance but also to cultivate an internal culture of quality management, accountability and reflective practice within institutions. In this sense, accreditation is positioned as both a regulatory and a developmental tool.

From a policy perspective, accreditation also ensures alignment between independent schools and national education priorities. While South Africa's Constitution protects the right to establish independent educational institutions, this right is conditional upon compliance with minimum standards, including non-discrimination and the maintenance of quality. Umalusi's accreditation framework operationalises these constitutional requirements by translating them into measurable criteria related to curriculum delivery, assessment, staffing, infrastructure and learner welfare.

Nevertheless, recent research has highlighted tensions between the intended rationale of accreditation and its lived implementation, particularly in independent and

rural schooling contexts. Studies indicate that while accreditation is widely acknowledged as necessary for quality assurance, it is often experienced by schools as administratively burdensome, compliance-driven and insufficiently responsive to contextual constraints such as poverty, limited infrastructure and staffing shortages. These critiques do not negate the rationale for accreditation; rather, they point to the need for ongoing refinement of the process to balance standardisation with contextual sensitivity.

In summary, the rationale for Umalusi's accreditation process lies in its dual role as a protective and developmental instrument. It seeks to guarantee minimum standards, protect learners and parents, uphold the credibility of national qualifications and promote continuous institutional improvement within independent schools. However, as this study demonstrates, the effectiveness and fairness of this process, particularly for rural independent schools, depend on how accreditation requirements are interpreted, supported and implemented within highly unequal educational contexts.

6.3 MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of this study was to explore the experiences of independent rural school management in Limpopo in relation to the Umalusi accreditation process. Specifically, the study investigated key factors influencing effective teaching and learning following schools' engagement with the accreditation process. It further examined the suitability of the accreditation instrument for use across diverse contexts, including both rural and urban independent schools.

6.3.1 Describe the Umalusi Accreditation Process as Applied to Independent Schools

This objective sought to describe the Umalusi accreditation process as applied to independent schools, based on the experiences of principals and SMT members who participated in this study. The description presented here draws on interview data and document analysis and reflects how the accreditation process is understood and enacted at the school level, particularly within rural and deep-rural contexts.

6.3.1.1 Legislative and Regulatory Context of Accreditation

Findings indicate that participants understood accreditation as a formal quality assurance process mandated by Umalusi, the quality council responsible for setting and maintaining standards in General and Further Education and Training in South Africa. Accreditation was consistently distinguished from provincial registration. While registration with a Provincial Education Department grants an independent school legal permission to operate, accreditation was described as a process that evaluates whether the school has the institutional capacity to offer qualifications registered on the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF).

Participants were aware that accreditation is grounded in national legislation, particularly the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act 58 of 2001 and the National Qualifications Framework Act 67 of 2008, which assign Umalusi responsibility for accrediting and monitoring independent schools offering registered qualifications.

6.3.1.2 Entry into the Accreditation Process

The findings show that the accreditation process typically begins once an independent school is provincially registered and initiates engagement with Umalusi by submitting a formal letter of intent, registering on the Umalusi accreditation platform, and paying prescribed accreditation fees. Schools in the study reported that participation in a compulsory Quality Promotion (QP) meeting formed part of the initial stages of the process. During these meetings, schools were introduced to accreditation requirements, compliance domains, timelines and evidence expectations. Participants described this phase as an important orientation stage, particularly for schools with limited prior exposure to formal quality assurance procedures.

6.3.1.3 Self-Evaluation and Documentation Preparation

A central feature of the accreditation process, as described by participants, involved the school's responsibility to conduct an internal self-evaluation and compile extensive documentary evidence. Schools were required to submit documentation demonstrating compliance across multiple domains, including governance and management, financial accountability, staffing and qualifications, curriculum delivery, assessment practices, learner support, safety and infrastructure.

The findings indicate that many schools engaged in intensive policy development and record-keeping during this stage, often formalising practices that had previously operated informally. Document analysis confirmed that Umalusi's accreditation framework places strong emphasis on written evidence, verified systems and auditable records as indicators of institutional capacity.

6.3.1.4 Desktop Evaluation and Verification Site Visit

Following submission of documentation, schools reported undergoing a desktop evaluation, during which Umalusi assessed the completeness and adequacy of submitted evidence. Where documentation met minimum requirements, a verification site visit was scheduled. Participants described site visits as structured and evidence-based, with evaluation teams verifying submitted documentation, inspecting facilities and assessing whether school practices aligned with accreditation criteria. Attention was given to policy implementation, safety compliance, assessment controls and administrative systems. Schools were responsible for facilitating access to documentation and responding to clarifying questions during the visit.

6.3.1.5 Accreditation Outcomes

The findings show that accreditation decisions resulted in either full accreditation or provisional accreditation. Full accreditation was granted where schools met all minimum requirements, while provisional accreditation was awarded where most criteria were met but specific conditions required remediation within a defined timeframe. Document analysis of accreditation reports confirmed that the majority of participating schools received full accreditation, despite operating under typical rural constraints, while one school was granted provisional accreditation subject to specified corrective actions. Participants described these outcomes as formal confirmation of compliance with national quality standards.

6.3.1.6 Post-Accreditation Monitoring

Accreditation was not described as a once-off event, but as part of an ongoing quality assurance relationship. Schools reported that accredited status carried expectations of continued compliance and possible monitoring to ensure that standards were maintained. Participants further associated accreditation with institutional recognition, enhanced credibility and eligibility for government subsidies, provided additional regulatory requirements were met.

6.3.1.7 Summary Description

Overall, the findings describe the Umalusi accreditation process as applied to independent schools as a structured, sequential and evidence-driven process governed by national policy and standardised criteria. The process requires schools to initiate applications, prepare extensive documentation, undergo external evaluation and respond to accreditation decisions. While the process is uniform in design across contexts, its enactment within rural independent schools occurred under conditions characterised by limited resources and constrained administrative capacity. These experiences provide the contextual foundation for later analytical discussion of accreditation's implications for teaching, learning and school management.

6.3.2 Critically Analyse the Influence of the Accreditation Process on Teaching and Learning in Independent Rural Schools

This objective sought to critically analyse the influence of the Umalusi accreditation process on teaching and learning in independent rural schools. Drawing on the findings of this study, the analysis shows that accreditation operates as a powerful regulatory mechanism that both enhances instructional coherence and simultaneously reshapes pedagogical practice through compliance-driven pressures. The influence of accreditation on teaching and learning is therefore best understood as ambivalent producing measurable instructional gains while also generating constraints that particularly affect rural schools with limited capacity.

6.3.2.1 Accreditation and the Regulation of Instructional Practice

The findings indicate that the accreditation process significantly reshapes teaching and learning by enforcing instructional formalisation and standardisation. Schools reported that accreditation requirements compelled tighter curriculum alignment, uniform lesson planning, systematic assessment scheduling and closer SMT oversight of classroom practice. From a quality assurance perspective, these changes strengthened instructional predictability and reduced variability in curriculum coverage, which is a central objective of Umalusi's mandate to safeguard national qualification standards.

Critically, however, this influence reflects a shift from professional discretion to procedural compliance. While structured lesson planning and documentation

improved, teachers' instructional autonomy was often narrowed, as pedagogical decisions became increasingly oriented toward what could be externally verified during accreditation visits rather than what was pedagogically responsive to local learner needs. This finding aligns with wider critiques of standards-based quality assurance systems, which argue that compliance logics can displace reflective teaching practice with performative conformity (Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Allais, 2021). In this respect, accreditation improved instructional order but did not consistently deepen instructional quality.

6.3.2.2 Assessment Reform: Quality Enhancement or Administrative Intensification

The findings demonstrate that accreditation exerted one of its strongest influences on assessment practices, leading to improved test design, formal moderation procedures and standardised assessment records. These changes strengthened alignment between curriculum intentions, assessment tasks and reporting practices, thereby enhancing the internal credibility of learner achievement. From a critical standpoint, this represents a substantive instructional gain, as coherent assessment systems are central to effective teaching and learning.

However, this improvement carried significant instructional trade-offs. Teachers reported that the documentation burden associated with assessment compliance often reduced available time for lesson preparation, learner feedback and differentiated instruction. In rural contexts where teachers commonly fulfilled multiple roles, accreditation intensified workload pressures and shifted teacher effort toward administrative compliance rather than instructional engagement. This supports broader evidence that accountability regimes can improve technical quality while simultaneously eroding instructional capacity through workload intensification (Bush, 2021; Spaull, 2021). Thus, accreditation enhanced assessment procedures but, in some cases, constrained assessment pedagogy.

6.3.2.3 Teacher Professionalism, Surveillance, and Capacity Loss

Accreditation also reconfigured teaching and learning by strengthening teacher accountability and professional regulation. The findings show that accreditation prompted closer lesson supervision, stricter punctuality expectations and improved compliance with curricular and assessment requirements. In this sense, accreditation functioned as a disciplinary mechanism that raised baseline instructional

expectations and professional conduct. Critically, however, this regulatory effect produced unintended consequences. The enforcement of formal qualification requirements resulted in the displacement of experienced but unqualified teachers, despite their established instructional competence and contextual knowledge. In rural schools already struggling to attract qualified educators, this resulted in instructional instability and increased workloads for remaining staff. Rather than strengthening instructional capacity, accreditation in these cases produced a net instructional loss, highlighting a structural tension between professionalisation and contextual sustainability. This finding reinforces concerns that quality assurance systems may privilege formal compliance over situated educational expertise, particularly in disadvantaged contexts (UNESCO, 2023b; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025).

6.3.2.4 Resource Constraints and Unequal Instructional Impact

The influence of accreditation on teaching and learning was further mediated by material and infrastructural constraints. While accreditation standards assume access to adequate teaching resources, digital infrastructure and subject-specific facilities, the findings show that many rural schools lacked these prerequisites. As a result, improved lesson planning and curriculum alignment did not always translate into enriched learning experiences.

Teachers were often required to compensate for inadequate resources through improvisation and personal sacrifice, thereby absorbing systemic deficiencies into individual labour. Critically, this reveals how a uniform accreditation framework interacts unequally with unequal contexts, amplifying instructional disparities rather than mitigating them. This supports equity-focused critiques, which argue that standardised accountability systems may inadvertently reproduce educational inequality when structural conditions are not addressed in parallel (Sayed & Ahmed, 2021a; UNESCO, 2023b).

6.3.2.5 Critical Synthesis

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the Umalusi accreditation process exerts a complex and contradictory influence on teaching and learning in independent rural schools. Accreditation strengthened instructional structure, assessment coherence and professional accountability, thereby improving organisational discipline and baseline instructional consistency. Simultaneously, the compliance-driven nature of the process constrained pedagogical flexibility,

intensified administrative burdens, displaced contextual teaching capacity and imposed uniform expectations on materially unequal schools.

Critically, this suggests that accreditation functions more effectively as a regulatory assurance mechanism than as a sustained instructional improvement strategy in rural contexts. Without differentiated support and contextual responsiveness, accreditation risks shifting teaching and learning toward performative compliance rather than deep pedagogical engagement. This tension underscores the need to reconceptualise accreditation not merely as a mechanism for enforcing minimum standards, but as a developmental process that actively supports instructional quality within structurally constrained environments.

6.3.3 Investigate the Impact of the Accreditation Process on the Effective Management of Independent Schools

This objective sought to investigate the impact of the Umalusi accreditation process on the effectiveness of school management in independent rural schools. The findings of this study indicate that accreditation plays a significant role in reshaping management systems, leadership practices, governance structures and accountability mechanisms within schools. However, the impact is not uniformly positive; rather, it reflects a complex interaction between institutional strengthening and increased managerial pressure within resource-constrained rural contexts.

6.3.3.1 Strengthening of Management Systems and Organisational Formalisation

The findings demonstrate that the accreditation process acted as a catalyst for the formalisation of school management systems. Participants reported that accreditation requirements compelled schools to introduce clearly defined organisational structures, establish written policies and formalise administrative procedures that had previously been informal or ad hoc. Governance documentation, financial records, staff role descriptions and operational procedures became more structured, systematic and policy-driven following accreditation.

From a management perspective, this formalisation enhanced organisational coherence and reduced role ambiguity, enabling principals and SMTs to coordinate school operations more effectively. These findings align with quality assurance literature that positions accreditation as a mechanism for institutional

professionalisation, particularly in settings where managerial practices develop organically rather than institutionally (Materu, 2020; Eaton, 2021a). In this study, accreditation strengthened managerial clarity and consistency, contributing to improved organisational stability.

Critically, however, the findings suggest that this formalisation was driven primarily by external compliance demands rather than internally embedded strategic planning. Management systems were often designed to satisfy accreditation criteria rather than to support long-term context-specific development. This raises questions about the sustainability of management improvements once accreditation pressures lessen (Allais, 2021).

6.3.3.2 Governance, Accountability, and Financial Management

The accreditation process had a pronounced impact on school governance and financial management. Participants consistently reported improvements in financial accountability, budgeting processes and oversight mechanisms following accreditation. The introduction of documented financial controls, regular management meetings and clearer governance structures enhanced transparency and accountability within schools.

These changes support findings in school management research that link external accountability mechanisms to improved financial discipline and governance effectiveness (Mestry, 2017; Bush, 2020). In rural independent schools, where financial vulnerability is common due to fee dependency and limited subsidies, strengthened financial management represented a critical institutional gain.

However, the findings also reveal that accountability requirements increased the administrative burden on principals and SMTs. School leaders were required to manage extensive documentation, compliance reporting and monitoring tasks alongside their instructional leadership roles. This reflects a pattern identified in accountability-driven systems, where effectiveness gains in governance are accompanied by managerial overload, particularly in schools with limited administrative staffing (Bush, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2023).

6.3.3.3 Leadership Role Intensification and Managerial Pressure

Accreditation significantly reshaped the work profile of principals and SMT members. Findings indicate that school leaders assumed expanded roles as compliance

managers, quality assurance coordinators and regulatory intermediaries. While accreditation strengthened leadership authority and strategic oversight, it simultaneously intensified leadership workload and emotional pressure.

Participants described accreditation as a high-stakes process, with potential financial, reputational and operational consequences for school survival. This heightened the sense of managerial responsibility and risk borne by principals, particularly in rural contexts where institutional failure could directly affect community access to education. International and South African scholarship similarly notes that accountability regimes shift principals' roles from instructional leadership toward compliance management, often at the cost of pedagogical and developmental leadership (Allais, 2021; Bush, 2021).

Critically, while accreditation enhanced management discipline and organisational control, it also narrowed leadership focus toward short-term compliance rather than long-term strategic development. This tension has implications for sustainable school improvement in rural contexts.

6.3.3.4 Human Resource Management and Capacity Challenges

The findings show that accreditation influenced human resource management practices by enforcing qualification requirements, staff registration and role clarification; in some cases, improved staff professionalism and accountability. However, accreditation also resulted in the loss of experienced but unqualified staff, which negatively affected institutional memory and operational continuity.

From a management effectiveness perspective, this outcome illustrates a contradiction within accreditation logic: while aiming to strengthen institutional capacity, accreditation sometimes reduced available human capital in contexts already facing staffing shortages. This finding is corroborated by research showing that formalisation processes may inadvertently weaken organisational capacity in disadvantaged settings by prioritising formal compliance over contextual functionality (UNESCO, 2023a; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025).

6.3.3.5 Critical Synthesis

Overall, the findings indicate that the accreditation process has a dual impact on the effective management of independent rural schools. On the one hand, accreditation strengthened governance structures, financial accountability, administrative systems

and formal management practices, contributing to increased organisational stability and legitimacy. On the other, it intensified administrative workload, expanded leadership responsibilities and exposed capacity constraints related to staffing and resources.

Critically, the study suggests that accreditation improves managerial control more effectively than managerial sustainability in rural independent schools. While schools became more compliant, accountable and formally organised, these gains were achieved through increased managerial strain and reliance on limited leadership capacity. Without differentiated support and contextual flexibility, accreditation risks function as a regulatory compliance mechanism rather than a balanced tool for long-term management effectiveness in rural schooling environments.

6.3.4 Examine the Importance of Accreditation for Independent Schools

This objective sought to examine the importance of the Umalusi accreditation process for independent schools, as experienced by principals and SMT members in rural and deep-rural contexts. Findings from this study indicate that accreditation is perceived as a foundational institutional requirement that extends beyond regulatory compliance to influence school legitimacy, sustainability, management credibility and instructional confidence.

6.3.4.1 Accreditation as Institutional Legitimacy and Legal Recognition

One of the most prominent findings of the study is that accreditation is regarded by participants as critical for establishing institutional legitimacy. Accreditation was consistently described as formal recognition that an independent school meets nationally prescribed quality standards and is therefore a legitimate provider of education within the South African system. Participants viewed accreditation as a protective mechanism that distinguishes compliant schools from unregistered or sub-standard providers, particularly in rural areas where oversight is limited.

This finding aligns with Umalusi's mandate to ensure that only credible institutions offer qualifications registered on the GFETQSF, thereby protecting learners, parents and the integrity of the education system (Umalusi, 2025b). From an institutional perspective, accreditation functioned as a form of symbolic and legal validation, enhancing trust among communities, parents and external stakeholders. Similar studies emphasise that accreditation confers public credibility and reinforces the

social contract between independent schools and the state (Ehren et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023b).

6.3.4.2 Importance of Accreditation for School Sustainability and Financial Viability

The findings further demonstrate that accreditation is critically important for the financial sustainability of independent schools. Participants repeatedly emphasised that accreditation enabled access to government subsidies, which are essential for schools serving low-income rural communities. In this study, accreditation was therefore directly linked to a school's ability to remain operational, retain staff and improve infrastructure.

Given that most participating schools relied heavily on school fees in economically vulnerable communities, accreditation was viewed as a stabilising mechanism that reduced financial precarity. This supports broader evidence that accreditation-linked funding plays a key role in sustaining independent schools that serve disadvantaged populations (World Bank, 2022; OECD, 2023a). Without accreditation, schools reported heightened risk of closure, reinforcing the perception that accreditation is not optional but existential for many rural independent institutions.

6.3.4.3 Accreditation as a Catalyst for Organisational and Professional Improvement

Another important finding is that accreditation was valued for its role in strengthening internal school systems. Participants reported that accreditation prompted improvements in governance structures, management practices, policy development and professional accountability. Schools introduced clearer role allocation, more systematic planning, and structured decision-making processes in response to accreditation requirements.

From the perspective of institutional development, accreditation was therefore experienced as a mechanism that encouraged organisational maturity and professionalisation. This finding is consistent with quality assurance literature which frames accreditation as both a regulatory and developmental process, particularly in contexts where schools have historically operated with informal management systems (Materu, 2020; Eaton, 2021b).

However, the findings also indicate that these improvements were often driven by external compliance pressure rather than by internally generated strategic vision. While accreditation strengthened organisational systems, it did not always foster long-term developmental planning, raising questions about the depth and sustainability of improvement once accreditation requirements are met (Allais, 2021).

6.3.4.4 Accreditation and Educational Quality Assurance

Participants further emphasised the importance of accreditation in relation to educational quality and standards assurance. Accreditation was perceived as providing a framework against which teaching, learning and assessment practices could be evaluated and improved. Schools reported increased confidence in their instructional practices following accreditation, particularly in relation to curriculum coverage, assessment coherence and learner progression.

This reinforces Umalusi's positioning of accreditation as a quality assurance mechanism designed to protect the credibility of qualifications and ensure comparability across institutions (Umalusi, 2024). Importantly, for rural schools operating under persistent material constraints, accreditation offered a reference point for minimum quality expectations, even where full realisation of those standards remained challenging.

6.3.4.5 Tensions and Conditional Importance of Accreditation

Critically, while accreditation was widely viewed as important and necessary, the findings reveal that its significance is contextually conditional. Participants acknowledged that accreditation imposed heavy administrative and financial demands, particularly for small rural schools with limited staffing and resources. The importance of accreditation was therefore sometimes framed as a mandatory burden rather than an intrinsically empowering process.

This tension reflects broader critiques in the literature that caution against a one-size-fits-all accreditation approach in highly unequal education systems (Sayed & Ahmed, 2021a; UNESCO, 2023a). In this study, accreditation was important not only for what it enabled but also for what it compelled schools to do in order to survive within regulated educational frameworks.

6.3.4.6 Synthesis

Overall, the findings show that accreditation is important to independent schools for legitimacy, sustainability, organisational strengthening and quality assurance. In rural contexts, its importance is heightened by financial vulnerability, historical marginalisation and disproportionate access to support. However, the study also demonstrates that the value of accreditation is tempered by the strain it places on limited institutional capacity. Accreditation thus emerges as both an enabling and constraining force, whose importance is undisputed but whose implementation requires greater contextual sensitivity to fully realise its developmental potential.

6.3.5 Explore the Role Played by Independent Schools During the Accreditation Process

This objective sought to explore the role played by independent schools during the Umalusi accreditation process, as reflected in the experiences and accounts of principals and SMT members who participated in this study. The findings indicate that independent schools are not passive recipients of accreditation outcomes; rather, they play an active, multi-dimensional role in preparing for, engaging with and responding to accreditation requirements.

6.3.5.1 Institutional Preparation and Compliance Coordination

The findings reveal that independent schools assume primary responsibility for initiating and coordinating the accreditation process. Participants described the school's role as beginning with the decision to pursue accreditation, followed by engagement with Umalusi requirements through formal application procedures, submission of a letter of intent and payment of accreditation-related fees. Schools were responsible for ensuring that prerequisite conditions, such as provincial registration and basic compliance readiness, were met prior to entering the accreditation process.

A central role played by independent schools involved internal coordination of compliance activities. Principals and SMT members led the organisation of institutional documentation, ensured that policies were developed or updated and mobilised staff to contribute evidence across required domains. This confirms that accreditation is largely school-driven in its operationalisation, with schools acting as

the primary agents responsible for aligning internal systems with external standards (Eaton, 2021a; Umalusi, 2025a).

6.3.5.2 Policy Development, Documentation, and Evidence Production

One of the most prominent roles played by independent schools involved the production and organisation of documentary evidence. The findings show that schools were required to generate extensive records covering governance, finance, staffing, curriculum delivery, assessment, learner support and safety compliance. Participants reported that policy development and documentation became a central organisational activity during accreditation preparation.

In many cases, schools developed formal policies for the first time, reflecting a shift from informal practices to written and standardised systems. The study shows that independent schools played an active role in translating accreditation criteria into institution-specific policies and procedures. This aligns with literature describing accreditation as a process that compels institutions to articulate and formalise their organisational practices (Materu, 2020; Allais, 2021).

6.3.5.3 Leadership and Distributed Responsibility

The findings indicate that leadership within independent schools played a decisive role in steering the accreditation process. Principals assumed responsibility for overall coordination, communication with Umalusi and strategic decision-making, while SMT members were tasked with managing specific compliance areas such as curriculum, assessment or administration. This reflects a distributed leadership approach, where accreditation responsibilities were shared across management structures.

Independent schools also played a key role in mobilising internal stakeholders, including teachers, administrative staff and governing bodies. Participants described how educators were required to adjust teaching practices, submit lesson plans and prepare assessment records as part of accreditation readiness. In this respect, schools acted as mediating institutions that translated regulatory expectations into everyday practices within classrooms and administrative offices.

6.3.5.4 Engagement during Evaluation and Site Visits

The study further shows that independent schools played an active role during desktop evaluations and verification site visits. Schools were responsible for making

documentation accessible, facilitating evaluator access to facilities and responding to queries raised during site visits. Participants indicated that principals and SMT members often assumed advocacy roles, contextualising challenges faced by rural schools and explaining how standards were met under constrained conditions.

This finding highlights that accreditation is not merely an inspection but an interactive process in which schools participate through explanation, clarification and demonstration of practice. However, the effectiveness of this engagement was shaped by schools' familiarity with accreditation language and evaluative criteria, which varied across institutions.

6.3.5.5 Post-Accreditation Response and Institutional Adjustment

The findings show that the role of independent schools extends beyond the accreditation decision itself. Following accreditation outcomes, schools were responsible for implementing recommendations, addressing conditions attached to provisional accreditation and sustaining compliance. Participants reported that accredited status required ongoing management attention to policy implementation, monitoring and preparedness for future evaluations.

For schools that received provisional accreditation, the role of the school involved targeted institutional improvement, including addressing identified gaps within specified timelines. This positions independent schools as continuous participants in quality assurance, rather than one-time applicants, reinforcing the ongoing nature of accreditation engagement (Ehren et al., 2023; Umalusi, 2024).

6.3.5.6 Critical Reflection on the School's Role

Critically, while the findings demonstrate strong institutional agency, they also highlight limits to schools' capacity to fulfil this role effectively. The responsibility placed on independent schools to self-manage accreditation requirements often occurred in contexts of limited administrative support, financial pressure and staffing constraints. As a result, schools relied heavily on principals and SMT members, concentrating compliance expertise within a small leadership group.

This finding echoes with broader critiques that quality assurance systems assume levels of institutional capacity that may not exist uniformly across contexts, particularly in rural and disadvantaged settings (Sayed & Ahmed, 2021a; UNESCO,

2023b). The role played by independent schools is therefore both active and burdensome, reflecting resilience and adaptability alongside structural vulnerability.

6.3.5.7 Synthesis

Overall, the findings demonstrate that independent schools play a central and active role in the accreditation process by initiating applications, coordinating compliance, developing policies, engaging evaluators and implementing post-accreditation actions. Accreditation is shaped not only by external standards but by how schools interpret, enact and sustain those standards within their organisational realities. While schools demonstrated significant agency and commitment, the effectiveness of their role was constrained by contextual factors that influence capacity, sustainability and equity in accreditation engagement.

6.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was theoretically grounded in Normalisation Process Theory (NPT), a sociological framework concerned with how complex interventions, policies, and practices are implemented, embedded and sustained within organisational and social contexts (May & Finch, 2009; May et al., 2022). In this study, NPT proved particularly valuable for interpreting the lived experiences of independent rural schools as they engaged with the Umalusi accreditation process, an externally imposed and compulsory quality assurance intervention.

The study's key findings closely align with NPT’s central constructs. Coherence (sense-making) was evident in how principals and SMTs developed an understanding of accreditation as both a quality assurance requirement and a condition for institutional legitimacy and survival. While participants recognised the importance of accreditation, the findings revealed disparate and sometimes fragile coherence, shaped by limited prior exposure to formal quality assurance systems and constrained administrative capacity. This explains why accreditation was frequently experienced as complex, demanding and anxiety-provoking rather than inherently developmental.

Cognitive participation (relational work) was reflected in the leadership burden assumed by principals and SMT members, who mobilised staff, coordinated documentation and sustained engagement throughout the accreditation process. The findings demonstrate that participation was largely driven by obligation rather than

voluntary commitment, confirming NPT's relevance to mandatory policy contexts. In rural schools with limited staffing, this participation was concentrated within a small leadership cohort, intensifying workload and emotional strain, an outcome that helps explain leadership fatigue and stress, as reported in the study.

The study's findings further illuminate collective action (enactment work), particularly in relation to the formalisation of management systems, teaching practices, assessment procedures and governance structures. Accreditation prompted measurable improvements in organisational discipline, instructional planning and accountability. However, NPT helps explain why these gains were achieved through compliance-oriented practices that at times, increased the administrative burden and, in some cases, resulted in the loss of experienced but unqualified teachers. This reflects a mismatch between accreditation expectations and the material and human resource realities of rural independent schools.

Finally, reflexive monitoring (appraisal work) was evident in how schools evaluated the outcomes of accreditation after the process. Participants acknowledged gains in legitimacy, credibility and organisational structure, yet simultaneously critiqued the process as insufficiently responsive to contextual inequalities. These reflective assessments underscore the study's key conclusion: while accreditation becomes partially normalised within school practices, its sustainability and developmental value remain contingent on contextual support, differentiated expectations and ongoing guidance.

Overall, the application of NPT strengthened the analytical coherence of the study by linking individual experiences, organisational responses and structural conditions. By aligning the empirical findings with NPT's explanatory mechanisms, this study demonstrates that Umalusi accreditation is normalised in rural independent schools through continuous negotiation, adaptation and compliance work rather than seamless integration. In so doing, the study contributes theoretically by extending the application of NPT to education quality assurance in resource-constrained rural contexts and empirically by deepening understanding of accreditation as both an enabling and constraining force within unequal education systems.

6.5 CONTRIBUTION TO THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

This study makes several significant contributions to the body of knowledge on education quality assurance, independent schooling and rural education management in South Africa and comparable contexts. By examining the lived experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo during the Umalusi accreditation process, the study advances both empirical understanding and theoretical insight into how accreditation operates within structurally constrained educational environments.

6.5.1 Empirical Contribution to Knowledge on Rural Independent Schools

Firstly, the study contributes original empirical evidence to a limited body of research on independent rural schools, a sector that remains under-represented in South African education research. Existing studies on accreditation and quality assurance tend to focus on urban independent schools or public schooling systems. This study addresses that gap by foregrounding the voices of principals and SMTs operating in deep-rural contexts characterised by poverty, weak infrastructure, staffing shortages and financial vulnerability. In so doing, it provides contextually grounded insights into how accreditation is experienced, navigated and sustained under conditions of structural inequality.

6.5.2 Contribution to Understanding Accreditation as Lived Practice

Secondly, the study advances knowledge by reframing Umalusi accreditation not merely as a technical or procedural quality assurance mechanism, but as a complex social and organisational process. The findings demonstrate that accreditation is enacted through sustained leadership labour, emotional work, negotiation and adaptation. This contribution deepens understanding of accreditation as an ongoing institutional practice that reshapes school management, teaching and organisational culture over time, rather than as a once-off compliance event.

Importantly, the study highlights the dual nature of accreditation as both enabling and constraining. While accreditation strengthens governance, accountability, instructional structure and institutional legitimacy, it simultaneously intensifies administrative burden, displaces contextual teaching capacity and places disproportionate pressure on rural school leadership. This nuanced contribution

challenges overly linear or success-oriented representations of accreditation in policy discourse.

6.5.3 Theoretical Contribution through the Application of Normalisation Process Theory

A further contribution lies in the theoretical application of Normalisation Process Theory (NPT) to the field of education accreditation. While NPT has been widely applied in healthcare and organisational change studies, its use in analysing school accreditation processes, particularly in rural education, is limited. This study extends NPT's applicability by demonstrating its value in explaining how a mandatory policy intervention becomes embedded, contested and sustained in schools with limited institutional capacity.

By aligning key findings with the constructs of coherence, cognitive participation, collective action and reflexive monitoring, the study shows how accreditation is normalised through compliance-driven sense-making, leadership mobilisation, formalised practices and post-accreditation reflection. This contributes theoretically by positioning accreditation as a socially mediated process shaped by context, power and resource inequality.

6.5.4 Contribution to Policy and Practice Discourse on Equity and Quality Assurance

The study also contributes to broader debates on equity and contextual responsiveness in quality assurance systems. By evidencing the structural mismatch between uniform accreditation standards and unequal schooling contexts, the research challenges a one-size-fits-all approach to quality assurance. It adds to scholarly arguments that quality assurance mechanisms must balance standardisation with differentiated support if they are to promote equity rather than reproduce disadvantage.

Through its findings, the study provides an evidence-based foundation for rethinking accreditation frameworks in rural and low-resource settings, thereby contributing knowledge that is relevant to policymakers, accrediting bodies and education leaders concerned with sustainable school improvement.

6.5.5 Methodological Contribution

Finally, the study contributes methodologically through its qualitative, interpretivist approach, which privileges participant voice and contextual depth. By combining interview data with document analysis, the research offers a richly textured account of accreditation as it is lived and experienced within schools, demonstrating the value of qualitative inquiry for unpacking complex policy processes in education.

6.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, several areas emerge where further research is needed to deepen understanding of the accreditation experiences of independent rural schools in South Africa as well as urban independent schools. The following recommendations highlight possible directions for future studies:

Topic 1. Comparative Studies Between Rural and Urban Independent Schools

Future research could compare the accreditation experiences of rural independent schools with those of urban or peri-urban schools. Such comparative studies may reveal how contextual inequalities such as access to infrastructure, technology and qualified teachers shape accreditation outcomes. This would help determine whether a differentiated accreditation model is justified.

Topic 2. Longitudinal Studies on Post-Accreditation School Improvement

Given that participants reported improvements in governance, teaching and infrastructure after accreditation, longitudinal research is needed to examine whether these improvements are sustained over time. Tracking schools across several accreditation cycles could provide insight into long-term impacts on learner performance, financial sustainability and teacher retention.

Topic 3. The Emotional and Psychological Effects of Accreditation on School Leaders

The findings revealed that principals experienced stress, pressure and emotional burden during accreditation. Future studies could investigate the psychological impact of accreditation on school leadership more deeply. Such research would help policymakers understand leadership wellbeing as a factor influencing school performance.

Topic 4. Role of SMTs in Strengthening Quality Assurance in Rural Settings

SMT members reported significant gains in administrative and leadership skills due to accreditation. Future research could explore how SMT capacity-building affects teaching, curriculum delivery and organisational culture in the long term.

Topic 5. Impact of Accreditation on Teacher Professional Development

Accreditation appears to influence teacher practice, including lesson planning, supervision and curriculum delivery. Researchers could investigate how professional development is shaped by accreditation requirements, especially in resource-constrained rural contexts where unqualified but experienced teachers often play important roles.

Topic 6. Evaluating Umalusi's Support Mechanisms for Rural Schools

Participants indicated a need for better guidance, templates, communication and more face-to-face support from Umalusi. Future studies could evaluate the effectiveness of Umalusi's outreach and support programmes and recommend strategies for making the process more context-sensitive.

Topic 7. Financial Models of Sustainability for Rural Independent Schools

Because many schools struggle with fee collection and inconsistent funding, research into viable financial models, such as community partnerships, subsidies, or donor support, could help schools meet accreditation standards without financial strain.

Topic 8. Learner Experiences During Accreditation

While this study focused on principals and SMT members, future research could explore how learners perceive the accreditation process. Their experiences could provide additional insight into how accreditation affects teaching, learning, school climate and learner support structures.

Topic 9. Parental Involvement and Rural Household Dynamics

Given that many learners are raised by grandparents with limited educational backgrounds, future research could examine the role of household dynamics and parental migration in shaping school readiness for accreditation and learner performance.

Topic 10. Technology and Accreditation Compliance in Low-Resource Schools

Since technology shortages were a major challenge in the study, research could explore how digital solutions, low-cost devices or community technology hubs can help rural schools comply with accreditation requirements.

6.7 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This section delineates the key limitations and delimitations of the study, thereby clarifying the scope, boundaries and inherent constraints that may have influenced the research process and the interpretation of the findings.

6.7.1 Limitations of the Study

Limitations refer to constraints and weaknesses beyond the researcher's control that may have influenced the study's outcomes. The study sought to understand the experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo, which contribute to a critical understanding of the Umalusi accreditation process**.** One major limitation of this study relates to the size and composition of the sample, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to other contexts or populations. The study was conducted in six independent schools, with a principal and one SMT member per school. Although efforts were made to ensure adequate representation, the results should be interpreted with caution when applied beyond the specific study setting.

Another limitation concerns the research design and data collection methods employed. The reliance on self-reported data may have introduced response bias, as participants could have provided socially desirable answers or may not have recalled information accurately. In addition, the use of structured instruments limited the depth of responses, potentially overlooking nuanced insights that could have emerged from more open-ended methods.

Time constraints also posed a limitation, as the data were collected within a defined period. This restricted the ability of the study to capture changes in perceptions, behaviours, or outcomes over time. Furthermore, external factors such as participant availability and access to relevant documentation may have influenced the completeness and consistency of the data collected.

6.7.2 Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations are the boundaries intentionally set by the researcher to narrow the scope of the study and maintain feasibility. This study was deliberately limited to a

specific geographical area, population group and institutional or organisational context, which is a rural area in Limpopo province and was conducted at independent schools. As such, the findings are contextual and are not intended to represent all settings or populations beyond the defined scope.

The study was also delimited by its focus on selected variables and themes that were directly aligned with the research objectives. Other potentially relevant factors were excluded to maintain clarity and ensure a manageable scope of analysis. Additionally, the study focused on a single methodological approach, a qualitative research approach, which was chosen based on its suitability to address the research questions, despite the availability of alternative methods.

Lastly, the delimitations included the time frame of the study, which was confined to the period during which data collection and analysis were feasible. Longitudinal analysis was therefore beyond the scope of this research.

6.8 SUMMARY

It is widely acknowledged that the accreditation process experienced by rural independent schools in Limpopo has a direct influence on teaching and learning, particularly in relation to institutional capacity, resource availability, curriculum compliance and educator preparedness. Recent studies indicate that while accreditation is intended to enhance quality assurance and accountability, rural independent schools often experience challenges in meeting accreditation requirements due to limited infrastructure, financial constraints and insufficient professional support, which may disrupt instructional continuity and pedagogical effectiveness (Umalusi, 2022a; Chauke, 2025). Furthermore, empirical evidence from rural South African contexts demonstrates that systemic and institutional pressures associated with quality assurance processes can exacerbate existing inequalities, thereby constraining educators' ability to deliver effective teaching and support learner achievement (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; DBE, 2025). These challenges are particularly pronounced in under-resourced rural settings, where compliance demands may compete with core teaching and learning priorities

Chapter 1 presented the research questions, as well as the aims and objectives of the study. It further outlined the research design and the methodological approach adopted. The study employed a qualitative research design, located within a social

constructivist paradigm, and utilised semi-structured interviews and document analysis as the primary data collection methods.

Chapter 2 presented and discussed the Normalisation Process Theory (NPT) as the theoretical framework underpinning the study.

Chapter 3 critically reviewed scholarly literature on the accreditation of independent schools by Umalusi. The chapter explored the concept of accreditation and detailed the accreditation process, drawing on South African, African, and international perspectives. It further examined the challenges encountered by rural independent schools during the accreditation process.

Chapter 4 provided a detailed account of the research design and methodological approach adopted for the study. The chapter outlined the target population, sampling techniques and data collection methods, which included semi-structured interviews and document analysis. In addition, the procedures for data analysis were explained, with qualitative content analysis employed to interpret the collected data. The chapter concluded with a discussion on the measures undertaken to ensure methodological rigour, as well as the ethical considerations observed throughout the research process.

Chapter 5 presented and analysed the data generated through face-to-face interviews and document analysis. The chapter provided a discussion and interpretation of the findings, which were contextualised and substantiated through engagement with relevant scholarly literature.

Chapter 6, the final chapter, presented the conclusions and a comprehensive summary of the study. The chapter further outlined recommendations derived from the research findings and discussed the limitations and delimitations of the study.

6.9 CONCLUSION

This study set out to develop a critical and contextually grounded understanding of how independent rural school management in Limpopo experiences the Umalusi accreditation process, with particular attention to its implications for teaching and learning, school management and institutional sustainability. Drawing on qualitative data generated from principals and SMT members, and guided by Normalisation Process Theory (NPT), the study demonstrated that accreditation is neither a neutral nor purely technical quality assurance mechanism. Rather, it is a socially mediated,

resource-intensive and unevenly experienced process that both enables and constrains school development within deeply unequal educational contexts. The findings of this study confirm that Umalusi accreditation performs a vital regulatory function within South Africa's education system by safeguarding minimum educational standards, protecting learners and parents and upholding the credibility of national qualifications. For independent rural schools, accreditation was widely regarded as essential for institutional legitimacy, public trust and access to government subsidies, without which many participating schools would struggle to sustain operations. In this regard, accreditation emerged as an indispensable condition for school survival and formal recognition within the broader education system. However, the study also revealed that the benefits of accreditation are accompanied by substantial structural and operational challenges, particularly in rural and deep-rural contexts characterised by poverty, limited infrastructure, staffing shortages and constrained administrative capacity. While accreditation strengthened governance structures, financial accountability, assessment systems and organisational discipline, these gains were often achieved through intensified leadership labour, increased administrative workload and compliance-driven practices that competed with core teaching and learning priorities. The findings illustrate that accreditation tends to privilege formal documentation, procedural compliance and auditable systems over contextually responsive pedagogical development. With specific reference to teaching and learning, the study demonstrated that Umalusi accreditation contributed to improved curriculum alignment, lesson planning, assessment coherence and professional accountability. These changes enhanced instructional order and reduced variability in curriculum coverage, thereby supporting baseline quality assurance objectives. At the same time, accreditation constrained pedagogical flexibility and professional autonomy, particularly where teachers were required to prioritise documentation and assessment records over differentiated instruction and learner support. In some instances, the enforcement of formal qualification requirements led to the displacement of experienced but unqualified teachers, resulting in instructional instability and capacity loss within already vulnerable schools. Consequently, accreditation functioned more effectively as a regulatory standardisation mechanism than as a sustained instructional improvement strategy in rural contexts. In relation to school management and leadership, the study found that accreditation acted as a

catalyst for organisational formalisation, strengthening governance arrangements, financial controls and administrative systems. Principals and SMTs developed clearer role definitions, policy frameworks and accountability mechanisms, contributing to improved institutional coherence and managerial control. However, these improvements were largely compliance-driven and externally motivated, raising concerns about sustainability and long-term strategic development once accreditation pressures ease. Leadership roles became increasingly oriented toward compliance management, regulatory mediation and risk mitigation, often at the expense of distributed instructional leadership and developmental planning. The application of Normalisation Process Theory provided a powerful analytical lens through which to interpret these findings.

The study demonstrated that accreditation becomes normalised in rural independent schools through continuous sense-making, relational work, enactment and appraisal rather than through seamless institutional integration. Coherence around accreditation was often fragile, shaped by confusion, anxiety and limited prior exposure to formal quality assurance systems. Cognitive participation was concentrated within a small leadership cohort, intensifying workload and emotional strain. Collective action resulted in measurable organisational gains but also generated unintended consequences related to workload intensification and capacity erosion. Reflexive monitoring revealed a critical awareness among school leaders of both the benefits and limitations of accreditation, reinforcing the ambivalent and conditional nature of its perceived value. Overall, the study concludes that while Umalusi accreditation is a necessary and important mechanism for ensuring educational quality and accountability, its implementation within rural independent schools is marked by structural mismatches between uniform standards and unequal schooling realities. Without differentiated expectations, targeted support and greater contextual sensitivity, accreditation risks reinforcing existing disparities rather than promoting equitable educational improvement. The findings underscore the need for accreditation frameworks that balance standardisation with developmental support, particularly in rural and resource-constrained environments. In synthesising these insights, this study contributes to scholarly and policy debates on education quality assurance by foregrounding the lived experiences of rural independent schools and demonstrating how accreditation is enacted within conditions of inequality.

The conclusions drawn point toward the importance of re-imagining accreditation not merely as a mechanism of compliance and control, but as a contextually responsive process that actively supports institutional capacity, leadership sustainability and meaningful teaching and learning. Such an approach would enable accreditation to fulfil its quality assurance mandate while simultaneously advancing equity and educational transformation within South Africa's diverse schooling landscape.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethics Clearance Certificate

UNISA university of south africa

College of Education _ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

NHREC Registration # : (If applicable)
Ref #: 7826
Name: Mr Tshililo Thomas Magadze
Student #: 53440048
Staff #:

Date: 14/04/2025

Dear: Mr Tshililo Thomas Magadze

Decision: Ethics Approval from 14/04/2025 to 14/04/2030

Researcher: Mr Tshililo Thomas Magadze

Thomas.Magadze@umalusi.org.za

Pretoria

53440048@mylife.unisa.ac.za 0724223217

Supervisor: Dr Dr Seshoka Joseph Rapeta rapetsj@unisa.ac.za

Co-Supervisor:

Co-Researcher(s):

Email address:

The experiences of independent rural schools in Limpopo of the accreditation process of Umalusi.

Qualification: Phd

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Education _ERC for the above mentioned research study Ethics approval is granted for five years.

The **low risk application** was **reviewed** by College of Education _ETHICS RESEARCH COMMITTEE on 06 April 2025 in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College of Education _ERC Educational Leadership and Management .
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.

Appendix B: Request to Conduct Research to the Department

LIMPOPO
PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

For admin. use
Reference number:

REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE LIMPOPO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

1. **PARTICULARS OF THE RESEARCHER/S** (if there is more than one researcher involved, provide the details of the main researcher)

1.1. Personal details	
Title (Prof/Dr/Mr/Mrs/Ms):	Mr
Surname and initials:	Magadze TT
First name/s:	Tshililo Thomas
SA ID number:	7005057341085
Work permit number (If not SA citizen):	

1.2. Contact details	
Tel home:	Not applicable
Tel work:	012 030 0797
Cell:	072 422 3217
Email address:	Thomas.Magadze@umalusi.org.za
Home address:	3226 Shalimaridge, 10 Jhelum Street, Heidelberg
Postal code:	1441
Postal address:	Same as above
Postal code:	1441

2. **PARTICULARS OF AFFILIATED ORGANISATION** (if applicable)

2.1. Affiliated organisation	
Name of organisation:	N/A
Position:	N/A
Head of organisation/research promoter:	N/A
Tel (head/research promoter):	N/A

Appendix C: Permission Letter from the Department

LIMPOPO
PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

CONFIDENTIAL

Ref: 2/2/2 Enq: Makgati DC Tel No: 015 290 9409 E-mail:MakgatiDC@edu.limpopo.gov.za

MAGADZE TT
3226 SHALIMARIDGE
10 JHELUM STREET
HEIDELBERG
1441

magadzethomas@gmail.com [072 422 3217]

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH.

1. The above bear's reference.

2. The Department wishes to inform you that your request to undertake research titled: **"THE EXPERIENCES OF INDEPENDENT RURAL SCHOOLS IN LIMPOPO OF THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS OF UMALUSI"** has been approved.

3. The following conditions should be considered:

3.1 The research should not have any financial implications for Limpopo Department of Education.

3.2 Arrangements should be made with the Circuit Office and the School concerned.

3.3 The conduct of research should not in any how disrupt the academic programmes at the school(s).

3.4 The research should not be conducted during the time of Examinations, especially in the fourth term.

Cnr 113 Biccard & 24 Excelsior Street, POLOKWANE, 0700, Private Bag X 9489, Polokwane, 0700
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Annexure D: Participant Information Leaflet and Informed Consent

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Date: 24 October 2025, at 09:00

Title : The experiences of independent rural schools of Limpopo on the accreditation process of Umalusi

DEAR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT

My name is Tshililo Thomas Magadze and I am doing research under the supervision of Dr **Seshoka Rapeta, a Senior Lecturer,** in the Department of Education towards a PhD in Educational Management and Leadership at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled 'The experiences of independent rural schools of Limpopo on the accreditation process of Umalusi.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This study is expected to collect important information that could highlight the challenges faced by independent rural schools during the accreditation process. The outcomes of this study will also reveal the role of the accreditation process in teaching and learning in rural schools, this in the light that rural schools are under resourced. Therefore, the study findings will provide crucial information on whether undergoing an accreditation process improves the quality of teaching in spite of the rural independent schools being poorly resourced. The findings are expected to be of benefit to independent schools, education policy makers and the Umalusi Quality Council.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited because you are a principal or school management team member from one of the independent schools located in rural areas of Limpopo, and you are either accredited or are in the process of being accredited by Umalusi.

I obtained your contact details from the data base of Umalusi as I am an employee of Umalusi You will be one of twelve participants, consisting of six principals and six SMT members who will be recruited and interviewed from six independent schools.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

The study involves semi-structured interviews, with a set of pre-determined questions and possible follow-up questions. The interviews aim to gain insight into your daily experiences and challenges, and to have better understanding on your views about accreditation. The interviews will take place in your own respective school, and each interview is expected to take at least 45

Annexure E: Interview Schedule for Participants

Appendix: Interview Questionnaire for Principals, and SMT

Section 1: Background Information

For Principals, and SMT

1. Can you briefly describe your role as a principal/SMT/SGB member in this school?
2. How long have you been in this position?
3. What are your main responsibilities regarding the school's leadership, teaching and learning?
4. Could you provide some background information about this school?
5. How long has the school been operating?
6. What are some of the key characteristics of your school (e.g., size, location, student demographics)?

Section 2: Understanding the Accreditation Process

For Both Principals and SMT Members:

3. **What has been your experience with the Umalusi accreditation process?** *Probe for steps involved in the accreditation process for independent school. Probe for any specific challenges or obstacles encountered during this process.*
4. **How would you describe Umalusi's accreditation criteria for independent rural schools?** *Probe: How would you assess the suitability of the accreditation criteria for both urban and rural schools? Are there specific aspects of the process that present unique challenges for rural schools?*
5. **How did your school prepare for the Umalusi accreditation process?** *Probe for the steps taken before the accreditation review.*
6. **Can you describe a specific moment during the accreditation process that stood out to you personally? How did it make you feel?**
7. **What has been the most rewarding or challenging aspect of going through the accreditation process for you?**

Section 3: Influence of Accreditation on Teaching and Learning

For Principals

6. **In your view, how has the accreditation process influenced teaching and learning in your school?** *Probe for changes, if any, that have occurred in teaching practices or*

Appendix G: Document Analysis Template

Document Analysis Template	
Document title/type	
Source/issuing body	
Documents analysed and findings	
Key selection requirements/criteria stated	
Data extraction procedure	
Coding and analysis	
Notes	

Appendix H: Proof of Editing Letter

Cilla Dowse Editing

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(on WhatsApp)



For editing of Master's Dissertations
and
Doctoral Theses

This letter serves to confirm that editing and proofreading were done for:

TSHILILO THOMAS MAGADZE

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

Leadership and Management

University of South Africa

THE EXPERIENCES OF INDEPENDENT RURAL SCHOOL MANAGEMENT IN LIMPOPO OF THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS OF UMALUSI

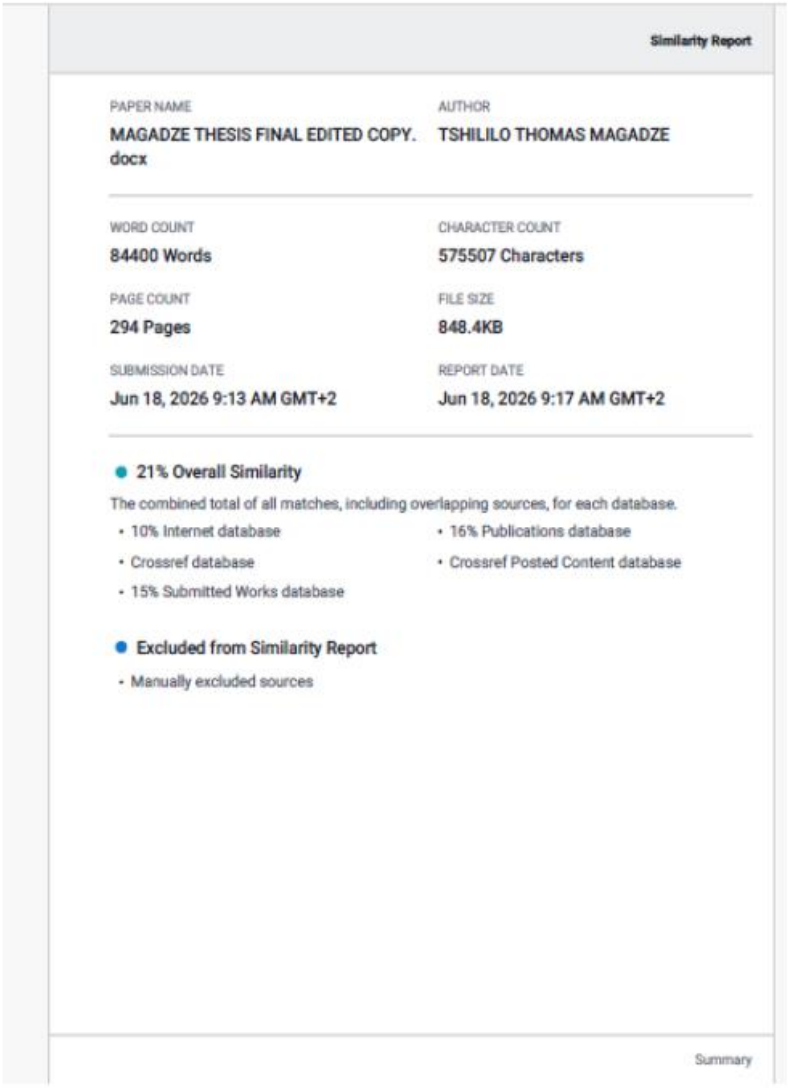


Cilla Dowse
15 June 2026

Cilla Dowse
PhD in Assessment and Quality Assurance in Education and Training: University of Pretoria 2014
Basic Editing and Proofreading: McGillivray Linnegar Associates 2008
Programme on Editing Principles and Practices: University of Pretoria 2009
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Professional Editors' Guild Associate Member, DOW003

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Appendix I: Turnitin Report



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