

## Efficiency of HEC's Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Framework: Perceptions of Quality Enhancement Cells' (QECs) Executives of Pakistani Universities



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**Abstract:** *This qualitative study examined Pakistani Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) executives' views on the HEC's Quality Assurance and Agency (QAA) framework's effectiveness in higher education. Thematic analysis was used to discover and analyse QEC executives' various viewpoints on the HEC's QAA framework's efficacy using in-depth interviews with 20 purposive sampled participants. Analysis revealed two themes: "Ideal Role Model" and "Loopholes in the Model." Within the "Ideal Role Model" subject, several interviewees saw the HEC's QAA framework as a thorough and adequate model for ensuring and improving higher education quality. In contrast, the "Loop Holes in the Model" topic highlighted most respondents' concerns. This research enhances the knowledge of Pakistan's higher education quality assurance dynamics. This research shows the challenges of ensuring and improving higher education quality from many viewpoints. Addressing these viewpoints and creating a dynamic, adaptive, and culturally relevant quality assurance system are essential for Pakistan's higher education growth.*

**Key Words:** Quality Assurance, HEC, QAA, Quality Management, QECs, Higher Education

### Introduction

The application of quality in the educational field interests many researchers and philosophers (Harvey & Green, 1993; Patton, 1999). By reimagining how they deliver education, HEIs are viewed as entities whose mission is to optimize stakeholder and consumer (Students) happiness. TQM in education has significantly increased, with higher education institutions receiving the majority of the attention (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018).

For higher education institutions (HEIs) to be relevant and competitive in their particular fields, they must adjust to market influences. Like many other service industries, higher education institutions (HEIs) are employing manufacturing-based quality principles

to raise the calibre of their offerings. High-quality higher education requires a dynamic, multidimensional, and multi-level approach that takes into consideration local conditions (Beerkens, 2018). In the context of higher education institutions, "quality" refers to a facility's capacity to offer a high-quality education at a reasonable price (Lim, 2018). The two subcategories of quality are educational and administrative quality (Lim, 2018). The quality of education is determined by the instructional strategies utilized and the perspectives of different stakeholders (Garira, 2020). According to Chonjo (1994), effective administration in education requires both a solid basis and effective bureaucratic procedures.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) must offer a high-quality education at a fair price in order to uphold

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their civic duty. Additionally, increasing loyalty and retention by gratifying stakeholders including students, employers, and social actors is also crucial for HEIs' reputation (Solievich, [2022](#)). Higher education institutions must therefore think about defining, evaluating, and ensuring quality in their activities. Recent studies have examined issues with student engagement, quality assurance, effective leadership, peer review of instruction, and teaching quality (Zhuravel et al., [2021](#)). Despite a formal QAA framework, the HEIs of Pakistan's quality are not up to the mark.

The Higher Education Commission's (HEC) perspective on quality assurance has been impacted by the importance of quality management and assurance in higher education. In 2005, the Pakistani government formed the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) through the Higher Education Commission (HEC) with the purpose to "promote, enhance, and guarantee the quality of higher education in Pakistan's HEIs." (HEC, [2005](#))

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is a policy-making and monitoring institution tasked with promoting and enforcing high standards across the country's colleges and universities. Systematic execution of quality enhancement procedures/criteria increase institutions' and programmes' international compatibility and competitiveness (HEC, [2005](#)).

Consequently, the purpose of this study is to explore the potential and efficiency of HEC's QAA framework through the perceptions of Quality Enhancement Cells (QEC) executives, who are the employers of the QAA framework in HEIs.

## Literature Review

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This section discusses and critiques previous research relevant to the subject of this study covering concepts of quality, quality management and assurance in higher education, especially in Pakistan's Context.

## The Concept of Quality

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The concept of quality is difficult to pin down since it is so elusive (Sallis, [2014](#)). Barcaccia et al., ([2013](#)) have referred to it as a "wild goose chase" in their writings. It is a wild goose chase since the word can be employed in a variety of various ways, and different people associate different connotations with the word.

Although there is consensus that students should receive a great education in school, opinions on what exactly constitutes such an education are quite diverse. It is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of the statement's complexities in order to prevent it from turning into a meaningless catchphrase (Barcaccia et al., [2013](#)).

According to Harvey and Green ([1993](#)), there are many facets/notions of Quality which they described in their study as follows:

- a) Quality as Exceptional: The exceptional view of quality begins with the presumption that quality is extraordinary. There are three distinct presentations of this notion of quality. To begin, there is the concept that quality cannot be duplicated; second, there is the belief that quality is embodied in excellence (that is, exceeding extremely high criteria); and third, there is the more flimsy concept of exceptional quality, which is defined as passing a set of required (minimum) norms (Harvey & Green, [1993](#)).
- b) Quality as Perfection: There is also the view that quality is best understood in terms of flawlessness. In simpler words, quality is the absence of flaws. It lays emphasis on procedure and establishes guidelines that must be strictly adhered to in order to achieve perfection (Shafqat et al., [2021](#)).
- c) Quality as Fitness for Purpose: The notion strategy of how well quality serves the product's or service's functions. According to this facet, quality is only relevant as far as it serves the products or services' intended function (Jia et al., [2019](#)). The quality of a good or service is measured by how well it fulfils its intended function. It is a far cry from the idea of quality as being exceptional, rare, exclusive, prestige-granting, or difficult to achieve.
- d) Quality as Value for Money: In popular conceptions of quality, value, and particularly value for money, is typically intertwined with perceptions of quality (Harvey & Green, [1993](#)). The expressions "quality at a low cost" and "quality items at a cheap cost," as well as others like them, give the impression of "high quality" at a reduced price (Asante & Ngulube, [2020](#))

- e) Quality as Transformation: The fundamental concept of quality as transformation is inextricably linked to the process of quality assurance, which states that the process should be transformational for the benefit of students (Harvey & Green, 1993). This fundamental concept is inextricably linked to the process of quality assurance (Abbott et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2021).

## Quality Management

According to one definition, Quality Management (QM) is "a philosophy or approach to management" based on "a sequence of mutually reinforcing principles, each of which is supported by a set of activities and procedures" (Javed & Alenezi, 2023).

The context of QM in this study is taken as a set of standards/benchmarks to meet by following a set of quality practices like; customer focus, leadership, strategic planning, teamwork performance management etc.

Darmaji et al. (2019) argue that QM is available in multiple forms in higher education, with different systems possibly being dominated by a separate subject orientation. These subject orientations include "academic," "managerial," "pedagogical," and "employment." As a result of this, Darmaji et al. (2019) say that QM is available in multiple forms. An academic orientation in a QM strategy emphasizes the importance of professorial authority and academic values, places an emphasis on course content, and establishes connections between courses and disciplinary specialities.

## Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The deliberate and systematic review of an institution or programme to evaluate whether acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are met, maintained, and enhanced is known as quality assurance. For developing nations like Pakistan to flourish economically, they need to invest in a higher education system that is both nationally and internationally acclaimed for its quality, efficiency, and effectiveness (Akhmedov, 2021).

Increased job prospects, better education and training for prospective workers, the development of future leaders, a more welcoming atmosphere for

education, and a more robust body of knowledge are all outcomes of a quality assurance programme with a long-term focus (Alrowwad et al., 2020). Therefore, it serves as a catalyst for global economic and social development. For a free and democratic civil society to thrive, a robust system of higher education is essential (Prestiadi et al., 2019).

According to, Javed and Aelenzi (2023), higher education would give social communication and interaction norms, such as philosophic inquiry and deductive reasoning, that encourage member sovereignty, eradicating all types of socio-class and ethnic strife, as well as gendered and religious discrimination. The emergence of a contemporary civil society can be traced back to high-quality higher education institutions. This level of academic achievement is unusual, yet it serves as a standard for assessing the quality of the nation's higher education institutions.

As Quality Assurance improvement is a continual process, quality in higher education necessitates continuous plans, activities, and attempts. Practitioners looking for quality assurance guidelines, proof of best practices, and tools to help them through the process face a substantial obstacle. Quality Assurance encompasses processes, procedures, and assessment outcomes.

## Quality Management Practices of Pakistani Higher Education

With the creation of the Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan's higher education system reached a watershed moment. In order to retain HEC's gains, it is critical to prioritise quality assurance in higher education. The Quality Assurance Agency was founded to ensure the delivery of high-quality education. The agency established Quality Enhancement Cells (QEC) in state-run universities and delegated authority to them to conduct authorised quality control methods (HEC, 2005).

According to, Baig et al. (2013) Pakistan's HEC is the country's major governing authority for higher education concerns. Recognising the importance of Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutes, the Commission agreed on the need to establish a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) at HEC as well as QECs under the supervision of the QAA (HEC, 2006).

The QA Committee, which advocated the formation of the QAA, now serves as an Advisory Body, with the QA reporting directly to the HEC Chairman (HEC, 2005). In order to achieve its goals, the QAA established QECs in both public and private universities, offering operational and financial assistance. The QAA was entrusted with creating QECs at both public and private universities over time to assure the delivery of high-quality postsecondary education as part of its responsibilities (HEC, 2006). The QAA regularly checks the progression of these QECs to assess their status. Quarterly reports on six criteria, including Institutional Performance Evaluation (IPE), Self-assessment Reports (SARs), Accreditations, PhD and MS/MPhil Programme Review, QEC Secretariat Functioning, and Implementation of QEC (QA) Policies and Criteria, are submitted as part of this monitoring. The QAA performs routine inspections of QECs as part of this oversight to evaluate their operations and promote uniformity in the implementation of quality assurance practises across the nation's academic institutions (HEC, 2005, 2006).

### Research Questions

The following are the research questions of this study:

- 1) Are there any good aspects of HEC QAA's Framework according to QEC executives?
- 2) What are the loopholes in the HEC QAA's Framework according to QEC executives?

The following objectives serve as the roadmap in order to answer the research questions:

- 1) To analyse the good aspects of HEC QAA's Framework.

- 2) To evaluate the loopholes in the HEC QAA's Framework.

### Methods

Because the problem under investigation is more interpretive and realistic, the qualitative research method was chosen for this study (Creswell et al., 2007). In order to investigate and make sense of the study's objectives, the researchers adopted a position aligned with the interpretive/constructivist paradigm. This approach necessitates that the researcher acknowledge the potential of socially generated alternate realities. As Creswell et al. (2007) underline, in quantitative research methodologies, a positivist lens is generally used to arrive at an objective solution to a research topic. In contrast to positivist epistemology, interpretivism holds that perception is a creative process and that reality is relative to the perceiver (Mason, 2017).

The researchers conducted the study at universities of Lahore, Pakistan. A total of 6 universities were selected by the researchers and 20 QEC executives were interviewed as a result.

Participants in this study as mentioned above were the QEC executives working at public and private universities of Lahore. Numerous parameters, including the study's purpose, research methodology, study population characteristics, analytical strategy, and available resources, were considered while establishing the sample size. Purposeful sampling was used to choose participants based on their knowledge, experience, and tenure with QECs (Acharya & Prakash, 2013). A total of 20 participants were chosen as a sample of the study.

**Table I**

*Demographic Profile of Participants*

S.No	Name of Interviewee	Designation	Experience	University Category
1	AS	Director	20+ years	Private
2	HA	Deputy Director	9 years	Private
3	MN	Asst. Manager (Data Analyst)	7 years	Private
4	AS	Asst. Manager (International Rankings)	6 years	Private
5	SS	Director		Public
6	HZ	Deputy Director	12 years	Public
7	N	Asst. Director	4 years	Public
8	MB	Director	2 years	Private

S.No	Name of Interviewee	Designation	Experience	University Category
9	R	Asst. Director	3 years	Private
10	W	Asst. Director	3.5 years	Private
11	YJ	Director	20+ years	Private
12	QA	Deputy Director	20+ years	Private
13	AN	Asst. Director	8 years	Private
14	MW	Director QEC	13 years	Public
15	DN	Deputy Director	7 years	Public
16	AH	Data Analyst	5 years	Public
17	DA	Director	9 years	Public
18	HI	Deputy Director	6 years	Public
19	SN	QA Manager	4 years	Public
20	AT	QA Manager	3 years	Public

The semi-structured enquiries were designed to get to the bottom of the phenomena by asking follow-up questions. There were recurring themes that linked these investigations to the effectiveness of the HEC's QAA Framework.

Participants were instructed on the study's goal and methods before the interview. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions. We were able to establish the assets and limits of the QAA framework by conducting interviews with senior-level QEC executives.

The researchers' expertise and dedication are critical to the credibility of qualitative investigations (Duffy & Chenail, 2009). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not differentiate between reliability and validity. The phrase "credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness" can also be used to include both of these attributes. According to constructivists, knowledge is socially generated and context-dependent (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Mason, 2017). According to Patton (1999), traditional research standards such as "generalizability," "objectivity," and "reliability" cannot be used in qualitative investigations. Instead, as Shufutinsky (2020) urges, the researcher should build credibility by detailing the study's participants, surroundings, and data processing techniques.

The researchers' in-depth interviews added to the study's scope and complexity. These interviews

were designed to collect a representative sample of participant replies. Researchers kept thorough notes throughout interviews to ensure they didn't miss anything important. The researcher painstakingly went through all of the transcripts in order to discover reoccurring themes for the inductive theme analysis. To produce theory-driven codes that were compatible with the existing literature, the researcher employed both inductive and deductive coding. In the meanwhile, the codes have been examined to verify that the information included within them is correct.

## Findings

The primary objective of this study was to find out how QEC executives felt about the efficacy of the HEC QAA framework. Interview transcripts were thematically evaluated by researchers in this study.

The aim of this study was to identify whether the QECs of public and private universities find HEC QAA's framework of quality assurance efficient enough to ensure the quality in Higher Education of Pakistan. Two contradictory themes were identified after transcribing and coding the collected data. A few interviewees mentioned that this framework is an ideal role model whereas the majority of the interviewees highlighted a lot of flaws within the framework which makes it very difficult for them to assure and implement quality in its true sense.

**Table 2**

Provides a brief overview of the research questions in relation to the themes and sub-themes:

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
Are there any good aspects of HEC QAA's Framework according to QEC executives?	Ideal Role Model	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Comprehensive and Appropriate Framework</li> <li>2. Streamlined Quality Assurance</li> <li>3. Guidance for Continuous Improvement</li> <li>4. Confidence in Accreditation</li> <li>5. National Standardization and Benchmarking</li> </ol>
What are the loopholes in the HEC QAA's Framework according to QEC executives?	Loopholes in the Model	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Excessive Documentation and Repetition</li> <li>2. Out-dated Framework</li> <li>3. Perceived Thankless Job</li> <li>4. Cultural Relevance and Global Trends</li> </ol>

### Theme I- Ideal role model

The meaning of an ideal role model according to the context of this study is the consideration of HEC QAA's quality framework as an ideal role model for QECs of public and private universities of Pakistan. At three different points, this sub-theme occurred in the transcripts of the interviewees. HZ, from a public university, told the researcher that this framework was ideal in the following words, "The Higher Education Commission QAA has developed a role model for all the public and private universities of Pakistan so; I believe there is no need to implement any other model or framework." Similarly, SS, from a public university also expressed her viewpoint about HEC QAA's framework, "Let me tell you, the 6 parameters of HEC are so comprehensive that we do not need separate initiatives for continuous improvement and Innovation." Furthermore, DN from a public university also expressed that the six parameters help QEC to implement quality assurance, "HEC's 6 criteria include constant development and innovation, and hence we do not require a separate project." (DN)

#### Sub-theme I: Comprehensive and Appropriate Framework

Interviewees consider HEC's QAA framework to be comprehensive and suitable for assuring quality in higher education, "The framework provides us with concise and comprehensive guidelines which we follow to maintain the quality of education at our university" (MN)

#### Sub-theme 2: Streamlined Quality Assurance

Interviewees appreciate that the HEC's QAA framework offers a unified and standardized approach to quality assurance. They emphasize that having a single framework reduces confusion and ensures consistent quality standards across institutions. One of the participants quotes the crux of all other interviewees' perceptions, "We continuously and annually implement SARs to remove as many problems as we can. This provides coherence and unification in our processes." (AT)

#### Sub-theme 3: Guidance for Continuous Improvement

Interviewees highlight how the QAA framework provides clear guidelines and parameters for continuous improvement. They believe that these guidelines help institutions identify areas of improvement and focus their efforts effectively. According to HZ, a private university, "...the 6 parameters of HEC are implemented and evaluated against a score card each fiscal year to ensure all perspectives required by the parameters, Doing it again and again moves us towards continuous improvement as we do better than the last year every time." Similar to HZ, many other interviewees agreed that the annual implementation of the QAA framework helps their institution to improve continuously.<sup>89</sup> + + +

#### Sub-theme 4: Confidence in Accreditation

Interviewees expressed that the adoption of HEC's QAA framework adds credibility and legitimacy to institutions. They believe that being accredited by a recognized national framework enhances their reputation and encourages trust among stakeholders.

Quotes from interviewees sharing this viewpoint can be included. *"I believe there is no need to implement any other model or framework as; following this framework automatically provides us national and international accreditations."* (YJ)

#### Sub-theme 5: National Standardization and Benchmarking

Interviewees acknowledged that the QAA framework establishes a common benchmark for all higher education institutions. They suggest that this benchmark allows for better comparison and assessment of the quality of education provided by different institutions. The interviewees expressed that following the QAA framework is a benchmark for them along with improving their national and international rankings. *"Right now Yearly Progress Report of HEC is our only benchmark. It has its own standards and sub-standards. It has 100 plus activities which we have to perform... We make national accreditation our benchmark as it helps us in gaining international accreditations."* (MB)

#### Theme 2- Loopholes in the model

The meaning of loopholes in the model according to the context of this study is the flaws mentioned by interviewees regarding the six parameters of HEC's QAA. This theme was the most prevalent among the interviewees. All interviews on different occasions elaborated on the problems faced by QECs while implementing the six parameters of HEC's QAA. The interviewees described that the six parameters are very lengthy and repetitive. It has a lot of documentation of things like vision and mission which does not get revised every year but still, it has to be provided every year. MR from a private university, expressed, *"Our strong stance is that HEC six parameters have a lot of document work. It is like a repeat telecast. For example, if they have asked a question in the first standard then the same question is mentioned in the 7th standard."*

#### Sub-theme 1: Excessive Documentation and Repetition

Interviewees express concerns about the excessive amount of documentation required by the QAA framework. They mention that certain requirements, such as vision and mission documentation, are repetitive and not revised annually. Interviewee MN, HZ, and QA at different points during their interviews shared that in the end these parameters only become paperwork which has to be provided to HEC during external audits. *"Institutions do not revise their procedures every year. For example, we have to provide the vision and mission to HEC auditors every year. HEC should do audits every three years so that they can evaluate major changes made in the system to assure quality."* (MN, from MUL) Just like MN, HZ from a public university also elaborated that it is a repetitive extensive workload which needs revision from HEC's side.

#### Sub-theme 2: Out-dated Framework

Interviewees criticize the QAA framework as outdated, mentioning that it was introduced in 2006 and hasn't kept up with current educational trends. They suggest that the framework needs to be updated to better suit the evolving landscape of higher education. On the other hand, many interviewees on 6 different occasions called this framework outdated instead of pointing out flaws in it. MB from a private university expressed, *"Not at all, it is insufficient as it has done annually."*

#### Sub-theme 3: Perceived Thankless Job

Interviewees mention that some departmental/school heads within universities perceive the implementation of the QAA framework as a thankless task. They discuss challenges in getting departments/schools to cooperate and provide necessary data. For instance, SS, from PU revealed that although the framework is fine the departments consider it a thankless job, she revealed that they have to constantly remind departments again and again to provide SARs and other necessary data for external audits. She said, *"As the departments think of it as a thankless job. We have to reach out to them again and again to provide SARs and this creates a lot of problems."* (SS)

## Sub-theme 4: Cultural Relevance and Global Trends

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Interviewees propose that a new framework should align with Pakistan's cultural context while also incorporating global educational trends. They suggest that a relevant and adaptable framework should be designed to last for an extended period. Furthermore, interviewees expressed a new model should be made which can fit the higher educational context of Pakistani universities and is relevant according to today's educational trends. *"Actually if I talk about the ground reality of quality of education and the support of HEC, the model provided by HEC is an obsolete model now as it was given in 2006 to evaluate the program's quality through SARs, IPE etc. So, there should be a new model of education which can target Pakistani universities."* (QA)

## Discussion

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The results of this study shed light on the perceptions of Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) executives regarding the efficiency of the Higher Education Commission's (HEC) Quality Assurance and Assessment (QAA) framework in Pakistan's higher education landscape. The analysis of qualitative data from interview transcripts revealed two main themes: "Ideal Role Model" and "Loopholes in the Model." These themes encapsulate the diverse perspectives of QEC executives on the effectiveness of the HEC's QAA framework.

The theme, "Ideal Role Model," for RQ1 reflects the viewpoint of some interviewees who consider the HEC's QAA framework as a comprehensive and appropriate model for ensuring quality in higher education. They view this framework as a beacon guiding both public and private universities towards maintaining and improving the quality of education in Pakistan. These executives highlight several sub-themes within this context.

Interviewees acknowledge that the HEC's QAA framework provides comprehensive and concise guidelines, serving as a valuable resource for quality assurance. This sub-theme underscores the utility of the framework in facilitating institutions' efforts to maintain high standards of education. The perception of the HEC's QAA framework as comprehensive and

appropriate resonates with the concept of "best practices" in higher education quality assurance. Harvey and Green (1993) emphasize that best practices often involve clear standards and guidelines for institutions to follow, contributing to improved overall quality.

Executives appreciate the standardized and unified approach to quality assurance offered by the HEC's QAA framework. This sub-theme highlights the importance of a consistent framework that reduces confusion and ensures quality standards across institutions. The idea of a unified and standardized approach to quality assurance aligns with the principles of quality assurance and accreditation frameworks in higher education. For instance, the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area emphasize the importance of standardization to ensure transparency and consistency (ENQA, 2019).

Interviewees emphasize the role of the QAA framework in providing clear guidelines and parameters for continuous improvement. They see this guidance as instrumental in helping institutions identify areas for enhancement and focus their efforts effectively. The notion that the QAA framework provides guidance for continuous improvement corresponds with the principles of continuous quality enhancement advocated by organizations such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the UK (Morgan, 2015).

The executives also express confidence that adopting the HEC's QAA framework adds credibility and legitimacy to their institutions. This recognition at a national level enhances the reputation of the institutions and fosters trust among various stakeholders. The belief that accreditation by a recognized national framework enhances institutional credibility is supported by research on the importance of accreditation in building public trust and confidence in higher education institutions (De Wit & Altbach, 2020).

The framework's establishment of a common benchmark for all higher education institutions is seen as a positive aspect. This benchmark allows for better comparison and assessment of the quality of education provided by different institutions, promoting a culture of continuous improvement. The concept of a common benchmark for quality assurance aligns with

the international trend of establishing quality standards and benchmarks to promote quality enhancement in higher education (Caeiro et al., 2020).

The theme, "Loop Holes in the Model," for RQ3 presents a contrasting perspective held by the majority of interviewees. They highlight various challenges and shortcomings associated with the HEC's QAA framework, making it difficult for QECs to effectively ensure and implement quality in higher education. Several sub-themes emerge within this theme.

Interviewees express concerns about the excessive documentation required by the QAA framework, particularly mentioning the repetitive nature of certain requirements such as vision and mission documentation. This sub-theme underscores the need for a more streamlined and efficient approach to documentation. Concerns regarding excessive documentation and repetition are in line with critiques of bureaucratic and burdensome quality assurance processes in higher education (Batool et al., 2013). This issue highlights the need for efficiency in documentation requirements.

Many interviewees consider the QAA framework to be outdated, as it was introduced in 2006 and has not evolved to align with current educational trends. They argue for the necessity of an updated framework that better suits the changing landscape of higher education. The perception that the QAA framework is outdated reflects the importance of frameworks evolving with the changing landscape of higher education. International literature highlights the need for continuous updating of quality assurance frameworks to remain relevant (Jamoliddinovich, 2022).

Some interviewees mentioned that departments within institutions perceive the implementation of the QAA framework as a thankless task. This perception creates challenges in obtaining cooperation and necessary data for quality assurance processes. The challenge of departments perceiving quality assurance as a thankless job resonates with studies on the importance of creating a culture of quality that engages all stakeholders in the process (Beerkens & Udam, 2017).

Executives propose the development of a new framework that aligns with Pakistan's cultural context while also incorporating global educational trends.

They emphasize the need for a relevant and adaptable framework that endures over time. The emphasis on a culturally relevant and globally informed framework aligns with discussions about the need for context-specific quality assurance practices that also consider global trends (Chhin et al., 2018).

In conclusion, this study reveals a diversity of perspectives among QEC executives regarding the HEC's QAA framework. While some view it as an ideal role model that provides comprehensive guidance and enhances institutional credibility, others point out significant flaws and advocate for a more flexible, updated, and culturally relevant framework. These findings underscore the importance of ongoing dialogue and collaboration between stakeholders to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of quality assurance in Pakistan's higher education sector. Further research and policy considerations are needed to address the identified challenges and enhance the quality assurance framework in line with the evolving needs of higher education institutions.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the diversity of perspectives presented by QEC executives in this research underscores the complexity of quality assurance in higher education. While some view the HEC's QAA framework as an ideal model, others emphasize the need for significant improvements. Addressing these concerns and fostering a dynamic, adaptable, and culturally relevant quality assurance system is critical to ensuring the continued growth and enhancement of Pakistan's higher education sector. Further research and collaborative efforts are necessary to translate these findings into meaningful policy changes and quality improvements in Pakistan's higher education landscape.

These findings have several implications for Pakistan's higher education landscape. Firstly, they underscore the need for a comprehensive review and potential revision of the existing QAA framework. The framework should adapt to the evolving needs and contexts of higher education institutions and address concerns related to documentation, flexibility, and cultural relevance. Secondly, the study emphasizes the importance of fostering a culture of quality assurance that engages all stakeholders. To address the perception of quality assurance as a thankless task,

efforts should be made to communicate the value and benefits of quality assurance processes more effectively.

Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of benchmarking and standardization in quality assurance. It suggests that a common benchmark can

facilitate comparisons among institutions and promote continuous improvement.

Consequently, the study calls for greater alignment between quality assurance frameworks and global educational trends while considering the unique cultural context of Pakistan's higher education system.

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