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An Analysis of the Effect of Quality Assurance on Higher Education in Afghanistan

Dr. Mohd Asif Shah
Zabihullah
Muhammad Sabaoon Khan

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Dr. Mohd Asif Shah
Zabihullah
Muhammad Sabaoon Khan

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of quality assurance (QA) mechanisms on higher education in Afghanistan, a country undergoing significant educational reforms. Despite the importance of higher education for national development, Afghanistan faces challenges in ensuring academic standards and institutional effectiveness. Quality assurance frameworks, when effectively implemented, play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of teaching, learning, and research outcomes. This paper critically examines the existing QA structures within Afghanistan universities, exploring their role in institutional accountability and their alignment with international educational standards. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, the research assesses the effectiveness of current QA practices in improving educational quality, student outcomes, and institutional management. A structured questionnaire was designed to collect data from faculty members, administrative staff, and students across multiple universities in Afghanistan. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation from both public and private universities.

Furthermore, the study identifies key challenges in the adoption and execution of QA systems, including limited resources and a lack of skilled personnel. Based on the findings, the paper offers practical recommendations to strengthen QA practices in Afghanistan's higher education sector, emphasising the need for continuous reform, capacity building, and international collaboration. This study contributes to the broader discourse on higher education reform in developing countries, providing insights into the unique challenges and opportunities facing Afghanistan's higher education system.

Keywords: Academic Standards, Afghanistan, Capacity Building, Developing Countries, Educational Policy, Educational Quality, Educational Reforms, Higher Education, Institutional Accountability, Quality Assurance

1. Introduction

Higher education plays a pivotal role in a country's socio-economic development.¹ In Afghanistan, where the education system has faced numerous challenges due to decades of conflict, quality assurance (QA) mechanisms are essential for maintaining academic

¹ Philip G. Altbach, Liz Reisberg, and Laura E. Rumbley, *Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution*, vol. 22 (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

standards and ensuring institutional accountability.² In recent years, Afghanistan's higher education sector has undergone significant reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of education and aligning it with global standards. However, while the importance of quality assurance is widely acknowledged, its implementation and effectiveness in Afghanistan's universities remain a subject of debate.³

Quality assurance systems are designed to assess and improve educational quality, ensure that institutions meet set standards, and promote continuous improvement in teaching, learning, and research.⁴ In Afghanistan, the introduction of QA practices has been hindered by several challenges, including limited resources and a lack of trained personnel. These obstacles have led to an uneven implementation of QA systems across universities, with some institutions making progress, while others continue to struggle with basic QA practices.⁵

This study aims to assess the impact of quality assurance on higher education in Afghanistan, with a focus on the challenges and opportunities for institutional improvement. The research examines the current QA frameworks in Afghan universities, evaluates their effectiveness in improving academic outcomes, and explores how QA practices contribute to institutional accountability and overall educational quality. By investigating these aspects, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of QA in the development of Afghanistan's higher education sector.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How do current quality assurance (QA) mechanisms influence the quality of teaching, learning, and research outcomes in Afghan higher education?
2. To what extent do QA frameworks in Afghan universities align with international educational standards?
3. What are the primary challenges in implementing QA systems within Afghan higher education institutions?
4. How effective are existing QA practices in improving student outcomes and institutional management?
5. What strategies can be recommended to strengthen QA mechanisms in Afghanistan's higher education sector?

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of quality assurance mechanisms on teaching, learning, and research outcomes in Afghanistan's higher education sector.
2. To evaluate the alignment of Afghan QA frameworks with international educational standards.
3. To identify the key challenges hindering the effective implementation of QA systems in Afghan universities.

² Antonius Verheijen, Atiqullah Ahmadzai, and Richard Hogg, "Through the Looking Glass: Lessons from the World Bank Afghanistan Portfolio for FCV Engagement," 2022.

³ Wolayat Tabasum Niroo and Chris R. Glass, "Illusions of Improvement: Aspirations and Realities of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Policy in Afghanistan Higher Education," *Higher Education Research & Development* 41, no. 3 (2022): 952–966.

⁴ Samar Aad Makhoul, "Higher Education Accreditation, Quality Assurance and Their Impact to Teaching and Learning Enhancement," *Journal of Economic and Administrative Sciences* 35, no. 4 (2019): 235–250.

⁵ Sayed Ahmad Javid Mussawwy and Gretchen B. Rossman, "Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Afghanistan: Faculty Members' Perceptions from Selected Universities," *Higher Learning Research Communications* 8, no. 2 (2018): n2.

4. To assess the effectiveness of current QA practices in enhancing educational quality, student performance, and institutional management.
5. To propose practical recommendations for improving QA practices, emphasising continuous reform, capacity building, and international collaboration.

2. Literature Review

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education is a vital component for enhancing academic standards, ensuring accountability, and promoting institutional growth and development. Over the past few decades, many countries have adopted QA frameworks to meet international education standards, with an increasing focus on systematic approaches to evaluating and improving educational processes. In the context of Afghanistan, the concept of QA has been relatively new, emerging as a response to the growing need for reforms in the higher education sector.⁶

Choosing the right higher education institution has become a significant challenge for students, parents, and faculty members alike.⁷ With rising competition in the academic sector, institutions are increasingly focused not only on maintaining high-quality education but also on building a strong local and global reputation. As the number of universities continues to grow, those aiming to lead must seek ways to differentiate themselves. Today, universities compete based on factors such as their legacy, geographic location, graduate employability, public image, and educational quality. To remain competitive, many institutions strive to meet the specific criteria set by internationally accredited agencies.⁸

Globally, studies have highlighted the significance of QA systems in enhancing the overall quality of higher education. For instance, Bejan, Robu, and Sandu argue that QA mechanisms contribute to the transparency and effectiveness of educational programs, ensuring that they meet the demands of both students and the job market.⁹ Furthermore, QA practices are essential for improving teaching and learning outcomes, as they provide a framework for continuous feedback and improvements in curriculum design, assessment methods, and student services.¹⁰

According to Jurvelin, Finnish law requires higher education institutions to conduct regular external evaluations of their quality assurance systems.¹¹ In Finland, national quality assurance is primarily implemented through extensive audits of these quality systems. These audits examine the methods and practices that institutions use to ensure and improve the quality of education and related operations. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), formerly known as the Finnish Higher Education

⁶ Theodor Leiber, Bjørn Stensaker, and Lee Harvey, "Impact Evaluation of Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Methodology and Causal Designs," *Quality in Higher Education* 21, no. 3 (2015): 288–311.

⁷ John Biggs, Catherine Tang, and Gregor Kennedy, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 5th ed. (London: McGraw-Hill Education, 2022).

⁸ Rodolphe Durand and Jean McGuire, "Legitimizing Agencies in the Face of Selection: The Case of AACSB," *Organization Studies* 26, no. 2 (2005): 165–196.

⁹ Stelian Andrei Bejan et al., "Quality Assurance and Its Impact from Higher Education Institutions' Perspectives: Methodological Approaches, Experiences and Expectations," *Quality in Higher Education* 21, no. 3 (2015): 343–371.

¹⁰ David D. Dill and Maarja Beerkens, eds., *Public Policy for Academic Quality: Analyses of Innovative Policy Instruments* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

¹¹ Jouni Antero Jurvelin, Matti Kajaste, and Heikki Malinen, "Impact Evaluation of EUR-ACE Programme Accreditation at Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences (Finland)," *European Journal of Higher Education* 8, no. 3 (2018): 304–318.

Evaluation Council (FINHEEC), generally carries out these audits. However, institutions in Finland also have the option to commission audits from any internationally recognised audit organisation. FINHEEC operates as an independent expert agency that supports both higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education and Culture in matters related to evaluation and assessment. It is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education.

Pescaru says that quality assurance in Romanian higher education is overseen at various levels, like universities, departments, academic staff, and administrative units.¹² The objective is to foster ongoing enhancement in the quality of education, research, and administrative operations.

Having a thorough understanding of systemic and causal factors is becoming increasingly important, as many stakeholders in higher education now seek quality policies that are backed by research. In line with this trend, there is currently a growing interest among higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, and other relevant parties in gaining deeper insights into the effectiveness and efficiency of quality assurance measures.¹³

In Afghanistan, however, the implementation of QA systems has been constrained by several challenges. According to Welch and Wahidyar, the lack of infrastructure and limited resources have hindered the establishment of effective quality assurance (QA) practices in Afghan universities.¹⁴ Additionally, there is a shortage of qualified personnel capable of overseeing QA processes, which has resulted in inconsistencies in QA implementation across institutions. While some universities have made strides toward adopting QA frameworks, the progress remains uneven, with several institutions still lacking basic QA mechanisms.

Several studies have examined the role of QA in improving the quality of education in post-conflict societies. Taheryar suggests that QA systems can act as a stabilising force in such settings, promoting institutional accountability and ensuring that academic standards are upheld despite external challenges.¹⁵ QA practices could play a key role in fostering a culture of continuous improvement and academic integrity.

Despite these challenges, the literature suggests that QA frameworks offer significant opportunities for reform in Afghanistan's higher education sector. By fostering greater institutional accountability, improving the quality of teaching and research, and aligning academic programs with international standards, QA can contribute to the long-term development of Afghanistan's higher education system. Additionally, QA systems provide a valuable tool for building trust with stakeholders, including students, faculty, policymakers, and the international community, which is crucial for the country's education sector in the post-conflict era.¹⁶

¹² Maria Pescaru, "The National Quality Assurance System in Romania," in *2019 11th International Conference on Electronics, Computers and Artificial Intelligence (ECAI)* (IEEE, 2019), 1-5.

¹³ Bjørn Stensaker et al., "An In-Depth Study on the Impact of External Quality Assurance," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 36, no. 4 (2011): 465-478.

¹⁴ Anthony Welch and Attaullah Wahidyar, "Quality Assurance in Afghan Higher Education: Achievements and Challenges," *Asian Education and Development Studies* 9, no. 4 (2020): 479-493.

¹⁵ Homayoon Taheryar, "Perceptions of Quality in Higher Education in Afghanistan: A Case Study of Shaheed Rabbani Education University" (master's capstone project, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2017), https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cie_capstones/186.

¹⁶ Chandru Kistan, "Quality Assurance in South Africa," *Quality Assurance in Education* 7, no. 3 (1999): 125-134.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the impact of quality assurance (QA) on higher education in Afghanistan. The methodology combines both quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive analysis of QA implementation, effectiveness, and challenges faced by higher education institutions across the country.

3.1 Research Design

The research employs a descriptive and analytical design, focusing on evaluating current QA practices and their impact on institutional performance and educational quality. A cross-sectional survey and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from diverse stakeholders in the higher education sector.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

A structured questionnaire was designed to collect data from faculty members, administrative staff, and students across multiple universities in Afghanistan. The survey focused on aspects such as the presence of QA mechanisms, staff training in QA, frequency of institutional audits, and perceived improvements in teaching quality and student satisfaction. To gain deeper insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with policymakers, university administrators, and QA officers. The interviews explored themes related to institutional challenges, resource limitations, and policy-level barriers affecting QA implementation.

3.3 Sampling Technique and Population

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation from both public and private universities. The study targeted a sample size of 250 respondents, including 100 Faculty members, 80 Administrative staff and QA officers, and 70 Students. The selection of 250 participants was based on convenience sampling, considering practical constraints such as time, budget, respondent accessibility, and data availability.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Data from the surveys were analysed using both descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and percentages) and inferential statistics (chi-square tests and regression analysis) to identify patterns and correlations. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data from the interviews. Coding techniques helped identify recurring themes and perspectives regarding the challenges and opportunities of QA implementation. The data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Based on the nature of the study, formal ethical approval was not required. Informed consent was obtained from all participants through the questionnaire prior to data collection. To ensure ethical standards, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Results

The survey responses from 250 participants revealed the following key trends:

TABLE 4.1
Indicators of Quality Assurance Implementation in Higher Education.

Indicator	Students (%)	Academic staff (%)	Key Findings
QA Mechanism Implementation	—	72%	Formal QA mechanisms are present in most institutions, though unevenly implemented across public and private universities.
Training and Awareness on QA Policies	—	58%	Limited professional development and QA-related training among faculty and staff.
Improvement in Teaching Quality	62%	68%	Positive impact observed on instructional quality and curriculum design, as reported by both students and staff.
Student Satisfaction with Teaching	68%	—	Moderate to high satisfaction, highlighting improved course organisation and delivery.

Source: Computed.

QA Implementation: Approximately 72% of faculty members reported that their institutions had formal QA mechanisms, though the degree of implementation varied significantly across public and private universities. This indicates moderate to high institutional adoption of quality assurance frameworks. However, the variation in implementation, especially between public and private universities, points to systemic inconsistency. It suggests that while many institutions recognise QA’s importance, full-scale enforcement or integration remains incomplete.

Training and Awareness: Only 58% of respondents had received formal training on QA policies and procedures, indicating a gap in professional development for staff. The lowest score among all indicators, highlighting a significant capacity gap. Many faculty and administrative staff have limited knowledge or formal training in QA procedures, which can hinder effective implementation and monitoring.

Impact on Teaching Quality: 65% of faculty members acknowledged improvements in teaching quality and curriculum design since the adoption of QA practices. This reflects a positive trend, suggesting QA processes (such as peer review, curriculum revision, and evaluation) are contributing to pedagogical enhancement. Though not highly rated, this shows a promising trajectory toward improved learning outcomes.

Student Satisfaction: 68% of students expressed moderate to high satisfaction with their educational experience, highlighting improvements in instructional delivery and course organisation. This suggests that QA practices may be yielding better student experiences, including more structured courses, responsive teaching, and enhanced academic

support. This figure supports the notion that student feedback mechanisms and monitoring tools are beginning to influence the delivery of education.

4.2 Inferential Analysis

Table 4.2 provides evidence that Quality Assurance has a positive influence on higher education in Afghanistan, particularly in terms of teaching quality and student satisfaction. However, uneven implementation and limited staff training are critical barriers to optimising QA's impact.

TABLE 4.2

Regression Analysis of QA Implementation and Teaching Quality.

Independent Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	Correlation (r)	Significance
QA Implementation	0.68	0.12	5.67	0.000	0.68	Significant (positive)
Resource Limitations	-0.45	0.15	-3.00	0.004	-0.52	Significant (negative)

Source: Computed.

Through the help of the regression analysis, we can see that the QA implementation shows a strong positive relationship with perceived teaching quality ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that improved QA systems are associated with better educational outcomes. Regarding the resource limitations, we have found a moderate negative effect on QA effectiveness ($\beta = -0.45$, $p = 0.004$), indicating that institutional constraints significantly hinder the success of QA initiatives.

TABLE 4.3

Correlation Between QA Implementation and Teaching Quality.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value	Significance Level	Interpretation
QA Implementation	Teaching Quality	0.68	< 0.05	* (significant)	Strong positive correlation

Source: Computed.

The correlation analysis from Table 4.3 reveals a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.68$) between the implementation of quality assurance and teaching quality, suggesting that improvements in QA practices are associated with enhanced instructional outcomes. The result is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), confirming the reliability of this association.

Note: p-value < 0.05 indicates statistical significance at the 5% level. This means the probability of the observed correlation occurring by chance is less than 5%, suggesting a meaningful relationship between the variables.

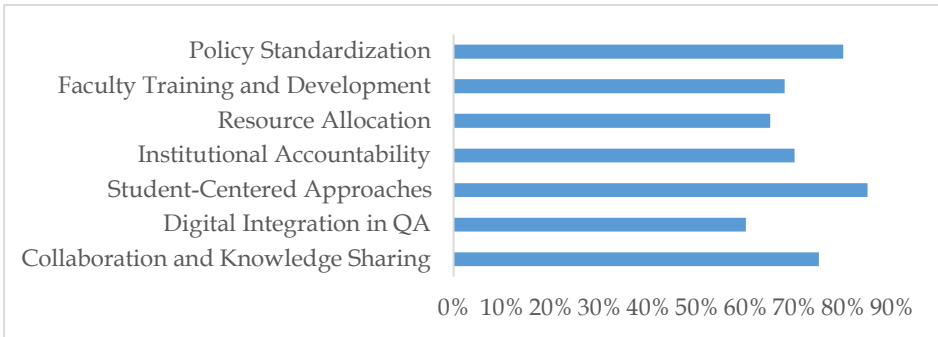


Figure 4.1: Implementation Status of Quality Assurance Recommendations in Higher Education Institutions.
Source: Computed.

4.2.1 High Implementation Areas (As per Figure 4.1)

Student-Centred Approaches (85%): This high implementation reflects a significant emphasis on student engagement, learning support services, and the integration of feedback mechanisms. It indicates that Afghan higher education institutions are aligning with global best practices by prioritising student experience in QA processes.

Policy Standardisation (80%): The strong implementation level suggests a positive move toward uniform academic standards and QA procedures across institutions. This helps reduce inconsistencies and enhance institutional credibility.

4.2.2 Moderate Implementation Areas

Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing (75%): Indicates moderate success in creating a collaborative academic culture. Knowledge sharing between departments and institutions is present but may need strengthening, particularly across provinces or between public and private institutions.

Institutional Accountability (70%): Reflects the growing emphasis on transparency, performance evaluation, and governance, though further monitoring mechanisms could enhance effectiveness.

Faculty Training and Development (68%): Points to partial implementation, suggesting that while some training efforts exist, there is a need for consistent and advanced professional development to equip faculty with modern pedagogical and assessment skills.

4.2.3 Low Implementation Areas (As per Figure 4.1)

Resource Allocation (65%): This indicates challenges in budget distribution, infrastructure, and support services. It reflects systemic resource constraints affecting the ability to implement QA recommendations fully.

Digital Integration in QA (60%): As the lowest-scoring factor, this highlights a critical gap in the use of digital tools and technologies for monitoring, evaluation, and reporting. This limitation may hinder automation, efficiency, and data-driven decision-making in quality assurance systems.

It shows that while Afghanistan's higher education institutions are making significant strides in implementing quality assurance, particularly in student engagement and standardisation, there are persistent challenges related to infrastructure, technology, and capacity development.

4.3 Qualitative Insights

Interviews with policymakers, QA officers, and university administrators revealed the following themes:

TABLE 4.4
Thematic Summary of Key Findings on Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

Key Theme	Observations
Challenges in QA Implementation	Lack of standardised policies, resource constraints, and limited faculty training.
Institutional Improvements	Enhanced accountability, introduction of performance audits, and faculty evaluations.
Policy Gaps	Need for a centralised QA body and alignment with global standards.

Source: Computed.

Challenges in QA Implementation: One of the major challenges facing the implementation of quality assurance (QA) in higher education institutions is the lack of standardised policies across different universities. This inconsistency leads to fragmented practices, hindering the development of a cohesive national QA framework. Additionally, insufficient funding and resource constraints further limit the capacity of institutions to implement QA mechanisms effectively. Many universities struggle with inadequate infrastructure, limited access to technology, and a shortage of qualified personnel. Compounding these issues is the limited training available for QA officers and faculty members, which hinders their ability to understand, apply, and monitor quality standards consistently. Addressing these challenges is crucial to enhancing the overall effectiveness and sustainability of QA systems in the higher education sector.

Institutional Improvements: The implementation of quality assurance mechanisms has led to enhanced accountability in teaching practices across higher education institutions. Faculty members are now more conscious of maintaining academic standards and delivering effective instruction. This shift is supported by the introduction of performance audits and systematic faculty evaluations, which provide structured feedback and help identify areas for improvement. These measures not only promote professional development among educators but also ensure that teaching quality aligns with institutional and national academic goals.

Policy Gaps: A significant gap in the current quality assurance system is the absence of a centralised QA body responsible for monitoring and ensuring compliance across institutions. Without a unified authority, efforts to standardise practices and uphold consistent quality benchmarks remain fragmented. This highlights the urgent need for the development of national-level QA frameworks that are not only cohesive but also aligned with global standards. Establishing such frameworks would facilitate uniformity, enhance credibility, and enable Afghan higher education institutions to compete and collaborate more effectively on an international scale.

4.4 Discussion

The findings suggest that while Quality Assurance (QA) mechanisms have positively influenced the quality of higher education in Afghanistan, gaps remain in policy standardisation, faculty training, and resource availability. This aligns with previous

research highlighting both achievements and persistent challenges in Afghanistan's higher education QA landscape.¹⁷ Institutions with dedicated QA offices demonstrated better academic performance and student satisfaction compared to those with limited QA integration, echoing findings by Mussawy and Niroo, who observed that perceptions of QA effectiveness vary widely depending on institutional commitment and resource support.¹⁸ However, these benefits are undermined by ongoing issues such as inconsistent policy frameworks and insufficient faculty training, which continue to hinder the full realisation of QA's potential.¹⁹ These results suggest that while QA practices are making strides in Afghanistan, a stronger focus on policy coherence, professional development, and equitable resource allocation is essential to sustain and enhance the quality of higher education.

Key Implications: Quality assurance (QA) has the potential to act as a powerful catalyst for institutional development and continuous improvement in higher education, provided it is adequately resourced and standardised across institutions. To achieve this, comprehensive policy reforms are necessary at the national level to establish QA policies that ensure uniform standards and accountability throughout the higher education system. Additionally, capacity building must be prioritised through increased investment in faculty training and development programs. Such initiatives are essential to equip academic and administrative staff with the knowledge and skills required to effectively implement QA principles and sustain long-term improvements in educational quality.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the impact of quality assurance (QA) on higher education in Afghanistan, revealing that while QA mechanisms have improved teaching quality, curriculum design, and student satisfaction, there are still challenges in faculty training, policy standardisation, and resource allocation. Statistical analysis showed a positive correlation between effective QA practices and teaching quality, highlighting the potential of comprehensive QA frameworks. Additionally, institutions with more structured QA processes demonstrated better academic performance and student engagement. Qualitative findings emphasised the need for national-level policy reforms to ensure consistent QA standards and practices across the higher education sector.

5.2 Recommendations

To strengthen the QA framework and ensure consistent academic improvement across Afghan higher education institutions, the following recommendations are proposed:

¹⁷ Anthony Welch and Attaulah Wahidyar, "Quality Assurance in Afghan Higher Education: Achievements and Challenges," *Asian Education and Development Studies* 9, no. 4 (2020): 479–493; Sayed Ahmad Javid Mussawy and Gretchen B. Rossman, "Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Afghanistan: Faculty Members' Perceptions from Selected Universities," *Higher Learning Research Communications* 8, no. 2 (2018): n2.

¹⁸ Wolayat Tabasum Niroo and Chris R. Glass, "Illusions of Improvement: Aspirations and Realities of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Policy in Afghanistan Higher Education," *Higher Education Research & Development* 41, no. 3 (2022): 952–966.

¹⁹ Homayoon Taheryar, "Perceptions of Quality in Higher Education in Afghanistan: A Case Study of Shaheed Rabbani Education University" (master's capstone project, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2017), https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cie_capstones/186; Antonius Verheijen, Atiqullah Ahmadzai, and Richard Hogg, "Through the Looking Glass: Lessons from the World Bank Afghanistan Portfolio for FCV Engagement," 2022.

1. Develop a centralised national QA framework to ensure uniformity and standardisation across public and private institutions.
2. Implement regular faculty training sessions and professional development programs focused on QA principles and teaching innovation.
3. Increase funding for QA implementation, faculty development, and institutional infrastructure to bridge the resource gap.
4. Establish regular QA audits and performance reviews to ensure policy compliance and continuous improvement.
5. Actively engage students in the QA process through systematic feedback mechanisms and satisfaction surveys.
6. Leverage digital tools for real-time QA monitoring, reporting, and data-driven decision-making.
7. Encourage cross-institutional collaboration to exchange best practices and share innovative QA strategies.

5.3 Future Research Directions

Future studies could delve into the long-term effects of quality assurance (QA) practices on institutional rankings and overall academic performance, providing valuable insights into their sustained impact. Comparative research examining QA frameworks across neighbouring countries would also offer a broader perspective, helping to identify best practices and regional challenges. Additionally, exploring the role of digital tools and data analytics in enhancing the effectiveness of QA could uncover innovative approaches to monitoring, evaluation, and decision-making in higher education institutions.

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About the Authors

Dr. Mohd Asif Shah, Dean, Faculty of Economics, Kardan University, Kabul, Afghanistan. <m.asif@kardan.edu.af> ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0351-9559>

Mr. Zabihullah, Academic Administrator, Graduate Programs, Kardan University, Kabul, Afghanistan. <shahnan41@gmail.com> ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3193-7520>

Mr. Muhammad Sabaon Khan, Assistant Professor, Department of Engineering, Kardan University, Kabul, Afghanistan. <m.sabaon@kardan.edu.af> ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6735-4311>