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## Comparative Analysis of the Quality Assurance Framework of Pakistan and Afghanistan

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## Abstract

*This article compares Afghanistan's quality assurance framework with that of Pakistan. Specifically, this article answers three key questions to address these issues: Is Afghanistan's current quality assurance policy or mechanism aligned with international standards to ensure quality outcomes in higher education? Second, does an annual assessment of eleven sub-criteria for maintaining accreditation impact the achievement of quality outcomes in higher education? Thirdly, this article answers how the existing system can be improved. A comparative content analysis of policy documents from Afghanistan and Pakistan is employed to answer these questions. It is worth mentioning that the article is based on a policy document analysis of the quality assurance framework of both countries. After comparison analysis, it is asserted that Afghanistan's higher education quality assurance and accreditation policy adopts a "one size fits all" approach across all fields of study, which does not guarantee quality outcomes. This article also highlights that the country's accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms in higher education require improvement in operationalising existing policies and procedures within the accreditation criteria. Additionally, the article critiques the fourth phase of accreditation, which focuses on maintaining certification. The findings are presented along with proposed policy solutions, recommendations, and a roadmap for transformation.*

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Comparative Policy Analysis, Higher Education, Pakistan, Quality Assurance Process

## 1. Introduction and Background of the Study

Afghanistan's higher education accreditation system is overseen by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) and the National Accreditation Council (NAC), which is responsible for ensuring quality standards across universities and institutions. Afghanistan's accreditation framework is centrally controlled by the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate (QAAD) under the Ministry of Higher Education. The existing model evaluates institutions using the same 11 criteria every year, regardless of differences in faculties or academic disciplines. These criteria include: (1) Institutional Mission and Objectives (2) Governance and Administration (3) Academic Programs (4) university, Faculty and department (5) Students (6) learning resources (7) Physical Resources (8) financial resources (9) community engagement (10) research (11) planning

and evaluation<sup>1</sup>. However, the system faces challenges, including limited resources and inconsistent standard implementation. While efforts have been made to align with international benchmarks, gaps remain in fully meeting global quality assurance norms, particularly in institutional autonomy, quality assurance, and continuous improvement mechanisms.<sup>2</sup> This model emphasises consistency but fails to recognise the specific needs of professional programs, such as engineering, medicine, economics, and education. One of the main problems with Afghanistan's current quality assurance framework is the "one size fits all" approach, which means that the MOHE quality assurance framework does not differentiate between programs according to program-specific quality criteria but instead uses a single criterion for all programs. This is happening because there is no classification of higher degrees. Moreover, annual reviews impose administrative burdens without sufficient time for measurable improvements.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the quality assurance mechanism and maintaining the university's accreditation, this article is, therefore, an endeavour to improve the accreditation framework of Afghanistan's higher education system. Specifically, this article aims to address the following question: *Is Afghanistan's current quality assurance policy or mechanism aligned with international standards to ensure quality outcomes in higher education?* Secondly, *does an annual assessment of eleven sub-criteria for maintaining accreditation impact the achievement of quality outcomes in higher education?* Moreover, thirdly, *how can the existing system be improved?* The article aims to identify gaps and propose actionable steps for enhancing quality assurance in Afghan higher education by examining these questions.

This article contributes to the discourse on higher education quality assurance by offering a comparative policy analysis of Afghanistan and Pakistan's quality assurance frameworks, with a focus on drawing actionable lessons for Afghanistan. Through an in-depth examination of official policy documents, the study evaluates whether Afghanistan's current mechanisms align with international standards, assesses the effectiveness of annual evaluations based on eleven sub-criteria in achieving quality outcomes, and identifies key areas for reform. By answering these three research questions, the article highlights gaps in Afghanistan's system and proposes evidence-based recommendations informed by Pakistan's relatively mature quality assurance practices. This comparative approach provides a valuable perspective for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to enhance the quality assurance of higher education in Afghanistan.

## 2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative policy analysis approach to answer the three research questions regarding Afghanistan's higher education accreditation system, focusing on the Pakistan Higher Education Commission (HEC) quality assurance and accreditation framework as a comparative benchmark. The methodology involves the following steps:

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<sup>1</sup> Philip G. Altbach and Jamil Salmi, *The Road to Academic Excellence: The Making of World-Class Research Universities* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Wahid T. Nirroo and Chris R. Glass, "Illusions of Improvement: Aspirations and Realities of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Policy in Afghanistan's Higher Education," *Higher Education Research & Development* 41, no. 3 (2022): 952–966.

## 2.1 Documentary Analysis of Pakistan's Quality Assurance Policy

A thorough review of the Pakistan Higher Education Commission's (HEC) Quality Assurance Manuals, Accreditation Criteria, and Policy Guidelines is conducted to identify key components, including institutional evaluation processes, accreditation standards, and compliance mechanisms. Analysis of legal and regulatory frameworks, including the HEC Ordinance (2002)<sup>4</sup> and subsequent amendments, to understand the enforcement structure of quality assurance in Pakistan.

## 2.2 Comparative Policy Assessment Against Afghanistan's System

Afghanistan's National Accreditation Council (NAC) policies and Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) regulations are examined to identify gaps in alignment with international standards. A side-by-side comparison is made between Pakistan's and Afghanistan's criteria for accreditation (or similar benchmarks) and Afghanistan's annual assessment requirements to evaluate their effectiveness in ensuring quality outcomes.

## 2.3 Identification of Best Practices and Recommendations

Based on Pakistan's successful implementation strategies – such as external peer reviews, institutional performance audits, and faculty development programs – recommendations are formulated for improving Afghanistan's accreditation system. The study also considers challenges in Pakistan's model (e.g., bureaucratic delays and uneven enforcement) to avoid similar pitfalls in Afghanistan. This policy-driven methodology ensures that the findings are grounded in existing regulatory frameworks rather than empirical data or a systematic literature review. It provides actionable insights for Afghan policymakers to enhance their quality assurance mechanisms in higher education.

## 3. Higher Education Framework of Pakistan

Pakistan's higher education accreditation operates under the Higher Education Commission (HEC), established in 2002. Pakistan's higher education accreditation system is structured to cater to a diverse range of degree programs, each overseen by a specific accreditation council to ensure quality and relevance. For instance, a 4-year Bachelor of Science (BS) degree in Arts and Sciences is accredited by the Higher Education Commission (HEC). In contrast, professional degrees such as MBBS, Pharm-D, and Engineering are regulated by councils like the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) and the Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC). Similarly, 5-year programs like LLB and Architecture require accreditation from the Pakistan Bar Council and the Pakistan Council of Architects and Town Planners, respectively.

Additionally, disciplines such as Business Education and Computer Science are monitored by councils like the National Business Education Accreditation Council (NBEAC) and the National Computing Education Accreditation Council (NCEAC). The HEC also accredits two-year Associate Degrees. This multi-council system ensures specialised standards for each field, unlike Afghanistan, where a uniform set of 11 criteria is applied across institutional, faculty, and departmental levels for accreditation. The HEC serves as the overarching regulatory body for higher education in Pakistan,

<sup>4</sup> Government of Pakistan, *The Higher Education Commission Ordinance, 2002, The Pakistan Code*, Ministry of Law and Justice, <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/pdffiles/administratora507e19d845bee722dd5e03f71d64817.pdf>.

mandating program accreditation to maintain quality assurance. According to the HEC's official website, accreditation involves a rigorous evaluation of curricula, faculty qualifications, infrastructure, and research output. The process is cyclical, requiring periodic reviews to ensure continued compliance with national and international standards. Pakistan's system is more decentralised, with discipline-specific councils working alongside the Higher Education Commission (HEC), whereas Afghanistan's approach is centralised, using the same benchmarks for all programs.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.1 Pakistan's Quality Assurance Framework in Higher Education

HEC delegates accreditation authority to specialised councils for various academic disciplines, such as

1. Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC) for engineering degrees
2. Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) for medical and dental programs
3. National Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (NACTE)
4. National Business Education Accreditation Council (NBEAC)
5. National Computing Education Accreditation Council (NCEAC)

These bodies conduct program-specific accreditation reviews every 4 to 5 years. Each council develops its quality assurance standards tailored to the academic and professional requirements of its field. For instance, PEC evaluates engineering programs on faculty qualifications, curriculum design, lab facilities, industry linkages, and graduate employability. This program-centric and cyclical evaluation enables institutions to implement improvements and innovations over time.

Moreover, Pakistan's higher education quality assurance (QA) framework is a three-tiered model designed to ensure continuous improvement at the program, institutional, and accreditation body levels, as depicted in the Figure below.<sup>6</sup>

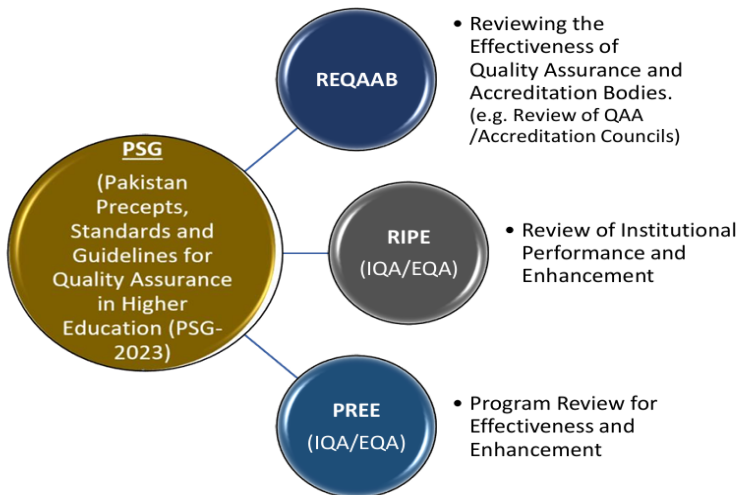


Figure 1: Pakistan's Quality Assurance Framework

Source: HEC Quality Assurance Agency ([www.hec.gov.pk](http://www.hec.gov.pk))

<sup>5</sup> For further details on Pakistan's higher education quality assurance manuals and policy documents, see Higher Education Commission, "Policies and Accreditation Frameworks," accessed June 28, 2025, <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/services/universities/pqf/Pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>6</sup>For official details, see Higher Education Commission, *National Qualification Framework of Pakistan*, accessed June 28, 2025, <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/services/universities/pqf/Documents/National%20Qualification%20Framework%20of%20Pakistan.pdf>.

The above Figure shows the framework that integrates internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms within universities with external quality assurance (EQA) evaluations conducted by regulatory bodies under the Higher Education Commission (HEC). The ultimate goal is to strengthen academic standards, enhance institutional performance, and ensure that accreditation councils function effectively.

### 3.1.1 Program Review for Effectiveness and Enhancement (PREE)

- a) Internal (IQA): Universities conduct self-assessments of their academic programs, evaluating curriculum relevance, teaching quality, learning outcomes, and research output.
- b) External (EQA): The HEC and relevant accreditation councils (e.g., NBEAC, NCEAC, PEC) perform external reviews, ensuring programs meet national and international standards.
- c) Focus: Outcome-based education (OBE), employability of graduates, and alignment with industry needs.

### 3.1.2 Review of Institutional Performance and Enhancement (RIPE)

- a) Internal (IQA): Universities assess their governance, faculty qualifications, infrastructure, research culture, and student support services.
- b) External (EQA): The HEC's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) conducts institutional audits, ranking universities based on performance metrics like research output, faculty development, and financial sustainability.
- c) Focus: Institutional sustainability, leadership effectiveness, and compliance with Pakistan's Precepts, Standards, and Guidelines for QA (PSG-2023).

### 3.1.3. Review of the Effectiveness of QA and Accreditation Bodies (REQAAB)

- a) This top-level review evaluates whether accreditation councils (e.g., PMDC, PEC, NBEAC) and the HEC's QAA are functioning effectively.
- b) Process: Independent audits assess whether these bodies enforce standards consistently, avoid conflicts of interest, and adapt to global QA trends.
- c) Focus: Transparency, accountability, and the impact of accreditation on higher education quality.

## 3.2 Key Features of Pakistan's QA Framework

- a) Dual-Layered Assurance: Combines IQA (university-led self-assessment) with EQA (HEC/council-led validation) for credibility.
- b) Outcome-Based: Emphasises graduate competencies, employability, and research impact rather than just inputs.
- c) PSG-2023 Compliance: All QA processes align with Pakistan's latest Precepts, Standards, and Guidelines.
- d) Continuous Improvement: Cyclical reviews ensure that institutions and programs evolve in response to changing educational demands.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For additional information, see Higher Education Commission, <https://www.hec.gov.pk>.

#### 4. Comparative Analysis of Afghanistan and Pakistan's Quality Assurance

Pakistan's model supports a developmental approach to accreditation, promoting long-term improvements. In contrast, Afghanistan's annual, uniform system limits adaptability and fails to address discipline-specific standards. The table below presents a comparative analysis of the quality assurance models of both countries.

**TABLE 1**

*Key Differences Between Pakistan and Afghanistan's Quality Assurance Mechanisms*

No	Dimension	Pakistan	Afghanistan
1	Classification of higher education degrees for program-based outcomes	yes	no
2	Program-specific accreditation	yes	no
3	Independent accreditation councils	yes	no
4	Accreditation review frequency	4-5 years	Annually
5	Criteria basis	Tailored per program	Generic for all institutions and programs
6	Institutional autonomy	moderate	Low
7	Improvement timeframe	Available	Very short, as evaluated yearly.

*Source:* Authors' compilation

The differences in the mechanisms for ensuring the quality of higher education in Pakistan and Afghanistan are both structural and operational. Pakistan has a more evolved and programme-focused process with a classification of degrees according to programme-specified outcomes, programme-tailored accreditation, and monitoring by stand-alone accrediting councils. Accreditation in Pakistan is carried out every 4–5 years in a manner that gives the institution ample time to incorporate changes based on an exhaustive set of criteria per academic programme. Pakistani institutions also have a moderate amount of autonomy, which grants them freedom of decision-making in academic and administrative matters, with the overarching aim of enhancing quality.

Contrastingly, Afghanistan's quality assurance system is still centralised and generic. There is no official categorisation of the degrees based on learning outcomes, and the accreditation process is carried out institutionally rather than programmatically. There are no independent accrediting councils, and the evaluation process is conducted annually, leaving little time for meaningful improvement by the institutions. The accrediting criteria employed are widely generalised across all institutions and programs and, hence, lack relevance and significance. Moreover, institutional autonomy is low in Afghanistan, which limits the universities' capacity to effectively respond to the findings of quality assurance and stimulate innovation and improvement in their academic programs<sup>8</sup>.

Unlike Afghanistan's uniform 11-criteria model (applied at institutional, faculty, and department levels), Pakistan's system is specialised, with different councils overseeing

<sup>8</sup> Said A. J. 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.

disciplines like medicine, engineering, and business. This ensures field-specific rigour but requires stronger coordination among accrediting bodies. Pakistan's QA framework is comprehensive and multi-layered, ensuring quality at all levels – program, institution, and regulatory body. While IQA allows universities to self-monitor, EQA ensures accountability, and REQAAB guarantees that accreditors themselves maintain high standards. This structured approach helps Pakistani higher education remain competitive globally while addressing local industry and societal needs.

Based on the aforementioned analysis, this article proposes the following policy recommendations to enhance the quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms in Afghanistan's higher education.

## 5. Policy Recommendations

### *5.1 Categorisation of Academic Streams and Setting up Discipline-Specific Quality Assurance Bodies*

As a starting point for reform, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) would first have to categorise higher education programs into specific academic streams—e.g., medical science, engineering, business, computing, etc. After categorising these, specific quality assurance systems would have to be established for each, consistent with the particular standards, competencies, and professional needs of the respective fields. These discipline-specific quality assurance systems must operate with autonomy to objectively evaluate and maintain the quality of outputs relative to their respective academic or professional areas. To begin with, the MoHE could establish these entities within a semi-governmental framework for close tutorial support and oversight during the formative stages. Over time, these frameworks must evolve into stand-alone quality assurance entities that can operate independently of government yet align with national higher education agendas and global best practices. This policy change will promote more appropriate, specific, and effective quality assurance processes that align with the diversified and evolving landscape of the higher education sector in Afghanistan.

### *5.2 Strengthen Institutional Autonomy and Accountability by Improving the Internal Quality Assurance Mechanism.*

To foster a culture of continuous improvement and sustainable quality in higher education, Afghanistan's Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) should prioritise strengthening internal quality assurance mechanisms (IQA) within universities rather than directly evaluating institutions' day-to-day operations. While external quality assurance remains essential, meaningful and sustainable quality improvements are best achieved when institutions take ownership of their internal processes. Universities across Afghanistan should be required and supported in establishing robust Internal Quality Assurance Units (IQAUs) responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and enhancing academic and administrative performance at the institutional level. These units should operate with a clear mandate to collect and analyse data, conduct internal evaluations, and prepare Self-Assessment Reports (SARs) that reflect institutional strengths, weaknesses, and improvement plans.

The MOHE's role should transition from operational oversight to strategic oversight. Specifically, MOHE should develop and implement a standardised national framework



for internal quality assurance. This framework should define the structure, functions, and performance indicators for IQAUs, ensuring consistency and reliability across institutions. Instead of directly assessing the operations of universities, the MOHE should evaluate the functionality and effectiveness of these internal quality assurance systems, focusing on how well institutions evaluate themselves and implement improvements based on data-driven assessments. Furthermore, the MOHE can conduct periodic external reviews of the IQAUS and audit the quality of the SARS to ensure credibility, objectivity, and alignment with national standards. This approach empowers institutions, builds their capacity for self-governance, and reinforces the principle of accountability through evidence-based internal mechanisms. Ultimately, this shift would enable Afghanistan's higher education system to mature into a more autonomous, accountable, and quality-driven sector, one that is better aligned with international standards and accreditation frameworks.

5.3 Shift to a Periodic Review Cycle

Accreditation reviews, accompanied by mid-cycle progress reports, should be conducted every 4 to 5 years. This will give institutions sufficient time for internal reforms.

5.4 Capacity Building for QAAD Staff

Training programs in policy analysis, accreditation systems, and quality assurance best practices should be conducted for QAAD personnel and institutional QA officers.

To implement the above policy recommendation, the following is the roadmap for its execution.

6. Implementation Road Map of the Policy Recommendations

The table below outlines the implementation plan for enhancing the accreditation framework and quality assurance mechanism in Afghanistan's higher education sector.

TABLE 2: Implantation Roadmap

Phase	Activities	Timeline
Phase 1: Policy Design	Draft new accreditation policies; identify key stakeholders	6 months
Phase 2: Pilot Program Councils	Launch 2-3 discipline-specific councils (e.g. engineering, medical, education)	1 year
Phase 3: Capacity Building	Train QAAD and institutional staff; develop SAR templates	6-12 months
Phase 4: National Rollout	Expand councils; revise QAAD mandate; implement periodic review schedule	2 years
Phase 5: Monitoring and Evaluation	Review outcomes; adjust standards and processes	Ongoing

Source: Authors' compilation

Phase 1: Policy Design and Degree Categorisation

This foundational phase begins by clearly defining and categorising degree programs in Afghanistan. This classification helps prioritise accreditation efforts for high-stakes, professional disciplines where quality assurance is critical, such as Medicine and

Engineering. The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) will draft tailored accreditation policies and a roadmap for forming specialised councils. Involving stakeholders early ensures the framework reflects sector-specific needs and gains wide acceptance. Below are the main activities of this phase

- a) **Categorise academic programs** into key degree types such as:
  - Professional degrees (e.g., Medicine, Engineering, Business, Computing)
  - General academic degrees (e.g., Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences)
- b) Draft new national accreditation policies aligned with international standards.
- c) Propose a strategic roadmap for establishing discipline-specific accreditation councils for each category, starting with high-impact sectors like Medicine, Engineering, and Business.
- d) Identify and engage key stakeholders, including universities, ministries, professional bodies, and industry representatives.
- e) Timeline: 6 months

## **Phase 2: Pilot Program Councils**

This phase tests the new accreditation model by piloting it in a few key disciplines. It allows for experimentation and learning before scaling the system nationwide.

- a) **Activities:** Launch 2–3 discipline-specific councils (e.g., Engineering, Medical, Education).
- b) **Timeline:** 1 year

## **Phase 3: Capacity Building**

This phase focuses on developing human and institutional capacity, which is essential for effective accreditation. Training ensures that all involved parties understand the new standards and processes.

- a) **Activities:**
  - Train QAAD (Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate) and institutional staff.
  - Develop Self-Assessment Report (SAR) templates.
- b) **Timeline:** 6–12 months

## **Phase 4: National Rollout**

This is the implementation phase, during which the pilot is scaled to the national level. It institutionalises the new framework and embeds a culture of regular quality reviews.

### **Activities:**

- a) Expand the discipline-specific councils to encompass a broader range of academic fields.
- b) Revise the QAAD's mandate to align with the reformed framework.
- c) Implement a periodic review schedule for continuous quality assurance.

- **Timeline:** 2 years

### Phase 5: Monitoring and Evaluation

Ensures sustainability and continuous improvement of the accreditation system by monitoring effectiveness and making data-driven adjustments.

#### Activities:

- a) Review the outcomes of accreditation efforts.
- b) Adjust standards and processes as needed based on feedback and evaluation.

- **Timeline:** Ongoing

## 7. Conclusion

The research critically analysed whether the framework of the higher education accrediting structure in Afghanistan is aligned with Pakistan and whether the yearly evaluation of eleven sub-criteria is genuinely practical in supporting quality outcomes. The research finds that the system falls short of achieving the global standard for academic requirements. It is based on a single formula that disregards institutional diversity and setting, hindering the potential for successful quality improvement.

The study is based on a policy analysis framework, employing Pakistan's higher education accreditation instruments to compare throughout the evaluation process and inform the Afghan system. Drawing on the Pakistani experience, we have identified specific gaps and reform needs within the Afghan framework. Based on the findings of this comparative analysis, we propose a list of policy initiatives to transform the system into a more context-specific, outcomes-driven, and globally aligned model for sustained improvement in the quality of higher education.

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