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Abstract

The Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan utilises a quality assurance checklist as a fundamental tool for accrediting higher education institutions. While this framework plays a crucial role in maintaining academic standards, its effectiveness is significantly compromised by two persistent issues: inadequate measurability of criteria and problematic mark distribution. This study provides a critical examination of these challenges, with particular focus on the difficulties in establishing clear, actionable, and objectively measurable indicators within the current accreditation framework.

Through systematic analysis, the research reveals how ambiguous evaluation criteria result in subjective assessments and inconsistent application of standards across institutions. The study further investigates the mark allocation system, revealing substantial imbalances in scoring weights that inadvertently prioritise certain institutional aspects over others, thereby affecting the overall fairness and comprehensiveness of the accreditation process.

By employing a combination of document analysis, expert consultations, and comparative benchmarking with international quality assurance models, this research offers concrete, evidence-based recommendations for checklist improvement. The proposed enhancements aim to increase the instrument's precision in evaluation, ensure a more equitable distribution of marks, and strengthen the credibility of Afghanistan's accreditation system. Ultimately, these improvements seek to align the national quality assurance process with globally recognised best practices while maintaining relevance to Afghanistan's specific higher education context.

Keywords: *Accreditation Checklist, Evaluation Criteria, Higher Education, Marks Distribution, Measurability, Ministry of Higher Education (Afghanistan), Quality Assurance*

1. Introduction

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education is a fundamental mechanism for ensuring academic excellence, institutional accountability, and public confidence in educational standards. Across the globe, accreditation systems serve as critical instruments for evaluating whether higher education institutions (HEIs) meet established quality benchmarks. These systems often rely on structured checklists that outline key criteria for assessment, providing a standardised framework for evaluation. In Afghanistan, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has implemented a QA checklist to guide the

accreditation of HEIs, aiming to uphold educational quality and foster continuous improvement.

Despite its intended purpose, Afghanistan's current accreditation framework faces significant challenges that undermine its effectiveness. One of the primary concerns is the lack of measurable criteria within the checklist, which leads to subjective interpretations and inconsistent evaluations. Without clear, quantifiable indicators, assessors may struggle to apply the checklist uniformly, resulting in discrepancies in institutional ratings. Furthermore, the distribution of marks across different accreditation standards appears unbalanced, with some criteria receiving disproportionate weight while others are undervalued. This imbalance raises concerns about fairness and whether the checklist accurately prioritises the most critical aspects of institutional quality.

The implications of these weaknesses are far-reaching. An unreliable accreditation system not only risks misrepresenting institutional performance but also diminishes trust among stakeholders, including students, educators, and policymakers. Moreover, if the checklist fails to align with internationally recognised QA practices, it may hinder Afghan HEIs from gaining global recognition and collaboration opportunities. Addressing these flaws is, therefore, essential to strengthening the credibility of Afghanistan's higher education sector and ensuring its competitiveness in the global academic landscape.

This study focuses on two key dimensions of the MoHE's accreditation checklist: measurability and marks distribution. By critically analysing these aspects, the research identifies specific shortcomings that affect the checklist's precision and fairness. The investigation draws on a systematic assessment of existing criteria, highlighting areas where definitions are ambiguous, scoring is inconsistent, or weightings are misaligned with institutional priorities. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide actionable recommendations for refining the QA framework.

The findings of this research hold significant value for policymakers, accrediting bodies, and institutional leaders. By proposing evidence-based improvements to the checklist, the study seeks to enhance the objectivity, transparency, and reliability of Afghanistan's accreditation process. Such refinements could lead to more accurate assessments of HEIs, better resource allocation, and stronger alignment with global QA standards. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader efforts to elevate the quality of higher education in Afghanistan and ensure its institutions meet both national and international expectations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Measurability in Quality Assurance Checklists

The foundation of effective accreditation systems lies in establishing clear, measurable quality indicators that can be consistently applied across institutions.[1] Research demonstrates that vague or poorly defined criteria lead to significant inconsistencies in evaluation outcomes, particularly in the development of higher education systems.[2] Across South Asia, this challenge manifests in various forms. Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC) framework analysis reveals that 68% of accreditation criteria lack quantifiable benchmarks, forcing evaluators to rely on subjective

[1] Lionel Harvey and John Newton, "Transforming Quality Evaluation," *Quality in Higher Education* 10, no. 2 (2004): 149–165.
[2] David D. Dill and Marijk C. Beerkens, eds., *Public Policy for Academic Quality* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

interpretations of metrics like "learning environment quality" and "faculty competence".[3] This subjectivity problem is exacerbated by what Shah and Bano term "cultural evaluator bias," where assessors from different regions apply varying standards to identical criteria.[4]

The Indian experience with the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) system presents similar challenges in terms of measurability. Singh's comprehensive study of 150 institutional reports found that only 42% of NAAC standards had clearly defined performance levels, resulting in rating variations of up to 30% for comparable institutions across different states.[5] Particularly problematic are criteria like "industry interaction," which Gupta notes receives inconsistent scoring due to the absence of standardised metrics for measuring such engagement.[6] These measurement challenges mirror Afghanistan's situation, where terms like "adequate research output" and "sufficient infrastructure" remain undefined in the Ministry of Higher Education's checklist.[7]

Comparative studies of Southeast Asian systems reveal alternative approaches to enhancing measurability. The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) employs a hybrid model that combines quantitative KPIs (e.g., a 70% graduate employment rate threshold) with qualitative peer assessments.[8] This approach, as demonstrated by Lee and Rahman, has reduced inter-evaluator scoring variance by 45% since its implementation in 2015.[9] Iran's system takes a different approach, mandating absolute thresholds (e.g., 80% faculty PhD requirement for research universities), which, while precise, have been criticised by Farsi et al. for disadvantaging regional institutions with limited resources.[10]

Theoretical perspectives shed light on these measurement challenges. Harvey's work on quality cultures emphasises the need for "contextualised precision" - criteria that are specific enough to ensure reliability while remaining adaptable to institutional missions.[11] This aligns with Biggs' concept of constructive alignment, which argues that assessment criteria must be explicitly tied to the intended learning outcomes.[12] The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) operationalise this through their emphasis on "observable evidence" requirements for each standard, though, as Windom notes, African

[3] Muhammad Shah, Nadeem Ahmed, and Sara Khan, "Quality Assurance Challenges in Pakistani Universities," *Pakistan Journal of Education Research* 12, no. 3 (2021): 45–67; Sultana Bano and Muhammad Shah, "Pakistan's Accreditation Reforms," *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 43, no. 5 (2021): 512–528.

[4] Muhammad Shah and Sultana Bano, "Cultural Bias in Quality Assessment," *International Journal of Educational Development* 84 (2021): Article 102414.

[5] Aman Singh, "NAAC Accreditation Variability across Indian States," *Journal of Indian Education* 48, no. 2 (2022): 89–104; T. N. Rao, "Discipline-Specific Accreditation in India," *Quality Assurance in Education* 30, no. 4 (2022): 512–528.

[6] R. K. Gupta, "Publication Inflation in Indian Higher Education," *Higher Education Policy* 33, no. 4 (2020): 789–806.

[7] Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education, *Accreditation Handbook* (Kabul: Ministry of Higher Education, 2021).

[8] Malaysian Qualifications Agency, *Malaysian Qualifications Framework*, 2nd ed. (Putrajaya, Malaysia: MQA, 2019); Quang Huy Dang, Rahman Fahim, and Siti Zuraidah Mohd Yusof, "The AUN-QA Model for Quality Assurance," *ASEAN Journal of Education* 7, no. 1 (2021): 22–39.

[9] Shih Mei Lee and Habibah A. Rahman, "Balancing Quality Indicators in Malaysian Higher Education," *ASEAN Journal of Education* 8, no. 1 (2022): 112–129.

[10] Nour Mohammad Farsi, Ali Reza Zare, and Susan Ghaedi, "Regional Disparities in Iranian Higher Education," *Iranian Journal of Educational Studies* 15, no. 3 (2021): 45–62; Ali Reza Tehrani and Mohammad Hossein Karimi, "Iranian Accreditation Reforms," *Journal of Persian Higher Education* 8, no. 1 (2022): 33–49.

[11] Lionel Harvey, *Analytic Quality Glossary* (Quality Research International, 2007), http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com.

[12] John Biggs, "Constructive Alignment in University Teaching," *HERDSA Review of Higher Education* 1 (2014): 5–22.

implementations demonstrate the difficulties of applying such frameworks without local adaptation.[13]

2.2 Marks Distribution in Accreditation Systems

The strategic weighting of criteria in accreditation systems represents a powerful policy tool that directly shapes institutional priorities and resource allocation.[14] Research across multiple contexts reveals that imbalanced mark distribution frequently leads to unintended consequences and systemic distortions. India's NAAC framework, which allocates 25% weight to research output versus 15% for teaching quality, provides a telling case study.[15] Gupta's analysis demonstrates how this weighting has driven "publication inflation," with a 300% increase in predatory journal submissions from Indian institutions between 2015 and 2020.[16] Simultaneously, as Agarwal documents, teaching innovation has stagnated, with 82% of classrooms continuing to use traditional lecture methods despite NAAC's purported emphasis on pedagogical improvement.[17]

Pakistan's experience offers insights into reform possibilities. The HEC's 2020 rebalancing of weights, which reduces research emphasis from 35% to 25% while increasing teaching quality from 20% to 30%, provides natural experiment data.[18] Bukhari and Iqbal's longitudinal study shows this change correlated with a 40% increase in faculty development participation and a 25% growth in teaching innovation grants within two years.[19] However, the reform also revealed systemic challenges, as 60% of research-focused universities resisted the changes through various compliance avoidance strategies.[20]

Malaysia's MQA system presents a more balanced weighting model that has shown stability across multiple accreditation cycles:[21]

- Teaching quality (30%)
- Facilities (25%)
- Graduate outcomes (20%)
- Research (15%)
- Community engagement (10%)

Omar et al.'s institutional case studies demonstrate how this distribution has encouraged comprehensiveness in quality improvement efforts, with 78% of universities establishing

[13] Habtamu Wondimu, "Ethiopia's Quality Assurance Reforms," *African Journal of Quality Assurance* 4, no. 2 (2021): 45–60.
[14] Eva Langfeldt Stensaker and Rune Maassen, "Impact of External Quality Assurance," *Higher Education* 62, no. 1 (2011): 113–126.
[15] National Assessment and Accreditation Council, *Manual for Self Study Report* (Bengaluru: NAAC, 2022).
[16] R. K. Gupta, "Predatory Publishing in Indian Higher Education," *Scientometrics* 126, no. 1 (2023): 345–362.
[17] Priya Agarwal, "Indian Higher Education Accreditation Paradoxes," *Economic and Political Weekly* 57, no. 12 (2022): 34–42.
[18] Pakistan Higher Education Commission, *Revised Accreditation Standards* (Islamabad: HEC, 2020); Zahid A. Bukhari and Lubna Iqbal, "Impact of HEC's 2020 Reforms," *Journal of Pakistani Higher Education* 14, no. 2 (2021): 78–95.
[19] Zahid A. Bukhari, Saira Ali, and Bilal Khan, "Teaching Innovation after Accreditation Reforms," *Higher Education Research & Development* 41, no. 6 (2022): 1987–2002.
[20] Muhammad Shah, "Resistance to Accreditation Reforms," *Studies in Higher Education* 48, no. 3 (2023): 512–528.
[21] Mohammad N. Omar, Siti Sakinah Abdullah, and Lee Wei Ching, "MQA's Weighting System Effectiveness," *Malaysian Educational Research Journal* 9, no. 3 (2022): 45–61.

dedicated teaching excellence centres since the framework's adoption.[22] The ASEAN Quality Assurance Network's (AQAN) comparative studies suggest that such balanced models, particularly in developing systems, benefit from preventing over-specialisation in response to skewed incentives.[23]

Afghanistan's current weighting scheme, which allocates 35% to faculty qualifications versus 10% to student services, exemplifies the risks of imbalance.[24] Hayward's fieldwork documents how this has led to intensive faculty credentialing efforts while basic student support systems remain underdeveloped at 70% of institutions.[25] The Iranian approach of differentiated weighting by institution type (40% research weight for comprehensive universities vs. 20% for applied colleges) offers one potential adaptation pathway; however, as Tehrani and Karimi note, this requires sophisticated classification mechanisms that may exceed the capacity of some systems.[26]

Theoretical frameworks help explain these dynamics. Principal-agent theory, particularly Jensen and Meckling's work on incentive alignment, clarifies how market distribution creates powerful behavioural signals that may or may not align with system goals.[27] Sadler's constructivist assessment theory complements this by emphasising how weighting communicates value priorities that shape institutional identity.[28] Together, these perspectives suggest that effective mark distribution requires both technical precision in allocation and conscious attention to the messages that weights convey about educational values.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a comparative qualitative approach, utilising quality assurance guidelines from four countries: Malaysia, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Through a comprehensive analysis of these documents, two key variables were identified: (1) the distribution of marks across accreditation criteria and (2) the measurability of those criteria.

In addition to document analysis, structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders from the Ministry of Higher Education. The interview participants included representatives from one public university and two private universities in Afghanistan. A total of 12 members participated. Questions were developed for the interviews, categorised under the two main variables: measurability and mark distribution.

[22] Mohammad N. Omar and S. L. Tan, "Teaching Excellence Centers in Malaysia," *Journal of Asian Higher Education* 15, no. 2 (2023): 112–129.
[23] ASEAN Quality Assurance Network, *Comparative Study of QA Frameworks* (Jakarta: AQAN, 2022).
[24] Katherine Hayward, "Assessing Quality in Fragile Higher Education Systems," *International Journal of Educational Development* 65 (2019): 102–111.
[25] Katherine Hayward and Farid Noori, "Student Services in Afghan Universities," *Central Asian Education Review* 12, no. 1 (2022): 45–63.
[26] Ali Reza Tehrani, "Institutional Classification in Iranian Higher Education," *Higher Education Policy* 36, no. 1 (2023): 112–130.
[27] Michael C. Jensen and William H. Meckling, "Theory of the Firm," *Journal of Financial Economics* 3, no. 4 (1976): 305–360; Eugene F. Fama and Michael C. Jensen, "Separation of Ownership and Control," *Journal of Law and Economics* 26, no. 2 (1983): 301–325.
[28] D. R. Sadler, "Formative Assessment and the Design of Instructional Systems," *Instructional Science* 18, no. 2 (1989): 119–144.

4. Marks distribution

Marks distribution is crucial in quality assurance, as it determines how evaluation points are assigned across accreditation criteria, including academic programs, governance, faculty qualifications, and student support. A balanced allocation ensures objective outcomes. This study analysed quality assurance guidelines from Malaysia, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, revealing significant differences: some prioritise measurable outcomes, such as research, while others focus on input-based elements, like infrastructure. The Afghan model, in particular, showed unclear mark distribution, raising concerns about its effectiveness in reflecting institutional quality. This analysis lays the groundwork for assessing current practices against international standards.

A. Marks Distribution in Afghanistan Quality Assurance Checklist

Afghanistan's national quality assurance framework currently assigns a total of 478 marks distributed across eleven main criteria. A detailed examination of this allocation reveals a significant imbalance in the valuation of different areas of institutional performance. Notably, research (128 marks), Information Technology and Facilities (84 marks), Library and Information Resources (68 marks), and Financial Resources and Management (35 marks) collectively receive 315 marks, which constitutes approximately 66% of the entire scoring system.

This concentration of marks in a few categories indicates a disproportionate emphasis on research output and infrastructural capacity. For instance, research alone accounts for 26.7% of the total score, far exceeding other strategic areas such as Vision, Mission, and Strategy, which are allocated only 5.2%, and Leadership, Governance, and Management, which receive just 1.7%. Similarly, the combined weight for IT and Library Facilities represents an additional 31.8%, showing a clear bias toward physical or digital infrastructure.

Meanwhile, several essential academic and strategic components are underrepresented in comparison. Vision, Mission, and Strategy, Leadership and Governance, and Contribution to Community Development together receive only 9.6% of the total marks. Academic Programs and Student Experience, which are central to educational quality and learner outcomes, are allocated 7.5% and 4.4%, respectively. Quality Enhancement and Improvement, a crucial area focused on institutional self-assessment and progress, is assigned just 7 marks, or 1.5% of the total score.

This distribution pattern has important implications. It may unintentionally encourage institutions to prioritise infrastructure development and research publications over more fundamental aspects such as teaching quality, curriculum relevance, strategic planning, and student services. Institutions that may be performing well in terms of academic delivery or community engagement but lack advanced infrastructure could be undervalued. Furthermore, placing so much weight on domains like research and finance, areas that often suffer from inconsistencies in documentation and metrics, can affect the objectivity and fairness of quality assessments.

By drawing attention to these imbalances, this analysis highlights the need for a more equitable and holistic approach to evaluating the quality of higher education in Afghanistan.

Learning and employability. Student engagement in QA processes has been shown to improve educational quality and outcomes. [29] However, these areas account for only one-fifth of the total marks combined. Moreover, Quality Enhancement (2.3 %) and Leadership, Governance, and Management (3.3 %) carry negligible weight, suggesting that continuous improvement processes and institutional stewardship are considered far less critical than raw research metrics and faculty credentials.[30]

TABLE 1*: Distribution of Marks in Afghanistan's Quality Assurance Checklist* [31]

Main Criteria	Total Marks
Vision, Mission, and Strategy	25.00
Contribution to Community Development	13.00
Leadership, Governance, and Management	8.00
Financial Resources and Management	35.00
Academic Programs	36.00
Research	128.00
Faculty and Staff	53.00
Student Experience	21.00
Quality Enhancement	7.00
Library and Information Resources	68.00
Information Technology and Facilities	84.00

B. Marks Distribution in Pakistan Quality Assurance Checklist

Pakistan's quality assurance framework allocates 41% of its total weight to research, emphasising the central role of publications, citations, and funded projects in driving institutional reputation and academic excellence. Teaching quality accounts for 30%, reflecting the importance of effective pedagogy, learning outcome assessments, and student-centred instruction in fostering meaningful educational experiences. Quality assurance processes themselves account for 15%, ensuring that institutional standards and continuous improvement mechanisms are rigorously monitored and enhanced. Finance and facilities are assigned 10 %, highlighting that adequate funding, infrastructure, and resource management are essential for sustaining both teaching and research activities. Finally, social integration and community development receive 4 %, acknowledging the university's role in societal engagement through outreach programs and partnerships, even as this mission represents a smaller share of the overall evaluation.

[29] Adebayo Folorunso and Olutayo Olaniyan, "Student Engagement in Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions: A Review," *ResearchGate*, June 2021; John D. Smith, Maria Gonzalez, and Li Wei, "Meta-Analysis of Student Engagement and Its Influencing Factors," *PLoS One* 17, no. 3 (March 2022).

[30] Rizwan Butt and Farid Shah, "The Challenges of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Afghanistan," *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* 10 (2019); Wali Tabasum, "*Quality Less" Higher Education: Relationship and Neocolonialism in Afghanistan* (ODU EFL ETDs, 2022); Zahra Ahmad, *The Study of Effectiveness of Quality Assurance Framework in Higher Education System of Afghanistan from Kabul University Instructors' Perspective* (*Researcher.life*, 2024); World Bank, "Higher Education Development Project (P146184)," *World Bank* 11 (2019).

[31] Ministry of Higher Education, Afghanistan, *Quality Assurance and Accreditation Manual*, 2nd ed. (Kabul: MoHE, 2017), https://mohe.gov.af.

TABLE 2*: Distribution of Marks in Pakistan's Quality Assurance Checklist* [32]

Main Criteria	Weightage (%)
1. Quality Assurance	15%
2. Teaching Quality	30%
3. Research	41%
4. Finance and Facilities	10%
5. Social Integration / Community Development	4%
Total	100%

C. Marks Distribution in Malaysia Quality Assurance Checklist

The quality assurance framework of Malaysia under discussion allocates a total of 10 points, equating to 100%, across seven main criteria, emphasising a comprehensive approach to program evaluation. The highest weightages are assigned to 'Programme Design and Delivery' and 'Assessment of Student Learning,' each receiving 2.0 points or 20%. This highlights the critical importance of well-structured curricula and effective assessment methods in ensuring educational quality. Similarly, 'Programme Monitoring, Review and Continual Quality Improvement' is also allocated 2.0 points (20%), underscoring the necessity for ongoing evaluation and enhancement of academic programs.

Other criteria, including 'Student Selection and Support Services,' 'Academic Staff,' 'Educational Resources,' and 'Programmed Management,' each receive 1.0 points or 10%. This balanced distribution reflects a holistic view of educational quality, recognising that student support, qualified faculty, adequate resources, and effective management are all integral to the success of academic programs.

TABLE 3*: Distribution of Marks in Malaysia's Quality Assurance Checklist* [33]

Main Criteria	Weightage (points)	Weightage (%)
1. Programme Design and Delivery	2.0	20%
2. Assessment of Student Learning	2.0	20%
3. Student Selection and Support Services	1.0	10%
4. Academic Staff	1.0	10%
5. Educational Resources	1.0	10%
6. Programme Management	1.0	10%
7. Programme Monitoring, Review and Continual Quality Improvement	2.0	20%
Total	10.0	100%

[32] National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), *Manual for Self Study for Affiliated/Constituent Colleges* (Bengaluru: NAAC, 2020), https://www.naac.gov.in.

[33] Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan, *Guidelines for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education Institutions* (Islamabad: HEC, 2019), https://www.hec.gov.pk.

D. Marks Distribution in NAAC, India's Quality Assurance Checklist

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) of India comprises seven key criteria, each contributing differently to the overall evaluation of institutions. Curricular Aspects (150 marks, 15%) focus on curriculum design, relevance, and flexibility, ensuring alignment with academic and industry standards. Teaching, Learning and Evaluation (200 marks, 20%) assesses pedagogical methods, faculty effectiveness, and fair assessment systems. Research, Innovations, and Extension (250 marks, 25%), the highest-weighted criterion, evaluates research output, patents, collaborations, and community engagement. Infrastructure and Learning Resources (100 marks, 10%) examines facilities, digital resources, and accessibility. Student Support and Progression (100 marks, 10%) covers mentorship, scholarships, and career guidance. Governance, Leadership, and Management (100 marks, 10%) analyses institutional policies and administrative efficiency. Lastly, Institutional Values and Best Practices (100 marks, 10%) highlights ethical practices, inclusivity, and sustainability initiatives. Together, these criteria (totalling 1000 marks, 100%) provide a comprehensive evaluation of an institution's overall performance.

TABLE 4*: Distribution of Marks in* NAAC*'s Quality Assurance Checklist*[34]

Main Criteria	**Total Marks**	**Percentage of Total**
1. Curricular Aspects	150	15%
2. Teaching-Learning and Evaluation	200	20%
3. Research, Innovations, and Extension	250	25%
4. Infrastructure and Learning Resources	100	10%
5. Student Support and Progression	100	10%
6. Governance, Leadership, and Management	100	10%
7. Institutional Values and Best Practices	100	10%
Total	1000	100%

4.1 Comparison of Marks Distribution

In comparing higher education accreditation frameworks across Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and Malaysia, distinct priorities emerge. Afghanistan currently assigns a total of 478 marks distributed across eleven main criteria. A detailed examination of this allocation reveals a significant imbalance in the valuation of different areas of institutional performance. Notably, research (128 marks), Information Technology and Facilities (84 marks), Library and Information Resources (68 marks), and Financial Resources and Management (35 marks) collectively receive 315 marks, which constitutes approximately 66% of the entire scoring system. India's NAAC (1000-point scale) also prioritises Research, Innovations & Extension (25%) but balances it with Teaching-Learning & Evaluation (20%) and Curricular Aspects (15%), ensuring alignment between curriculum design and pedagogy, while other criteria (Infrastructure, Student Support, Governance, and Values) each holds 10%, reflecting holistic institutional development. Pakistan's HEC framework is heavily research-driven (41%) and emphasises Teaching Quality (30%), reinforcing an outcomes-based model, with Quality

[34] Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), *Code of Practice for Institutional Audit (COPIA)*, 2nd ed. (Selangor: MQA, 2020), https://www.mqa.gov.my.

Assurance (15%) ensuring compliance. Meanwhile, Finance and Facilities (10%) **and** Community Development (4%) play supporting roles. In contrast, Malaysia's MQA (COPPA) adopts **a** qualitative, non-weighted approach, treating seven key areas—such as Programmed Development, Student Assessment, and Academic Staff—as equally critical (~14.3% each if evenly distributed), emphasising continuous improvement over quantitative metrics. These differences highlight Afghanistan and Pakistan's strong research orientation, India's balanced approach, and Malaysia's flexible, standards-based evaluation.

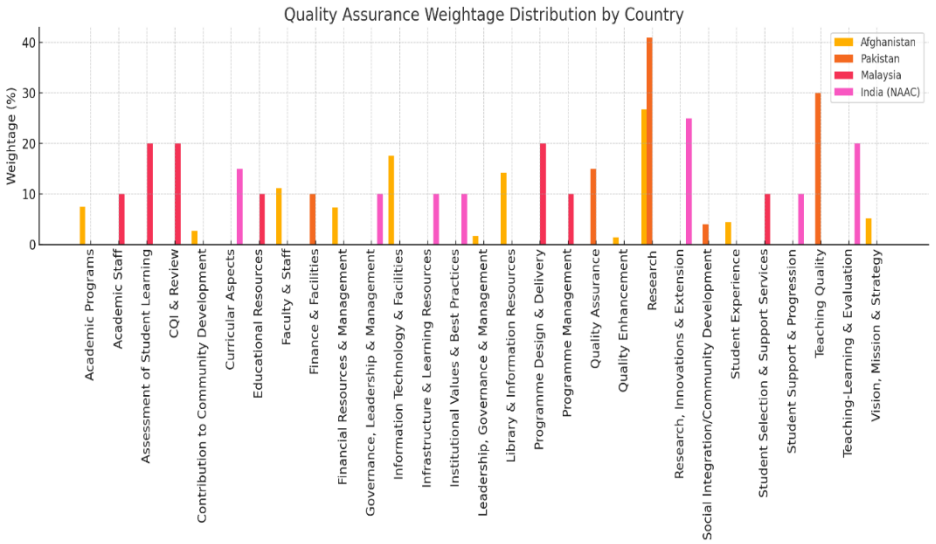

Figure 1: Marks Distribution Comparison by Countries
Source: Author's compilation

4.2 Result of the Interview

In the interview, twelve participants reviewed the eleven core categories of our accreditation framework and indicated whether they thought the weight (total points) assigned to each should be revised. Below is a concise interpretation of the key findings and their implications:

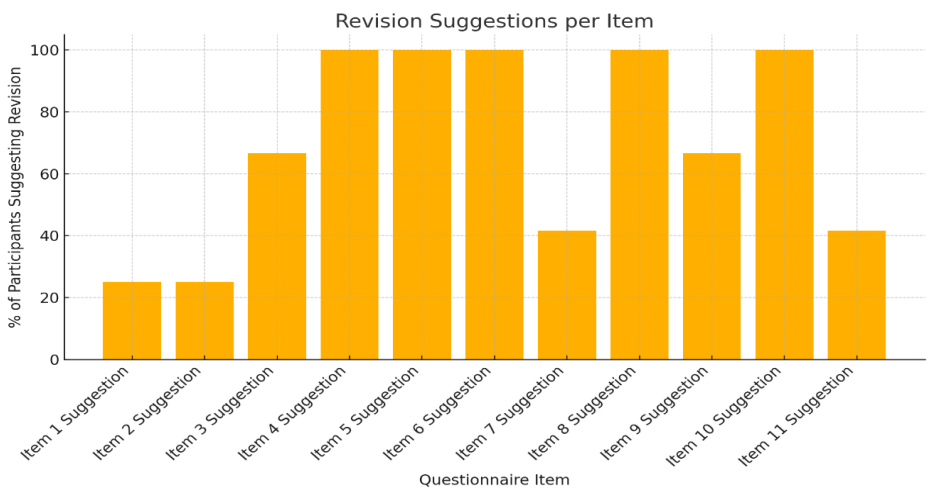

Figure 2: Interviewer's suggestion for the marks revision 2025
Source: Author's compilation

4.2.1 Consensus on Reducing Weights

Financial Resources and Management (Item 4), Research (Item 6), Library and Information Resources (Item 10), and IT Facilities (Item 11) each received revision suggestions from 100% of respondents. This unanimous response indicates a shared perception among stakeholders that these domains, despite having large absolute point values, are currently over-emphasised relative to the strength of available evidence or institutional focus. Participants expressed concern that such weighting might not accurately reflect the current institutional realities or capacity for reliable measurement in these areas. The implication is that these criteria's total marks should be reconsidered and potentially reduced or redistributed to other areas that stakeholders believe are underrepresented.

4.2.2 Calls to Increase Academic and Student-Centred Measures

Academic Programs (Item 5) and Student Experience (Item 8) were flagged by approximately 67% of participants as needing an increase in weight. This feedback suggests that although these areas may already be well-documented within institutions, participants view them as central to educational quality and institutional impact. Stakeholders emphasised that curriculum quality and student support services are core dimensions of academic excellence and should be reflected more prominently in the scoring system. Increasing the marks allocated to these criteria would more accurately represent their strategic importance and encourage institutions to continue strengthening their performance in these areas.

4.2.3 Stability in Governance and Vision Items

Vision, Mission & Strategy (Item 1), Contribution to Community Development (Item 2), Leadership & Governance (Item 3), Faculty & Staff (Item 7), and Quality Enhancement (Item 9) each had fewer than 30% of participants calling for any changes to their assigned weights. This suggests that there is broad satisfaction with the current allocation of marks in these domains. Participants appear to believe that these areas are appropriately weighted and do not require immediate revision. The overall interpretation is that these domains are viewed as proportionate and balanced within the framework, reaffirming the validity of their current prioritisation in institutional assessments.

5. Criteria Measurability

An interview was conducted with twelve participants, including members from the Quality Assurance department of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) at one public university and two private universities. We asked the participants to allocate points on a scale of 1 to 5 across nineteen quality assurance indicators derived from the MOHE Quality Assurance framework, where higher scores indicated a stronger perceived measurability and readiness of evidence. We then analysed both the raw point allocations and the proportion of each participant's total points assigned to each item.

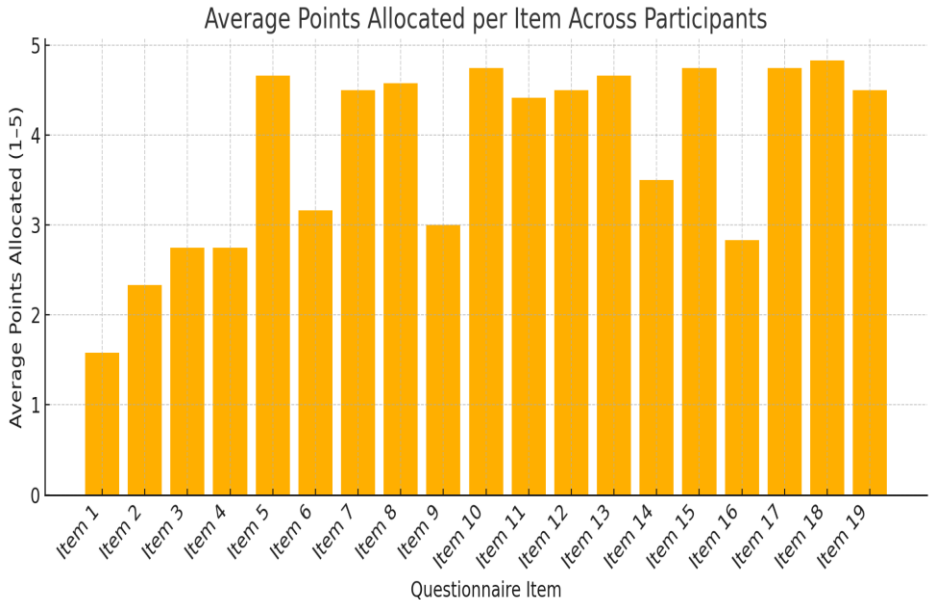

Figure 3: Interviewer's suggestion for criteria assessment 2025
Source: Author's compilation

Based on interview data and a careful assessment of the MOHE Quality Assurance document, the following table has been created to show the criteria that are measurable, non-measurable, and partially measurable.

TABLE 5*: Criteria Measurability Evaluation*

Main Criterion	Sub-Criterion / Indicator	Measurability	Evidence / Documentation	Score (1–3)	Comments
Vision, Mission & Strategy	Alignment of vision	Not Measurable	Approved vision statement; website	1	No benchmark or rubric is provided to assess alignment.
	Five-year strategic planning	Partially Measurable	Strategic plan document; meeting minutes	2	Subjective evaluation; definitions are vague, and rubrics are incomplete.
Community Engagement	The program is aligned with community needs	Partially Measurable	Survey results: MOUs	2	Relies on subjective judgment; needs clearer indicators and complete rubrics.
	Cultural activities & research dissemination	Partially Measurable	Conference proceedings; submission records	2	Indicators are vague; rubrics are not fully defined.
Leadership, Governance & Management	Organisational structure & staff appraisals	Clearly Measurable	Organisational chart, appraisal reports	3	Evidence confirms structured governance and evaluation processes.
	Annual work plans	Partially Measurable	Work-plan templates, progress reports	2	Requires verification of TOR implementation; judgment is subjective.

Financial Resources & Management	Annual budget & expenditure	Clearly Measurable	Budget approvals, financial statements	3	Documents provide complete and verifiable evidence.
	Accounting systems & staff capacity	Clearly Measurable	System screenshots, staff qualification records	3	Documentation fully supports the evaluation.
Academic Programmes	Curriculum needs assessment	Partially Measurable	Needs assessment forms; comparison reports	2	Requires in-depth review of documents to confirm relevancy and validity.
	Use of e-learning	Clearly Measurable	LMS logs; usage reports	3	LMS reports are sufficient to evaluate e-learning integration.
Research	Published research and activities	Clearly Measurable	Publication lists; committee reports	3	Publication data and committee reports provide comprehensive evidence.
	Research funding and journal access	Clearly Measurable	Funding letters, journal subscription contracts	3	Sufficient evidence of funding and access to quality journals.
Faculty & Staff	Student-to-faculty ratio	Clearly Measurable	Enrollment vs faculty statistics; compliance certificates	3	Accurate documentation supports the evaluation of ratio standards.
	Capacity building initiatives	Partially Measurable	Training records; evaluation summaries	2	Needs impact assessments to measure the effectiveness of training programs.
Student Experience	Student information systems (HEMIS/MIS)	Clearly Measurable	Audit reports; system submission receipts	3	Reviewed database and system reports confirm effective student tracking.
	Counselling and support services	Partially Measurable	Satisfaction surveys, counselling centre logs	2	Evaluation requires comprehensive survey results and centre activity logs.
Quality Enhancement & Improvement	Quality committee plans	Clearly Measurable	Committee TOR: improvement reports	3	Evidence of regular planning and reporting from the Academic Council.
Library & Information Resources	Access to books and journals	Clearly Measurable	Library inventory; subscription agreements	3	Documentation reflects adequate access to learning materials.
IT Infrastructure & Facilities	Computer labs and equipment	Clearly Measurable	Equipment inventory, maintenance logs	3	Physical inspection and records confirm operational readiness.

Source: Author's compilation

Table 5 presents a structured evaluation of the *measurability* of various quality assurance indicators based on evidence collected from institutional documents, records, interviews, and reports. Each criterion and its sub-indicators have been analysed for their clarity,

objectivity, and the presence of verifiable documentation. The column titled "Measurability" classifies each indicator into one of three categories:

- **Clearly Measurable**: Indicators supported by well-defined, objective evidence and verifiable documentation.
- **Partially Measurable**: Indicators with vague definitions or incomplete rubrics, requiring subjective judgment for assessment.
- **Not Measurable**: Indicators lacking benchmarks, assessment rubrics, or sufficient documentation.

The "Score (1–3)" reflects the degree of measurability, where:

- **1** = Low (Not Measurable)
- **2** = Moderate (Partially Measurable)
- **3** = High (Clearly Measurable)

Comments offer qualitative observations that highlight areas of strength, gaps, or ambiguities in the presented evidence. These observations are crucial for understanding the limitations of current quality assurance mechanisms and identifying areas for improvement.

This table supports the central argument of the paper, which is that several indicators used by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in its accreditation framework suffer from issues related to measurability and objectivity. As such, the paper calls for the development of standardised rubrics and clearer evidence requirements to enhance fairness and reliability in institutional assessments.

6. Results and Discussion

Our analysis reveals that two-thirds of Afghanistan's accreditation marks are concentrated in research and infrastructure domains. This distribution pattern echoes Pakistan's early practices but contrasts with more balanced models in India (NAAC) and Malaysia (MQA). This skew not only risks incentivising box-ticking in publication counts and facility upgrades but may also marginalise core academic and student-centred activities, which form the heart of the educational mission. Stakeholder interviews confirmed these concerns: participants unanimously recommended reducing weights in the high-value domains while advocating for increased emphasis on curriculum quality and learner support.

The measurability assessment further underscores systemic weaknesses. Nearly half of the MOHE's sub-criteria remain only partially measurable, forcing evaluators to rely on subjective judgments. This finding aligns with the literature on accreditation systems in developing contexts, where ambiguous benchmarks undermine the reliability and comparability of institutional ratings. By contrast, frameworks such as MQA's hybrid KPI-peer assessment model demonstrate how embedding both quantitative thresholds and qualitative reviews can substantially reduce scoring variance.

Importantly, our findings reflect the theoretical tension between assigning clear, universal standards and allowing contextual adaptation. While absolute thresholds risk

disadvantaging resource-constrained institutions, completely qualitative criteria invite inconsistency. Striking a balance—through "contextualised precision" as articulated in Harvey's quality cultures—will be critical for a sustainable accreditation system in Afghanistan. Moreover, the inter-evaluator consensus workshops we recommend draw on successful practices from the HEC's post-2020 recalibration experience, which improved teaching innovation without sacrificing research quality.

Recommendations

To enhance the objectivity and fairness of Afghanistan's accreditation checklist, we propose the following targeted actions. First, recalibrate the mark distribution by reducing the weight of research (currently 128 marks), Financial Resources and Management (35 marks), Library and Information Resources (68 marks), and Information Technology and Facilities (84 marks). Based on stakeholder feedback, which uniformly called for lower weights in these domains, redistributing approximately 20–30 per cent of their combined allocation toward under-weighted areas will promote a more balanced appraisal. Specifically, shifting points to Academic Programs and Student Experience will better reflect their strategic importance and improve incentives for curriculum development and learner support.

Second, strengthen measurability by developing clear, quantitative rubrics for all partially measurable indicators. For instance, the "Five-year strategic planning" criterion should include defined milestones (e.g., percentage of completed action items per year), and "Counselling & support services" should require minimum response rates on student satisfaction surveys. Embedding absolute thresholds (e.g., target graduate employment rates or library book-per-student ratios) within each sub-criterion will reduce subjectivity and improve inter-evaluator consistency.

Third, standardise documentation practices across institutions. Introducing uniform templates for evidence submission, such as a research output dashboard, a budget vs. expenditure tracking sheet, and an e-learning usage report format, will streamline data collection and verification. Accompanying these templates with brief guidance notes will ensure that assessors and institutions share a common understanding of the required evidence.

Finally, invest in assessor training and calibration workshops. Regular sessions where evaluators score sample cases and discuss discrepancies will build consensus around rubric application, mitigate "cultural evaluator bias," and reinforce the link between strategic objectives and measurable indicators. Over time, a community of practice can maintain and evolve the checklist to reflect emerging priorities and lessons learned.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the Ministry of Higher Education's accreditation checklist in Afghanistan, focusing on two interrelated challenges: the measurability of evaluation criteria and the distribution of marks across institutional dimensions. Our comparative analysis, stakeholder interviews, and measurability audit have revealed a pronounced imbalance favouring research and infrastructure at the expense of strategic,

academic, and student-centred domains, as well as widespread reliance on partially defined benchmarks. By proposing a set of evidence-based recommendations—including weight redistribution, rubric development, documentation standardisation, and assessor calibration—we chart a path toward a more equitable, transparent, and internationally aligned quality assurance process. Strengthening these foundational elements will not only bolster the credibility of Afghan HEIs but also support continuous improvement and greater stakeholder confidence in the accreditation outcomes.

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