Comparative Analysis of Quality Assessment Criteria of Higher Education in Afghanistan

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Article

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Abstract

The primary goal of universities worldwide is to accommodate the growing number of students while providing exceptional educational experiences. To meet the standards outlined by the Higher Education Quality Criteria, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to ensure the maintenance and improvement of their educational settings. In today's environment, the previously unquestioned position and financial investments of HEIs in their academic values are now being closely examined. The importance of an HEI extends beyond academics, contributing significantly to social, political, and economic development while also enhancing competitiveness in a rapidly globalising, knowledge-based society. In this regard, Afghanistan has been developing its higher education institutions (HEIs). This research specifically aims to assess the quality evaluation model of higher education in Afghanistan. Key figures were intentionally chosen from the Ministry of Higher Education and other pertinent stakeholders. Using a descriptive qualitative research approach, the data were analysed thematically. A review of the existing literature on higher education quality assessment models revealed a trend toward a common framework. Participants emphasised the importance of maintaining academic standards through comprehensive assessment systems and highlighted the need to adopt more student-centred teaching and learning methods. Several individuals highlighted a disparity between the curriculum content and the skills required in the workplace, emphasising the importance of better alignment with industry standards. The research also revealed increasing concerns regarding faculty workload, inadequate training, and limited opportunities for professional growth. Furthermore, attendees emphasised the importance of leadership commitment and stakeholder engagement to drive significant change.

In summary, the results indicated an urgent need for reforms that emphasise quality assurance, innovative teaching strategies, and responsiveness to societal and economic demands. It is recommended that Afghanistan's system operate under independent models tailored for different disciplines, aligned with international standards, and focus on engaging stakeholders in quality assurance. Furthermore, the integration of various methodologies and the creation of explicit standards for resource use are advised.

Keywords: Accreditation, Teaching and Learning, Continuous Improvement, Curriculum Alignment, Institutional Accountability, Learning Assessment, Quality Indicators, Faculty Development

1. Introduction

Universities worldwide are facing difficulties in accommodating the growing student population while also facilitating lifelong learning opportunities for a broader segment of society. Consequently, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are compelled to safeguard and support the excellence of educational experiences in accordance with established Higher Education Quality Criteria.[1]

The criteria for quality assessment in higher education play a crucial role in promoting academic excellence, accountability, and ongoing institutional improvement. They help uphold uniform academic standards, improve teaching and learning methodologies, and ensure that programs align with student needs and labour market demands. By encouraging transparency and facilitating accreditation efforts, these criteria strengthen public confidence and the credibility of institutions. Additionally, they facilitate strategic planning, efficient resource utilisation, and international recognition, ultimately leading to enhanced student outcomes, increased employability, and the global competitiveness of higher education institutions.

In the contemporary landscape, HEIs find themselves in a position where their previously unassailable status and financial dedication to academic integrity are now subject to inspection. The significance of preserving the quality and esteemed status of an HEI is evident in its crucial role in fostering social advancement, economic stability, and its contribution to effectiveness within an increasingly globalised knowledge economy, as well as its role in driving technological advancement. In light of this understanding, Afghanistan has been actively increasing its HEIs, grappling with the challenge of balancing excellence with capacity.[2]

While various individuals have attempted to document the developments in quality assurance systems, a thorough representation and exploration of these systems in the region has yet to be conducted. Although advancements have been made in the quality assessment systems within HEIs in Afghanistan, a lack of diverse research findings employing different benchmarks to evaluate the standard of higher education remains. Existing readings on educational quality assessment have primarily focused on outlining the current issues and factors influencing educational quality. For example, Olo and others researched the detailed inside and external quality assurance mechanisms present in selected universities.[3] Similarly, Welch and others analysed the general standards of quality assurance in Afghan HEIs, particularly regarding student knowledge and accomplishment.[4] Additionally, Abdulbaqi conducted research evaluating the implementation of quality assurance guidelines for public universities in Afghanistan.[5]

The current study examines the primary internally used and external quality benchmarks within HEIs in Afghanistan. The objective is to gain insights into the prevailing trends,

[1] Ahmad Y. Noaman, Ahmed H. M. Ragab, Ashraf I. Madbouly, Ahmed M. Khedra, and Abdulrahman G. Fayoumi, "Higher Education Quality Assessment Model: Towards Achieving Educational Quality Standard," *Studies in Higher Education* 42, no. 1 (2017): 23–46.

[2] N. G. Borahan and R. Ziarati, "Developing Quality Criteria for Application in the Higher Education Sector in Turkey," *Total Quality Management* 13, no. 7 (2002): 913–926.

[3] Divine Olo, Luis Correia, and Carla Rego, "Higher Education Institutions and Development: Missions, Models, and Challenges," *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 12, no. 2 (2021): 1–25.

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

[5] Mohammad Abdulbaqi, "Higher Education in Afghanistan," *Policy Perspectives*, 2009, 99–117.

similarities, differences, strengths, and weaknesses associated with the quality assessment systems and models outlined in existing literature. A notable deficiency in prior research concerning the quality of Afghanistan's HEIs is the lack of exploration into various global developed education quality assessment models while evaluating the quality assessment practices in these institutions. By reviewing diverse developed learning quality assessment models from around the world, this study aims to pinpoint the gaps present in both national and international quality assurance practices.

The underlying purpose of this analysis is to understand how different models conceptualise and approach the complex notion of quality in HEIs. The researcher posits that this exploration will yield valuable insights into various strategies for addressing quality-related challenges within HEIs. The objectives of the study include:

1. To examine the processes involved in conducting internal and external quality assessments within HEIs in Afghanistan.

2. To evaluate the internal and external quality assessment frameworks utilised in higher education institutions in Afghanistan, in light of the overarching quality assessment model and the applicable assessment structures in the field of higher education.

The Study Aims to Answer the Following Questions

1. In what manner are the quality assessments, internal and external, operated within higher education institutions in Afghanistan?

2) In what way are the components of the overarching higher education quality assessment procedures managed in Afghanistan?

3) What are the parallels and distinctions among the higher education quality assessment structures in Afghanistan and those in other parts of the world?

This research aims to contribute to the assessment of higher education quality in the country by presenting various perspectives on quality evaluation and their methodologies for addressing quality-related challenges.[6] This approach will facilitate the identification of gaps, strengths, and flaws within the system. By comparing the Afghanistan Higher Education Quality Assessment Framework with broader quality assessment practices, the study aims to highlight the discrepancies between the Afghan higher education system and international standards. Furthermore, it highlights the prominence of being aware of international higher education quality structures and models, advocating for their application and adherence to ensure genuine quality in higher education.[7] This should be done while considering local contexts and conditions to tailor mechanisms appropriately. Ultimately, the pursuit of quality higher education is framed as a global issue that connects and networks quality assurance agencies, fostering comparable standards of higher education worldwide.[8]

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[6] Ahmad A. Makki, Mohammed Alqahtani, et al., "A Novel Strategic Approach to Evaluating Higher Education Quality Standards in University Colleges Using Multi-Criteria Decision-Making," *Education Sciences* 13, no. 6 (2023): 577.
[7] Ibid.
[8] E. Grady Bogue, "Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The Evolution of Systems and Design Ideals," *New Directions for Institutional Research* 99 (1998): 7–18.

2. Literature Review

This research employed the overall quality assessment model as its foundational framework, utilising the benchmarks for higher education quality evaluation established by global higher education quality assessment systems. Van Vught and Westerheijden[9] identified several fundamental components of this universal model of higher education quality assessment:

1. The supervision body should operate independently from external influences, including governmental politics and policies. It should not impose its mission on institutions while bearing the individual duty for overseeing the quality assessment system.[10]

2. Self-evaluation, wherein scholars must be willing to embrace and implement variations, recognising their ownership of the process that involves defining problems and devising solutions.

3. The third component is peer appraisal, which entails a location official visit conducted by external experts.

4. The final element involves the reporting of quality assessment results alongside the methodologies employed.

Similarly, Mizikaci contended that the purpose of reports should not be to evaluate or rank higher HEIS. Instead, their aim should be to assist HEIs in improving their quality. However, the methodologies employed in various countries differ in this regard.[11]

For Instance, the United States and Canada reports are frequently treated as confidential. Conversely, in France, while official self-evaluations remain private, the reports produced by external experts are made public. Additionally, Beerkens highlighted the connection between the results of quality reviews and governmental funding judgments for HEIs.[12] They claimed that a thorough and inflexible link between quality assessment funding and reports undermines the effectiveness of the overall quality assessment system. Overall, the authors stressed the importance of establishing a solid foundation for HEIs to maintain their significant role within the community.

The understanding of quality assurance is inherently complex and varies across different contexts, revealing a disparity in perspectives among quality assurance professionals, academic personnel, and students.[13] Through an extensive review of existing literature, Lagrosen and others[14] categorised the explanations of quality into five main groups:

1. Transcendent definitions, which are subjective and personal, such as concepts of attractiveness and attachment;

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[9] Frans A. Van Vught and Don F. Westerheijden, "Towards a General Model of Quality Assessment in Higher Education," *Higher Education* 28, no. 3 (1994): 355–371.

[10] Richard Williams, Pascal de Rassenfosse, et al., "The Determinants of Quality National Higher Education Systems," *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 35, no. 6 (2013): 599–611.

[11] Fatma Mizikaci, "Quality Systems and Accreditation in Higher Education: An Overview of Turkish Higher Education," *Quality in Higher Education* 9, no. 1 (2003): 95–106.

[12] Maarja Beerkens, "Evidence-Based Policy and Higher Education Quality Assurance: Progress, Pitfalls and Promise," in *Impact Evaluation of Quality Management in Higher Education*, 38–53 (London: Routledge, 2020).

[13] Mary E. Ryan, *Teaching Reflective Learning in Higher Education: Systematic Approach Using Pedagogic Patterns* (2015).

[14] Stefan Lagrosen, Reza Seyyed-Hashemi, and Matthias Leitner, "Examination of the Dimensions of Quality in Higher Education," *Quality Assurance in Education* 12, no. 2 (2004): 61–69.

2. Product-wise explanations, which consider quality as a quantifiable attribute;

3. User-based meanings, which focus on client fulfilment;

4. Manufacturing-based classifications, which emphasise adherence to necessities and provisions;

5. Value-based explanations, which assess the quality of costs.

2.1 Historical Foundations of Quality Evaluation in Higher Education Institutions: The Medieval Era of Higher Learning.

Van Vught & Westerheijden[15] examined the origins of quality assessment, which can be summarised as follows:

2.1.1 French model

The writers noted that during the medieval period in France, universities functioned as ecclesiastical institutions. Consequently, the delegate bishop of Paris, a chancellor in position, held the authority to award or deny teaching licenses and to determine the set of courses.[16] The model is named as a foundational example of quality assessment in relationships of responsibility.

2.1.2 English Model of Self-Governance

Kayyalli[17] indicated that in feudal England, the masters operated independently of external authority. These individuals possessed the authority to evaluate the quality of peers. They determined both the content and methods of instruction, reflecting what is now recognised as peer review. The authors contended that these two frameworks represent significant dimensions of contemporary quality assessment systems in higher education. They correspond to the broader theories of inherent and visible potentials. Intrinsic potentials pertain to the principles of truth-seeking and knowledge acquisition, though extrinsic qualities relate to the contributions of higher education to the external society. By integrating intrinsic and extrinsic qualities, higher education institutions have demonstrated extraordinary continuity.

2.1.3 Modern Advancements in the Evaluation of Quality in Higher Education

According to Van Vught and Westerheijden,[18] the concept of quality assessment in higher education gained prominence in the 1980s, initially in the US, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Denmark, Finland, and various other European nations.[19] The authors identified several factors contributing to this heightened focus on quality in higher education systems:

1. The development of higher education structures, characterised by rapid growth of scholars, the diversification of fields of study, and the establishment of new institutes,

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[15] Van Vught and Westerheijden, "Towards a General Model," 355–371.
[16] Don F. Westerheijden, Bjørn Stensaker, et al., *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation* (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 2007).
[17] Mohammad Kayyali, "An Overview of Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Concepts and Frameworks," *International Journal of Management, Sciences, Innovation, and Technology* 4, no. 2 (2023): 1–4.
[18] Van Vught and Westerheijden, "Towards a General Model," 355–371.
[19] Yingqiang Zhang and Sun Yongjian, *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Reflection, Criticism, and Change* (London: Routledge, 2019).

raised questions regarding the allocation and method of public funding for higher education institutions.

2. The levels of public expenditure in these countries, alongside budget cutbacks

3. The transition towards technology-driven economies has influenced students to pursue areas deemed essential for economic growth. The writers noted that, in prior periods, the extrinsic values associated with higher education primarily motivated nations to implement quality control policies. Consequently, various nations have been developing novel structures and instruments for quality assessment and control.

2.1.4 Practices in the United States and Canada

In the US, the higher education system is primarily driven by market principles, and rivalry among HEIs is widely recognised. In contrast to continental Europe, government oversight is relatively minimal. The variety of institutional types and the absence of centrally established standards during the 19th century led to debates within American higher education. Consequently, institutions proactively established two mechanisms for quality evaluation: accreditation and an internal process for the organised appraisal of academic programs.[20]

2.1.5 Progressions in Western Europe

The writers noted that, excluding Britain, many HEIs in Western Europe were under state control and received government funding. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, significant transformations occurred within the higher education systems of Western Europe.[21] These changes were driven by alterations in governmental policies, which placed a greater emphasis on the value-for-money principle. Consequently, the relationship between funding and the appearance of HEIs, as well as the quality of higher education, emerged as a critical concern. Additionally, the authors identified a second trend in higher education policy-making in Western Europe: the emergence of a government strategy promoting 'self-regulation.' This shift led to enhanced independence and effectiveness among HEIs. In light of these growths, several Western European countries initiated new efforts to establish quality assessment systems.[22]

2.1.6 The United Kingdom

 The authors noted that from the early 1960s, the quality of non-university higher education was assessed by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and overseen by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). The CNAA, which was commenced by the government and operated independently, was responsible for evaluating and validating courses offered by polytechnics until its dissolution in 1992. In the mid-1980s, Reynold's report established standards aimed at improving the quality of management systems within academies. In contrast, the Jarratt report initiated discussions regarding performance indicators and their significance in quality-based education.[23] Between 1990 and 1991, the Academic Audit Unit (AAU) was created to provide an alternative to the

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[20] Van Vught and Westerheijden, "Towards a General Model," 355–371.

[21] Elaine El-Khawas, "Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Recent Progress; Challenges Ahead" (1998); Roger Brown, *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The UK Experience Since 1992* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[22] Brian Salter and Ted Tapper, "The Politics of Governance in Higher Education: The Case of Quality Assurance," *Political Studies* 48, no. 1 (2000): 66–87.

[23] Aleksankov, A., et al., "Quality Assurance of Higher Education," *Open Education*, no. 4 (2016): 10–16.

HMI. Following its establishment, the CVCP included external examiners, and the AAU focused on assessing the quality of the evaluation approaches employed by institutions.

The writers assert that the modifications resulting from the 1991 white paper prompted alterations in organisational frameworks and resulted in the establishment of distinct definitions for the subsequent terms within the British context:

1. Quality control - Systems implemented inside institutes to uphold and improve the quality of their offerings;

2. Quality audit - An external evaluation designed to ensure that institutions possess adequate quality control systems; and

3. Quality assessment - External evaluations and determinations regarding the excellence of instruction and knowledge within institutions, which fall under the purview of funding councils.

3. Study Design

The research employed a descriptive qualitative design. The responses obtained from interviews were analysed and discussed qualitatively. The population for this study comprised all public universities in Afghanistan. A non-probability sampling method was utilised, wherein key informants were intentionally selected for interviews. In total, 10 key participants were involved, including 2 respondents from the MOHE and 8 respondents from other universities. Each of the selected universities contributed participants to the study.

4. Results

4.1 Quality Assessment in Afghanistan HEIs

To enhance the quality of higher education, the Ministry of Higher Education established the Directorate of Quality Enhancement as an independent entity in 2012. Due to the increasing demand for higher education, the Ministry of Higher Education introduced three levels for accrediting institutions. The Candidacy for Accreditation Level One is a kind of self-review stage in which an institution meets the minimum requirements for providing higher education services. The university conducts a self-assessment report to evaluate its adherence to the standards provided by the MOHE. The second level of accreditation is a considerable and crucial stage for obtaining final accreditation. At this level, the accreditation body for higher education evaluates the institution's standards and then decides whether it should be accredited or not.[24]

Afghanistan's Quality Assurance Directorate uses standardised criteria for the appraisal of the quality of education in institutions. These key criteria are based on the outcomes of education, which have shown a considerable part in the development of educational services. The framework consists of eleven main criteria: mission, vision and strategy; contribution to society; governance, leadership, and administration; financial resources and management; academic programs; research; faculty members and staff; student

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[24] 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; Mohammad Osman Babury and Fred M. Hayward, "Afghanistan Higher Education: The Struggle for Quality, Merit, and Transformation," *Planning for Higher Education* 42, no. 2 (2014): 1–32.

experience; quality enhancement; library and information resources; and teaching, information technology, and resources. These criteria have defined indicators for implementation.

1. Mission, vision, and strategy

The university's strategy should be structured as a proper four- or five-year plan. This plan should contain clear goals for achievement, identify, and address the needs of society and students. The activities to be planned by the university or faculty should be clearly outlined, and the proper direction required for institutional improvement and effectiveness should be specified.

2. Governance and Administration

Good leadership and administration help organisations achieve sustainable improvement in the quality of higher education institutions. One of the criteria for accreditation is supportive governance, which facilitates excellent teaching, research, the achievement of strategic goals, gender equality, and the provision of quality educational services to stakeholders. The MoHE emphasises the importance of an environment that supports excellence for faculty members and students.

3. Academic Program

The academic programs of higher educational institutions are directly linked with strategic goals, curriculum, and outcomes of the programs. These outcomes should be regularly assessed for their sustainable achievement. The academic program must be aligned with strategic goals and educational standards. The curriculum should be periodically updated to meet the evolving needs of the market. The students should be equipped with the skills, knowledge, and attitude.

4. Faculty Members

Higher educational institutions are centres of training others in excellence, so it is the initial responsibility of the institutions to recruit and maintain competent faculty members. The recruitment process should be transparent and merit-based. There should be proper faculty professional development programs, a fair faculty workload, encouragement of research activities, regular evaluation for excellence, and proper performance appraisal and assessment methods should be employed. Academic freedom should also be promoted.

5. Student Support

Student support programs are the extra and co-curricular parts of the curriculum. These activities help learners become excellent and ready for jobs in the market. This is one of the key criteria for the quality of a higher education institution—to support its students practically and through site-based learning. Besides professional programs, students should also develop digital literacy and contemporary skills. To ensure self-satisfaction from such activities, the students should be assessed based on the outcomes of the academic activities.

6. Libraries and other Information Resources;

The sources of learning have been expanding daily in the current era. New digital libraries, physical libraries, online sources, and offline sources are different platforms used for collecting information. The higher education institution should be rich in terms of books and access to journals, databases, and the internet. Without these resources, neither students nor lecturers can proceed with the education program efficiently and sustainably. Therefore, these sources should be fully provided by the higher educational institutions for both students and faculty members.

7. Physical and Technological Resources

To support their academic programs, higher education institutions must have sufficient physical and technological resources, including screens, projectors, a sufficient number of computer labs, classrooms, technical labs, and other necessary infrastructure. It should be ensured that all these resources are accessible to stakeholders and faculty members. In the event of service extension programs or increased student recruitment, these resources should be incorporated into the strategic plan for expansion.

8. Financial Resources

Financial resources are key factors for the smooth operation of institutions, as higher education institutions allocate budgets based on strategic objectives, extension plans, and other developments. Institutions should allocate sufficient budgets for research, capacity building, and other academic programs. Besides expenditures, proper auditing and transparent financial management will help in the institution's improvement and success.

9. Research

Research and innovation are among the most prioritised tasks of higher education institutions. All higher educational institutions should foster proper collaboration in industrial research, policy-making research, and other types of research that help in solving existing problems. It is one of the necessary criteria of MoHE that a faculty member should have one national publication per year and one international publication within a maximum of three years. The research can be joint, independent, or conference-based papers, which are major requirements of the ministry for accreditation.

10. Quality Enhancement

All higher educational institutions must have a proper process in place to measure and evaluate the quality of education. MoHE has properly allocated certain indicators for quality maintenance. This involves establishing necessary standards, conducting proper evaluations, and assessing outcomes to bring about necessary improvements in educational services.

11. Contribution to the Society Development

Higher educational institutions play a vital role in the community's growth in terms of economic, political, and social aspects. It is a key criterion for quality education in Afghanistan that all institutions should actively participate in social development, such as helping people with disabilities. Faculty should conduct applied research to promote socio-economic development and social welfare.

TABLE 1: *Afghanistan vs the International Standard of Higher Education Quality Enhancement*

Key Criteria	Afghanistan	International
Primary focus	Institutional governance, community impact, and academic standards.	Focus on student-centred approach, accountability, and enhancement of quality.
Vision and Mission	Detailed focus on defining vision and mission aligned with national educational goals.	Encourages institutions to develop publicly available quality policies as part of their strategy.
Community Development	Explicit criterion for societal contributions and engagement.	Recognises the part of higher education in supporting socio-economic improvement indirectly.
Student-Centered Learning	Includes "student experience" but lacks detailed methodologies for assessment or learning environment.	Focused on active student participation, flexible learning paths, and diverse pedagogy.
Governance and Leadership	Significant emphasis on governance, leadership, and financial management.	Includes governance as part of broader quality assurance responsibilities.
Academic Programs	Stresses program relevance, design, and implementation with local community needs in mind.	Focuses on program design, student workload, and alignment with European frameworks.
Research	- Separate criterion for research, highlighting institutional priorities. - High score for research	- Encourages linking research with learning and teaching, but not as a standalone criterion. - Research is not necessary for bachelor institutions.
Stakeholder Involvement	Implicitly involves stakeholders (e.g., governance, teaching staff).	Actively requires the involvement of internal and external stakeholders in quality assurance.
External Quality Assurance	Data is less detailed; external reviews are implied but not clearly cyclic or standardised.	Clear requirements for periodic external reviews and follow-up actions in line with ESG.
Transparency and Reporting	Lacks visible emphasis on transparency, public reporting, or appeals processes.	Mandates publishing clear, accessible reports and defining appeals/complaints mechanisms.

Key Criteria	Afghanistan	International
Internationalization	Limited to national goals and objectives for higher education.	Encourages cross-border consistency, mutual trust, and mobility within the EHEA.
Assessment	- Based on the score assessment - Based on the process	- Based on the weightage assessment - Based on outcomes -
Accreditation level	- University-level accreditation - No rank	- University level is not necessary; program level is possible - Giving proper rank
Result	The results should be communicated for the purpose of improvement, whether correct or incorrect, but should not convey a professional tone.	Not directly positive and negative - Positive result - Accreditation, along with suggestions - Conditional Accreditation - No Accreditation
Centralize vs Decentralize	More centralised, only the MoHE has authority for assessment	Decentralised system (separate autonomy, semi-government organisation, and government organisation)

Source: Authors' compilation

5. A Comparative Analysis of Afghanistan Quality Assurance Standards and the Standards of Global Quality Assurance Networks

A significant body of literature indicates that various agencies worldwide maintain distinct collections of benchmarks for both internal and external quality assurance. These standards serve as guidelines for the effective implementation of quality assurance, assessment, and control processes. The standards are publicly accessible, ensuring that all stakeholders are informed of their components. In this context, a comparative analysis of the Afghanistan quality assurance standards for together internal and external quality assurance was conducted, drawing on the work of.

5.1 The association between the Regulatory Body and Higher Education Institutions

The policy documents articulate that the association between the Regulatory body and HEIs in the context of quality assurance is characterised as a static one. This framework enables institutions to take responsibility for evaluating and managing their quality assurance systems, while also promoting the idea that external evaluators should play a dominant role. Feedback from HEI representatives indicates that, in practice, there is a perception of dominance by the regulatory body over the institutions. Some respondents noted that the Regulatory body often pressures HEIs to complete their processes in a rushed manner, which can lead to superficial assessment outcomes.

5.2 Decision-Making Criteria

The quality review report details clearly state that, following the completion of the quality assurance process, which is based on the self-evaluation conducted by the institutes, an ultimate review and consideration with the HEIs takes place before the publication of their final reporting procedure. However, to the best of the writers' knowledge, there is no explicit guideline regarding the distribution of decision-making authority in quality assessment outcomes between the Ministry of Education (MOHE) and the Higher Education Institution (HEI). Some respondents indicated that the MOHE has a significant influence on the decision-making process of HEIs.

5.3 Required Resources

There is currently no externally established standard; however, it is presumed that the resource utilisation of a university will be evaluated, as suggested in the main area document. Categorical standards for resource utilisation must be established at the policy level, as well as by external quality assurance and higher education institutions (HEIs).

5.4 Requirement of the Stakeholders

The Document provides only a general overview regarding the process for stakeholders to appeal comments, lacking detailed discussion. It is essential to establish clear and comprehensive procedures for these appeals to foster a sense of ownership among stakeholders within HEIs. To ensure genuine quality, stakeholders' concerns must be acknowledged and addressed through democratic means.

5.5 Agency External Review

The procedure by which the quality assurance performs quality audits of HEIs is thoroughly outlined in the quality audit procedure document of the MOHE. Additionally, the documents specify the preparations and actions that HEIs may undertake before and during the external review.

5.6 Partnership with other Agencies is Required

The quality policy document indicates that the criteria are in collaboration with both local and international Quality Assurance agencies. According to feedback from experts, Ato Abebayehu reveals a limited connection through the external environment, as there are relatively few international employees at the office who volunteer their time. The aforementioned networks possess robust connections and encompass numerous agencies.

5.7 Analysis of the Afghanistan Quality Assessment System in line with the Overall Model in Higher Education Institutions

This aspect of the overarching quality assessment framework addresses the autonomy of the quality assessment system from external pressures, the agent's legal standing and accreditation status, as well as the sufficiency and formalisation of its procedural information and formats available for institutional use.

In an interview with an expert at the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), it was stated that the Agency's mission is "to ensure a high-quality and relevant higher education system in Afghanistan." The operational goals encompass the following:

1. Evaluating the significance and calibre of higher education;

2. Ensuring that the curriculum aligns with the developmental requirements of the nation;

3. Establishing an effective and transparent accreditation framework;

4. Disseminating information about standards and programs.

In comparison, Billing[25] reviewed surveys from 38 countries and noted that the objectives of external quality assurance seem to encompass various aspects of similar functions, which can be distilled into:

1. Enhancement of quality,

2. Availability of public information regarding quality and standards,

3. Accreditation (which serves to legitimise student certification),

4. Public accountability concerning achieved standards and financial utilisation,

 5. Contributing to the planning process within the higher education sector.

5.8 Mechanisms for Peer Evaluation and Site Assessments Conducted by External Specialists

Quality assurance personnel reported that external specialists from various universities visit their institutions to discuss issues, share experiences, and conduct program reviews. Additionally, professionals from different NGOs arrive to gather data, assess specific areas, and provide various forms of assistance and training based on their evaluations.

Nevertheless, the scholar has discerned from both the responses received and the literature reviewed that the peer review methodology in Afghanistan's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) lacks effective guidelines and mechanisms, resulting in applications that do not meet the necessary standards. For example, in universities worldwide, peer reviewers extensively engage in the quality assessment of academic programs and other areas of academic work. These peer reviewers operate without biases and external influences, which enhances the validity of their assessment outcomes. Insights from the experiences of the United States and the United Kingdom further illustrate this point. The peer review process plays a pivotal role in the quality assessment framework, offering significant advantages in terms of both validity and cost-effectiveness. Peer reviewers possess specialised expertise in their respective fields, which contrasts with the qualifications of agency officers responsible for conducting quality audits. Given the limited number of experts at MOHE, incorporating external specialists — both from abroad and domestically — serves as an effective strategy to address the workforce deficiency in quality assessment.

5.9 The Presentation of the Outcomes from the Quality Assessment

1. A statement should not serve the purpose of evaluating or positioning the institutions or programs that have been assessed. Instead, its primary aim

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[25] David Billing, "International Comparisons and Trends in External Quality Assurance of Higher Education: Commonality or Diversity?" *Higher Education* 47 (2004): 113–137.

should be to assist HEIs and study programs in enhancing their quality standards.

2. A vital aspect of the reporting process involves allowing HEIs the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft report and to present counterarguments if deemed necessary.

3. The methodologies employed in various countries differ in this regard. Based on insights gathered from MOHE experts and university officials, the principal goals of reporting include:

A) aiding HEIs in refining their self-evaluation processes,

B) highlighting their achievements and strengths to relevant stakeholders while offering recommendations and implications that foster a sense of pride in their accomplishments, as well as encouraging a critical examination of their weaknesses for improvement.

C) Nonetheless, few defendants indicated that reports are being utilised to rank universities in Afghanistan, with the criteria for such rankings lacking clarity and validity. For example, Teferra noted that the annual domestic ranking of universities distracts institutions from their core mission of quality enhancement, misleading them into believing they are performing satisfactorily.[26]

5.10 The Correlation Between the Outcomes of Quality Assessments and Financial Support

Van Vught & Westerheijden[27] contended that establishing a direct and inflexible connection between quality appraisal accounts and aid decisions could be detrimental to the functioning of the quality assessment system. The defendants indicated that the results of quality assessments do not lead to any funding disparities among universities, as determined by the government. The primary objective of quality assessment results is to assist universities in their self-improvement efforts. Nevertheless, the respondents noted that the public dissemination of evaluation reports could have both positive and negative impacts on the internal revenue and status of the universities.

5.11 The Required Resources

While discussing the World Bank's statement, Bascia[28] indicated that the findings revealed emerging nations were significantly affected by the crisis in higher education. The writers further contended that the financial limitations encountered by numerous countries, combined with rising demand for educational services, have resulted in overcrowded institutions, declining infrastructure, insufficient funds for non-salary expenses such as textbooks and laboratory equipment, and a deterioration in the quality of instruction and research endeavours. Drawing from an analysis of various countries' experiences, the World Bank report, as noted by the writers, proposed four essential guidelines for transformation:

1) promoting greater differentiation among institutions,

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[26] Damtew Teferra, "Charting African Higher Education: Perspectives at a Glance," *International Journal of African Higher Education* 1, no. 1 (2014).

[27] Van Vught and Westerheijden, "Towards a General Model," 355–371.

[28] Nina Bascia, Alister Cumming, Amanda Datnow, Kenneth Leithwood, and David Livingstone, "Elaine El-Khawas," in *International Handbook of Educational Policy*, 101 (2005).

2) offering incentives for higher education institutions to diversify their funding sources,

3) Redefining the government's role in higher education

4) Implementing policies specifically aimed at prioritising quality and equity objectives.

5.12 Periodic External Evaluation of the Agency

The specialist at the Agency indicated that they intended to perform quality audits of the HEIs every two to three years; however, in practice, these audits are conducted very frequently, which affects the smooth operation of the Universities.

6. Discussions

This section discusses the outcomes of the analysis through various types of literature, particularly by comparing diverse methodologies to quality assessment in different countries, including Afghanistan's higher education quality assessment structure. Furthermore, the key outcomes are presented along with corresponding recommendations.

Weber[29] employed four criteria to thoroughly evaluate a variety of quality assurance systems across countries. These criteria included:

1) The purpose and nature of evaluation (whether formative or summative);

2) The relative roles of higher education institutions (HEIS), agencies, and governments;

3) The results and impacts of decisions and/or commendations;

4) The costs associated with HEI quality assurance systems are related to the anticipated benefits. In Afghanistan, the quality assurance system for public higher education institutions (HEIs) is characterised as formative, encouraging institutions to recognise their strengths and weaknesses and devise improvement plans. Based on the data, it can be inferred that the regulatory body's role concerning public HEIs is moderate, as this role is shared with the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). In contrast, systems that adopt summative approaches to quality assurance tend to exhibit a greater agency role over the institutions themselves.

Regarding the subsequent criterion employed for comparing HEIs, specifically the comparative influence of the government over agencies, it can be observed that in the context of Afghanistan, the government's role in HEIs is similar to that of regulatory bodies. This is particularly evident as the MOHE significantly influences the final decisions regarding quality evaluation outcomes. The systems under comparison focus on the repercussions and effects of decisions and/or recommendations. In Afghanistan, it is evident that the repercussions and effects of such decisions and recommendations are moderate for public higher education institutions (HEIs). Should the universities consistently fail to rectify these weaknesses, the matter is escalated to the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), which then takes appropriate action.

The financial implications of HEIs' quality assurance systems, including the anticipated benefits, represent a significant criterion for evaluation. The analysis reveals that the

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[29] Luc Weber, Syed Bin Mahfooz, and Kristie Hovde, *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Comparison of Eight Systems* (2010).

European University Association (EUA) system incurs the lowest costs to meet its quality assessment objectives compared to other systems. When HEIs assume greater responsibility for their quality assurance processes, free from external influences, they expend less energy in achieving their desired outcomes. This is because quality assurance in higher education necessitates that every member of the institution takes ownership of the university's standards. Consequently, collective efforts to ensure quality can be achieved at a reduced cost.

In the context of the Afghanistan system, feedback from respondents indicates that quality assurance is perceived as costly, particularly concerning the readiness and accountability of the university community and stakeholders in maintaining the quality of higher education.

Jamoliddinovich[30] noted that the university's maturity level influences the capacity to correlate quality with associated costs; institutions with higher qualifications are more likely to evaluate their performance in terms of the costs required to meet their objectives.

There exist both global resemblances and changes in quality assurance models across several extents: 1) the definition of quality; 2) the aims of the quality assurance system; 3) the methodologies employed; 4) the designated answerable agents; 5) the nature of involvement, whether volunteer or obligatory; 6) the focus on research, teaching, or both; 7) the emphasis on program reviews, specific disciplines, or the entire university; and 8) the aspect of confidentiality.

7. Conclusion

Internal and external quality valuation instruments are currently being applied in HEIs in Afghanistan. Furthermore, formative and summative methods are utilised in a complementary manner within the classification. The primary external quality assessment methods employed to evaluate HEIs include quality audits for both public and private institutions, as well as accreditation, particularly for private HEIs. Additional practices such as self-evaluation, peer appraisals, and site visits are also incorporated. An examination of the quality assessment context in Afghanistan HEIs, in comparison to the general quality assessment model outlined in the current study, indicates that the Afghanistan quality assurance agency operates with a degree of semi-autonomy. Moreover, the regulatory role concerning HEIs is strict, as it shares responsibilities with the MOHE. Self-assessment is a prevalent method of quality evaluation, aligning with the overall quality assessment model. Although peer assessment is part of the Afghanistan system, this study indicates that it is not utilised to its full potential. Existing literature suggests that peer review serves multiple purposes in various contexts. The results of quality assessments within the Afghanistan structure are printed and communicated to stakeholders through suitable methodologies and processes. At hand, there is no direct correlation between funding and the outcomes of quality assessments in public higher education. Nevertheless, the published results of these assessments inevitably influence the internal revenue and status of HEIs. The recurring quality review process in Afghanistan HEIs is not executed as intended due to resource limitations.

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[30] Ubaydulloh Jamoliddinovich Bobokhonov, "Fundamentals of Education Quality in Higher Education," *International Journal of Social Science & Interdisciplinary Research* 11, no. 1 (2022): 149–151.

A significant challenge facing quality assessment in Afghanistan HEIs is the evident lack of equal financial and human resources. Furthermore, the limited connections and collaborations that the regulatory body maintains with international quality assurance organisations may hinder its ability to adhere to global standards, as the system may lack access to knowledge and best practices from international counterparts. Additionally, an examination of various standards of higher education quality assessment indicates that HEIs that operate with greater autonomy and accountability regarding their quality (essentially, those that are more developed) tend to have more effective and cost-efficient quality assessment systems. In comparison to the standards of quality assurance established by MOHE, the benchmarks set by international quality agencies and networks reveal notable disparities.

8. Recommendations of the Study

According to data analysis, literature review, and study findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1) It is advised that quality assurance operate independently from governmental and third-party influences to ensure impartiality in quality assessment and decision-making.

2) The implementation of peer review is strongly recommended for quality assessment purposes, with the inclusion of external experts, together national and international, to conduct evaluations;

3) Additionally, it is suggested that a greater number of professionals be trained in quality assessment to ensure an adequate supply of skilled human resources. This group should comprise a diverse mix of national and international experts to facilitate the exchange of experiences in the field.

4) The adoption of varied procedures for quality assessment in HEIs is recommended, drawing on successful practices from the developed nations. It has been observed that rigorous program reviews and interdisciplinary evaluations conducted by both internal and external experts yield more effective results and should be prioritised.

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