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Abstract

This article aims to compare Afghanistan's accreditation system with those of Bhutan and Sri Lanka to identify areas for improvement in the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) accreditation system checklist. A Qualitative research approach is applied to analyse the secondary data. The findings reveal that the MoHE's checklist has numerous flaws, particularly the way checklists are designed, too much weightage to research activities, requiring institutions to unnecessarily publish plans on walls, corridors, and social media platforms, the unlimited authority of the visiting board, the paradox in the indicators of digitalisation and internationalisation and the way evaluation is conducted are some of the major issues discussed in details in this article. The paper recommends that these major issues need to be addressed in future accreditation processes.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Accreditation, Bhutan, Education, Quality Assurance, Checklist, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

Quality Assurance in every field of operation, particularly in higher education, is an indispensable part of the process for ensuring transparency, enhancement and capacity building. The process of Quality Assurance in Higher Education ensures confidence that the standards are met within an institution.¹ The paper aims to critically evaluate the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) of Afghanistan's higher education accreditation related to the eight specific points system, mainly the weightage given to the research criterion, stakeholders' participation, strong board, stages of evaluation, posting on the walls, the internationalisation and digitalisation paradox, leaving out positive aspects of private universities and overall feasibility of the checklist requirements. The paper aims to identify gaps and issues related to the eight specific points by comparing them with those of Bhutan and Sri Lanka, and to provide policy recommendations.

This research article is based on the current checklist of Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan (MoHE), which was adopted in the meeting# 18, dated Sunday, Mizan 17, 1401 Solar Hijri calendar corresponding to Sunday, October 17, 2012, by the Quality

¹ European Commission, *Quality Assurance in Higher Education Manual*, August 19, 2018, p. 10, accessed January 20, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/project-result-content/ed7c0c0b-3b39-4388-b686-f0b4ae96e147/Quality_Assurance_Manual_final_version_29.04.2018.pdf.

Assurance and Accreditation Department of the Ministry of Higher Education, Afghanistan². It is compared with the Bhutanese and Sri Lankan higher education accreditation checklists. The main reason for comparing the MoHE's checklist with those of Bhutan and Sri Lanka is that, given the country's economic and political experience, it is within the category of Middle-Income Countries. Both are South Asian countries and share cultural similarities. In addition, the quality assurance criteria of Bhutan and Sri Lanka are comparatively better from many perspectives, especially in higher education. The paper relies on checklists, quality assurance manuals, and various scholarly articles to draw conclusions and provide recommendations for stakeholders in the MoHE on how to positively impact the process and standards of Higher Education Quality Assurance and Enhancement mechanisms. Afghanistan began the accreditation process in 2012 (1391)³ and is a relatively new entrant in this field. Many shortcomings and gaps can be improved. The study argues that certain areas require improvement, not only in understanding them but also in reshaping them in light of Afghanistan's current situation, which is still in the emerging phase of education, and in enhancing quality assurance.

2. Literature Review

The study reviewed the checklists of Bhutan and Sri Lanka to determine how they have designed their indicators of success in these specific areas.

Manual for Institutional Review of Sri Lankan Universities and Higher Education Institutions,⁴ Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century (HETC) Project Ministry of Higher Education and Research,⁵ Sri Lanka & University Grants Commission (April 2015),⁶ has been developed to guide Universities and other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who wish to submit themselves for Institutional Review under the Quality Assurance Framework of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). It serves as a guide for universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) to adopt and internalise good practices and standards in respect of quality assurance. Additionally, the Manual for Institutional Review of Sri Lankan Universities and Higher Education Institutions (Revised Edition), published by the University Grants Commission in January 2023, is also significant in the Sri Lankan context.

In the case of Bhutan, Accreditation Principles, Processes and Standards for the Tertiary Education Institutions in Bhutan Accreditation Council (2012)⁷ which is a document prepared by The Bhutan Accreditation Council (BAC), lays down that since, the field of higher education and tertiary education is comparatively a new area in the country, a strict, and a continuous oversight is maintained over the process as well the performance

² Quality Assurance & Accreditation Department, Ministry of Higher Education, Afghanistan, accessed October 17, 2022, <https://qaad.edu.af/dr/%D8%AD%D9%81%D8%B8-%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%87%DB%8C>.

³ Ibid.,

⁴ University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka, *Manual for Institutional Review of Sri Lankan Universities and Higher Education Institutions*, accessed January 25, 2025, https://www.ugc.ac.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1519%3Amanual-for-institutional-review-of-sri-lankan-universities-and-higher-education-institutions&catid=uaa=&Itemid=3&lang=en.

⁵ Sri Lanka - Higher Education for the Twenty First Century Project (English), Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, accessed January 25, 2025, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/585331498838674928>.

⁶ University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka, *Manual for Institutional Review of Sri Lankan Universities and Higher Education Institutions*.

⁷ Bhutan Qualifications and Professionals Certification Authority, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.bmhc.gov.bt/higher-education-quality-council/accreditation-eqa/>.

of such institutions with the help of a institutionalized system. This is done with the help of the Bhutan Accreditation Council, an autonomous body made up of permanent members and experts with a mandate to carry out the task of quality assurance for both government and private Tertiary Education Institutions (TEIs) around the country. This body was formally instituted in June 2011 by an Executive Order No. C-2/100/86. This autonomous agency, therefore, following its mandate, maintains and renews its task of finding out that the TEIs continue to meet the requirements as well as the needs of society and the students and other stakeholders. Therefore, the accreditation and licensing process of the BAC acts as a common indicator of shared principles, abilities, and procedures for the TEIs which reward certificates, diplomas, master's, or doctoral degrees. The BAC continually enhances educational quality throughout the country by certifying the effectiveness of TEIs through accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms. The BAC, therefore, affirms and periodically reaffirms that the TEIs meet standards and address the needs of society and students. The accreditation and licensing process serves as the common denominator of shared values, strengths, and practices among the TEIs that award certificates, diplomas, master's, or doctoral degrees.

Another document, the Institutional Accreditation Manual of the Bhutan Accreditation Council (2020),⁸ which became institutionalized with due approval of the country's Tertiary Education Policy of the Kingdom of Bhutan dated 2010 and also duly approved by the country's highest decision-making body, that is, the cabinet, called the Lhengye Zhungtshog. In this regard, the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Division (QAAD) under the country's Department of Adult and Higher Education (DAHE) in the Ministry of Education works as a secretariat to the Bhutan Accreditation Council. One of the important tasks before the council is to have a continuous oversight of the quality of higher education and tertiary education in the kingdom. Moreover, this is done through providing accreditation, appreciation of the qualifications rewarded by the TEIs in the country. It also oversees this entire process of accreditation as the single most important mechanism in ensuring the quality of tertiary and higher education in the kingdom. It also goes on to highlight the fact that accreditation is a collective and professional approach for maintaining a high standard in the higher education sector. Therefore, this document goes on to create and support a dynamic professional milieu in the country's higher education institutions (HEIs) through the process of accreditation. The basic objective here is to assist all the stakeholders in this accreditation process, their roles and their responsibilities in the process, as well as to benchmark the same. Therefore, it lays down every process under this accreditation system, starting from the nature of the fee structure to assessment and finally recognition of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Finally, this document marks the starting point, a reference point, for all the necessary stakeholders in putting into place a reliable accreditation system.

In addition, the main framework used for comparing certain weightage is the Rubrics for Standards of Institutional Accreditation, which is a supplement to the Institutional Accreditation Manual of the Bhutan Accreditation Council (2021).⁹ The rubrics for accreditation are the guides for evaluating the health of the institutions providing higher education. The guide has 3 parts: 1. Key aspects as Criteria, 2. five performance levels (Excellent, Very Good, Good, Satisfactory and Unsatisfactory) and 3—extra clarification

⁸ Department of Adult and Higher Education, Bhutan Accreditation Council, accessed January 25, 2025, <http://www.dahe.gov.bt/index.php/governing-boards/bhutan-accreditation-council>.

⁹ Bhutan Qualifications and Professionals Certification Authority.

for the performance regarding each level. The guide also serves as a roadmap for the evaluators to make a fair judgment.

In short, the role of the university in knowledge generation, innovation, and its transformational impact cannot be viewed solely in terms of its graduates. The concept of quality in higher education is multidimensional, encompassing all its functions and activities, including academic, research, and scholarly pursuits, as well as its community services.

3. Research Methodology

This research is qualitative, involving three case studies. First, we have reviewed the MoHE checklist for Quality Assurance and Enhancement. The checklists for Bhutan and Sri Lanka are compared with the selected sections of the MoHE checklist. The data is collected from the official websites of both countries, as well as from other available sources, such as research articles, in all three cases. They have been read against specific selected areas, compared with each other and analysed. The analysis of these data is used to provide recommendations for modifying not only the way MoHE conducts quality assurance visits but also to modify certain areas of the checklist.

4. A Comparative Analysis of Quality Assurance Checklists of Afghanistan, Bhutan and Sri Lanka

The comparative analysis of the checklists of Afghanistan, Bhutan and Sri Lanka related to the weightage given to the research criterion, stakeholders' participation, strong board, stages of evaluation, posting on the walls, the internationalisation and digitalisation paradox, leaving out positive aspects of private universities and overall feasibility of the checklist requirements are discussed below in detail:

4.1 Checklist Design Without Stakeholders' Participation

Both Bhutan and Sri Lanka have developed their checklists and quality assurance standards with wide stakeholder participation. Both countries have 8 (Bhutan)¹⁰ and 10 (Sri Lanka)¹¹ criteria, respectively. In Afghanistan's checklist, there are 11 criteria¹², while very limited stakeholder participation is permitted. The checklists of Bhutan and Sri Lanka have clear standards, illustrating the requirements and providing clear indicators without ambiguity.¹³ In Afghanistan, several ambiguous terms are used, leading to confusion within institutions, particularly when it comes to the board and its recommendations. It allows the Board of Evaluation to propose vague requirements, such as "sufficient evidence" and "standard",¹⁴ which are unmeasurable terms. Such words add to the already ambiguous situation rather than adding clarity. At the same time, there

¹⁰ Bhutan Accreditation Council, *Rubrics for Standards of Institutional Accreditation*, April 2021, accessed January 13, 2025, <http://www.dahe.gov.bt/images/pdf/QAAD/Accreditation-manual-2020.pdf>.

¹¹ University Grants Commission (UGC), *Manual for Institutional Review of Sri Lankan Universities and Higher Education Institutions: Chapter 4, Standards for Assessment*, April 2015, p. 50, accessed January 25, 2025, https://www.ugc.ac.lk/attachments/1519_IR%20Manual%20-%20Printed%20Version%207th%20May.pdf.

¹² Quality Assurance & Accreditation Department, Ministry of Higher Education, *Quality Assurance Manual*, February 7, 2023, accessed January 20, 2025, <https://qaad.edu.af/dr/%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%86%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7>.

¹³ University Grants Commission (UGC), *Manual for Institutional Review of Sri Lankan Universities and Higher Education Institutions: Chapter 4, Standards for Assessment*, April 2015, pp. 50–84, accessed January 25, 2025, https://www.ugc.ac.lk/attachments/1519_IR%20Manual%20-%20Printed%20Version%207th%20May.pdf.

¹⁴ As per the comments of the Quality Assurance Board received by Kardan in 1402.

is a very limited number of accepted templates or formats for presenting evidence of tasks that are carried out.

Another issue that arises from a one-sided approach to the quality assurance and enhancement mechanism is the cycle of evaluation. The standard practice in the region and beyond is that such accreditation occurs after the completion of one academic cycle. For example, in India, each accreditation cycle has a validity period of 5 years.¹⁵ The latter can be defined in terms of the application and fulfilment of any programs being offered for a four-year or five-year program. Likewise, in Sri Lanka or Bhutan, such accreditation occurs after the completion of these cycles. Not each year, and that too, not abruptly. Hence, this may result in a thorough review, revision, and drafting of the required changes following the market's requirements. In addition, having an autonomous accreditation council with independent and experienced full-time team members will further boost the credibility of such bodies. The onus shall lie on the stakeholder, here, the institution, to invite them for their sustenance and marketability and not driven by any misunderstanding or any other factors. The accreditation council must be able to provide an overall ranking of the university or institute after its exit from the institution, which must remain valid for a specified period.

Quality assurance checklists should be designed in a way that ensures the indicators within them guarantee and improve the quality of the services provided. Unfortunately, some of the checklist indicators neither guarantee nor improve quality but only guarantee the existence of documents in the files. For instance, the existence of the department's Social pages (Facebook, Twitter, or X) at the Department, Faculty, and institution levels has been placed as an indicator in the checklist. This is unnecessary because educational institutions typically have a social media page under the institution's name, through which the main activities, faculties, and departments are published.

4.2 Research Weightage

There is no doubt that research is one of the most important indicators of success and a pivotal part of the recognition of a university, but certainly not the only one. The current checklist has allocated 128 marks for the Research activity in a higher education institute (criteria no. 6, faculty level checklist).¹⁶ It seems that there is an overemphasis on research conducted by the faculty members.

In the current checklist, research is given the highest marks (128/480 (26.67%)), while in the Bhutanese experience, it is weighed as the 2nd most important (150/1000 (15%)), after the "Teaching Learning & Assessment".¹⁷ In the case of Sri Lanka, it does not involve research for universities offering graduate studies; rather, it checks the research activities of postgraduate universities only. They have not mentioned marks; rather, the weightage is given by four grade standards: 0 - Inadequate, 1 - Barely Adequate, 2 - Adequate, and

¹⁵ National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), "Information for Institutions - NAAC," September 2023, accessed January 14, 2025, <http://naac.gov.in/index.php/en/10-assessment-and-accreditation/55-cycles-of-accreditation>.

¹⁶ Quality Assurance & Accreditation Department, Ministry of Higher Education, *Quality Assurance Manual*, February 7, 2023, accessed January 18, 2025, <https://qaad.edu.af/dr/%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%86%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7>.

¹⁷ Bhutan Accreditation Council, *Rubrics for Standards of Institutional Accreditation*, April 2021, accessed January 13, 2025, <http://www.dahe.gov.bt/images/pdf/QAAD/Accreditation-manual-2020.pdf>.

3- Good.¹⁸ It is noteworthy to mention that in the Sri Lankan case, clear indicators have been provided, and good practices have been shared with universities to clarify further and enhance coherence in the research work.

TABLE 1

Standards and Weightage for Research Criterion for Research in Bhutan

Standard	Key Aspects	Weighting
5 Research, Publications, and Linkages (150)	5.1 Research culture	45
	5.2 Research and publication	45
	5.3 Consultancy and extension services	25
	5.4 Collaborations & linkages	35

Source: Bhutan Accreditation Council (BAC).

TABLE 2

Criteria and its Grading in the Sri Lankan Checklist

No.	Standards	Examples of Evidence	Score Guide
			0 - Inadequate 1 - Barely Adequate 2 - Adequate 3 - Good
1.14	The University/HEI incorporates the use of ICT in management, communication, teaching and learning, research and community engagement.	Policy documents on ICT; Strategic Plan; Handbooks; Planning and Development Committee documents; Annual Report; website, MIS & LMS	0 1 2 3 O O O O

Source: Manual for Institutional Review of Sri Lankan Universities and Higher Education Institutions.

4.2.1 Policy Publications

The issue of policy research remains unclear because no formats or examples of such research have been shared with the institutions by the Quality Assurance Board. Furthermore, any article presented to the esteemed board as policy research is sometimes not deemed acceptable to them (Criterion No. 6, Item No. 140).¹⁹ Therefore, the policy research indicators should be clarified so that the institutions and the board of the Ministry of Higher Education agree on the definition of such research. At the same time, the number of this type of article is also not known, so it is better to specify the number of academic articles and determine additional marks for articles exceeding the ceiling.

On the other hand, when hard copies of these articles are shared with government institutions, there is no mechanism in place to determine whether they have been read or used. Additionally, due to the lack of a mechanism, there is sometimes a delay or lack of acknowledgement of the receipt of the letter.

Similarly, Criteria No. 6.3, Item No. 150. reads as “dispatching professors to international research seminars”,²⁰ which is almost impossible under the current circumstances in the

¹⁸ University Grants Commission (UGC), *Manual for Institutional Review of Sri Lankan Universities and Higher Education Institutions: Chapter 4, Standards for Assessment*, April 2015, p. 50, accessed January 17, 2025, https://www.ugc.ac.lk/attachments/1519_IR%20Manual%20-%20Printed%20Version%207th%20May.pdf.

¹⁹ Quality Assurance & Accreditation Department, Ministry of Higher Education, *Quality Assurance Manual*, February 7, 2023, accessed January 18, 2025, <https://qaad.edu.af/dr/%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%86%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7>.

²⁰ Ibid.

country. Therefore, this indicator should be removed or modified from the checklist, at least for the time being.

4.3 Stages of the Evaluation

In the Sri Lankan case, there are three stages of evaluation. The first stage is called the "Preparation Stage", in which the university declares its preparedness for evaluation and the reviewer team or board. Then comes the second stage, "the review visit," which is conducted by a permanent team taken from the pool of reviewers who are experts in quality assurance and standards.²¹ In Afghanistan, any faculty member from a public university can be designated as a Board member to evaluate the private university. It has come to our experience that a medical doctor was assigned to evaluate the faculty of social sciences, who had a limited understanding of the checklist for social sciences and the activities carried out by the concerned faculty. The third stage is "The Review Report and process prior to publication". In other countries, the reviewer team prepares the draft report, and prior to publication of the results, it is shared with the concerned university. After the university's comments and concerns are addressed, the report is published by the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC). However, in Afghanistan, it is the opposite. The reviewer/board member may write any comments regarding the department/faculty's activities. At the same time, universities are not allowed to take a copy of their comments. Rather, the university is asked to sign and stamp the commented evaluation without knowing what has been written in the evaluation or if the university has any concerns. The reports are published on the Ministry of Higher Education's website without referring them to the evaluated universities for their views.

4.4 Strong Board

The Evaluation Board in Afghanistan is strong, as it can interpret the checklist requirements according to its understanding. In a couple of years, as the board visits universities yearly, there are differences of opinion regarding various indicators each time. At the same time, in a university with nine departments, there are differences in understanding regarding the checklist. This is primarily the result of the poor quality of the checklist indicators, which ultimately gives the settlement vote to the concerned board member. Any accreditation council that is independent and autonomous must have a clear mandate defined in its constitution, rules, and bylaws. Nothing must be left to one's free understanding or interpretation. As already expressed in the aforementioned paragraphs, such bodies must have the mandate to conduct checks on the health of the programs after the completion of a full academic cycle of 4 or 5 years.²² Following this, a ranking must be provided, which shall be displayable by the concerned stakeholder for the next 4/5-year duration. The autonomous body and its office must address any other matters for improvement within the mentioned criteria throughout the year. For this, it is recommended to have a permanent secretariat for such an accreditation council or body. One thing must be made clear: educational institutions are not

²¹ University Grants Commission (UGC), *Manual for Institutional Review of Sri Lankan Universities and Higher Education Institutions: Institutional Review - Process*, April 2015, p. 25, accessed January 25, 2025, https://www.ugc.ac.lk/attachments/1519_IR%20Manual%20-%20Printed%20Version%207th%20May.pdf.

²² National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), "Information for Institutions - NAAC," September 2023, accessed January 14, 2025, <http://naac.gov.in/index.php/en/10-assessment-and-accreditation/55-cycles-of-accreditation>.

production units preparing students to be fit for the market, whose value can be determined only after a specified period, say five or ten years, in the job market.

4.5 *The Digitalisation and Operational Plan Paradox*

The checklists have not been prepared with a unified perspective in mind. Therefore, some indicators have been determined in a way that raises questions about other indicators. For example, digitalisation (Criteria No. 10.1, Item no. 215) is one of the major issues in the strategic plan; however, a complaint box (Criteria No. 3.4, Item nos. 75, 77) has still been considered for employees. In the present era, employees can easily submit their complaints to the relevant authorities via email, utilising the most convenient facilities and services. If the relevant institution has a digital complaint system, the old system of submitting complaints in a box is no longer mandatory.

4.6 *Posting Plans on the Walls and Banners*

Similar to the points discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the vision and mission statements of any given institution of tertiary and higher learning should not be displayed prominently at the forefront of the institution; rather, they should resonate with the service delivery system and the day-to-day operations of the institution.²³ In an era of climate change that is staring starkly at us, as well as the rest of the region, we must adopt the slogan of going Green rather than relying on printing works. Tertiary education centres must go paperless, and the goal must be to minimise the usage of paper and thereby minimise the impact on the environment. Therefore, in order to promote itself as an environmentally responsible and conscious higher education institution, one must adopt and internalise the best possible technology available.

Likewise, weightage is given to notice boards at the university, faculty, and department levels (criteria no. 1.5, items 22-24).²⁴ If each department has a notice board, what should be published on the faculty and institution notice board? The principle is that the notice board is available at the institutional level, and each department within the institution shares the notices and documents it desires on it. In the new academic management system, all notices are shared with students via email through the educational management system or Learning Management System (LMS), making a notice board unnecessary. However, considering the realities, the board at the institutional level is sufficient.

In addition, according to the new checklist (Criteria no. 1.5, Items No. 22-24), publishing the vision and mission should be done on the official website of the institution. However, in addition to publishing on the website, the mentioned criteria emphasise that publishing it by departments, faculty level, as well as university level on the social pages (Facebook and X) is necessary.²⁵ In practical terms, for an institution that has 9 departments/programs and 5 faculties, it is not possible to create and continuously organise 14 pages on social networks.

²³ riteria no. 1.5, item nos. 22-24.

²⁴ Quality Assurance & Accreditation Department, Ministry of Higher Education, *Quality Assurance Manual*, February 7, 2023, accessed January 20, 2025, <https://qaad.edu.af/dr/%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%86%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7>.

²⁵ Ibid.

4.7 Neglecting the Positive Aspects of Private Universities

Private universities are not simply any random seat of higher education or learning in the country. Rather, they provided several value additions to the student community as well as to the rest of the national community. The recruitment and retention of educated, qualified, and experienced lecturers, both nationally and internationally, must be viewed in this light. Furthermore, several operations undertaken by the university to cater to the national community, such as financial support, donations, and various forms of corporate social responsibility, must be recognised and given credit by the accreditation council. This can be achieved by drafting additional criteria for such activities and thereby recognising the university as a centre of excellence.

Some universities have more PhD scholars, and all other faculty members hold Master's degrees. Holding international accreditations and offering job security are other positive aspects of some private universities. However, none of these factors are considered in the given checklist.

5. Comparative Study Results

This article analysed certain parts of the MoHE checklist. Content analysis has been done to weigh the weightage of the research section. We have compared this criterion with those of Bhutan and Sri Lanka. Similarly, the participation of stakeholders and the role of the board in all three countries are compared and contrasted. In comparison, we have discussed how two other cases, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, follow a flexible type of evaluation. We then describe the process by which Sri Lanka conducts its quality assurance evaluation. Not only do they follow three stages of evaluation, but they also pay visits as per the notification for readiness from their universities.

The study highlights another aspect of lesser importance but of high weightage in the MoHE checklist, which is the display of a publishing vision and mission statement on university walls/notice boards. The study found that this criterion is not followed in two other countries. Additionally, on the issues of internationalisation and digitalisation, the study argues that to become internationally recognised, or at least connected to international standards, we need to follow international standards in alignment with local ones. In the internationalisation criterion, the checklist requires resemblance to international standards; however, the details in the checklist are traditional and ambiguous, which is inconsistent with these standards.

In addition, the MoHE checklist overlooks the positive aspects of private universities. Some universities in Kabul have many positive aspects, such as serving students not only in education but also in career grooming during their educational journey, as well as after they become alumni. Alumni are connected to the universities, and the institutions provide a variety of services for them. This point, along with other positive aspects, is overlooked because no weight is assigned to these services.

Likewise, another important issue is the design of the checklist without stakeholder participation. By stakeholders, we mean not only the public but also private higher education institutions. In quality assurance procedures in Afghanistan, the voices of stakeholders are often minimal or sometimes neglected in higher education. The checklist is designed from a single view, individual-centric, and can be confusing and ambiguous.

A large number of higher education institutions in Afghanistan are private, but their voices, needs, and challenges they face are not reflected in the checklist.

Similarly, another issue is the research section of the checklist. The study argues that the marks assigned to this criterion exceed the standards set by the quality assurance checklists of two other countries, Bhutan and Sri Lanka.

Another issue is the evaluation process in Afghanistan, and the studied checklists indicate that it has three stages. In other countries, at each stage, the institution undergoing evaluation is kept informed, listened and consulted before the announcement of its assessment results.

Likewise, regarding the authority of the visiting members of the board, they are not only on the same page, but they also understand the checklist differently. The checklist itself prioritises much of the protocol over quality, as it requires publishing almost every plan on the walls and corridors of institutions.

At the same time, all other positive aspects of the institutions are not considered valuable, and it observes idealism in other requirements it identifies for the institutions.

Conclusion

It is considered good to have high benchmarking standards as well as currency for requirements criteria, but, once again, one is required to be realistic enough when it comes to realising them. Accreditation and Quality Assurance criteria should be formatted with consideration for the challenges faced by the country and institution. At the same time, one must begin by using less ambiguous titles and requirements and replace them with jargon-free titles and requirements that foster a common understanding of such requirements. This will remove confusion in the minds of both the evaluators and the evaluated.

Secondly, an autonomous and independent body, such as the Higher Education Council in Sri Lanka²⁶ or the Bhutan Accreditation Council in Bhutan,²⁷ should be established in Afghanistan. This body should comprise independent and full-time academics rather than part-time members on deputation. This will invariably reduce the bureaucratic red tape of any organisation and will give the respective body greater flexibility and agility, as well as the ability to hone the best of the experience and prudence required. Private universities with limited or no government financial support must be granted greater flexibility in forming external partnerships with universities in the region and beyond. This will enable greater benchmarking as well as currency for programs, courses, and the mobility of the teaching faculty, leading to increased exposure and knowledge. However, in the current context, the likelihood of the former is quite limited and restricted. Once again, if we draw lessons from universities in the region and beyond, one may come across the fact that universities, whether private or public, enjoy a greater degree of autonomy in their offerings of programs, courses, and teacher recruitment policies because universities are a part of the civil-society hence, required not to be interfered by any government body. However, in all the above instances, an external, autonomous body is required and also recommended for maintaining the highest standards of

²⁶ Higher Education Division, "Overview," accessed January 19, 2025, https://www.mohe.gov.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=66&Itemid=123&lang=en#.

²⁷ Bhutan Accreditation Council (BAC), "About CHEA," accessed January 19, 2025, <https://www.chea.org/about-chea>.

operation procedures. Lastly, the study argues that universities, whether private or public, should be treated as a vast pool of intellectual resources from which the highest office in the country may draw advice and lessons from time to time. There is a greater need for us to learn lessons from the several accreditation bodies already operating in the region, as well as globally. We have mentioned their experience in the aforementioned paragraphs, and now we are at the crossroads of reviewing their best practices and methods and developing our methods and practices. This will help us not only hone the experience of such existing bodies but also benchmark our accreditation system.

Recommendations

- Research must have a balanced weightage, taking into account the country's situation and the institution's nature. The research weightage should be adjusted in consideration of the institution's level and the programs it offers.
- The Quality Assurance/enhancement checklist must be reviewed with meaningful participation from private stakeholders, allowing them to have a voice in the checklist's finalisation.
- The evaluation should be shared before the announcement and agreed upon by the institutions evaluated before the results are publicised, rather than keeping it secret until the last days of publication.
- Evaluation should be performance-based rather than bureaucratic-oriented, focusing on the quality of programs rather than merely checking paperwork. Preparing papers alone would be a form of bureaucracy, whereas ensuring and enhancing the quality of the programs is the goal.
- The need for an indigenous checklist that reflects the ground realities of Afghanistan should be formulated. All unnecessary and irrelevant parts of the checklist need to be refined and revised. In this process, the MoHE may take advice from not only the public but also private universities.
- The Ministry of Higher Education, Directorate of Quality Assurance and Accreditation, must work towards recognising the positive aspects of universities beyond the checklist requirements.
- Internationalisation and digitalisation criteria must be reconsidered, and universities that have made significant contributions to these areas should be given weightage. The environment should also be taken into account.
- Arranging for external examiners or auditors for each department and faculty is highly recommended.

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