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# Analysis of Quality Assurance Initiatives in Associate Degree Program of Teacher Education Institutions of Southern Punjab

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**ABSTRACT**
Quality assurance (QA) in higher education has grown to be of great concern especially with regard to the Associate Degree Programs (ADPs) in teacher education. Although higher education Commission of Pakistan has introduced Quality Assurance mechanisms in the form of Quality Improvement Cells and policy of standardization, there are still vast implementation barriers in remote areas such as Southern Punjab. It's a qualitative study of explanatory research design so the purposive sampling techniques was used to select the sample of the study. This paper assessed the correspondence between current. Semi-structured interviews with 15 administrators and 30 faculty members, institutional documents such as QA manuals, curriculum reports and policy documents were used to collect data. Patterns and challenges were determined through thematic analysis. Key shortcomings were observed related to the execution of QA such as use of old curriculum, scarce faculty development opportunities and poor practice of assessment. There was a profound disjunction between HEC-directed structures and organizational practices, especially those of institutions with scarce resources in rural areas. Systematic implementation was low and only few of institutions had contextualized QA policies. The reform of QA would need to incorporate structural change, more stakeholder engagement, professional development throughout the lifetime and localized monitoring systems to be significant. The key to the sustainable enhancement of the quality of teacher education is a region-specific QA model that proposed gradual implementation with the involvement of stakeholders and resource optimization.

**Keywords:** Quality Assurance, Associate Degree Program, Teacher Education, Southern Punjab, HEC, Qualitative Research

## Introduction

The advent of Quality Assurance (QA) as being a major aspect of higher education reform has changed the landscape of academic governance in developing countries like Pakistan. QA may be said to be the systematization process in ensuring that academic programmes have such quality that they meet the requirements in terms of content, delivery and outcomes. To be in the international scene, Higher Education Commission (HEC) has already integrated the QA systems in the shapes of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), Institutional Performance Evaluations (IPEs) and curriculum standardization policies. The Undergraduate Education Policy (UGEP 2020) of HEC included the introduction of the Associate Degree Program (ADP) a two-year alternative to the former BA/BSc structure to offer a shorter, cheaper, and work-oriented academic

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route. By 2023, more than 300 state and non-state colleges in Punjab provide the ADP, and the numbers of enrollees to the programme increase among economically disadvantaged students who are looking at the chance to get an early career or a job access opportunity [1-4].

Although these efforts have been made, several obstacles continue to prevail in the application of QA practices in ADPs- especially in those parts that are under-resourced such as Southern Punjab. Institutions may also not have qualified faculty, curriculum to national competency standards, electronic infrastructure, and quality evaluation systems. The Directorate of Staff Development (2010) notes that only 37 percent of the institutions in Southern Punjab had undertaken QEC-led assessment yet more than 60 percent of the institutions did not have annual review cycles of the curriculum [5]. In addition, differences between urban and rural institutions in regard to access to training, supervision and materials of instruction expand quality differences. The National Education Policy of 2009 realized the crucial role of quality management in the learning of teachers and identified lack of supervisory mechanisms and weak accountability structures as consistent limitations to the realization of educational outcomes. Although there are attempts by some universities to implement the concepts of Total Quality Management (TQM) principles or models based on competency-based education, their level of application is inconsistent and incomplete.

In spite of these, various hurdles still exist in the practice of QA in ADPs- especially in under-resourced areas such as Southern Punjab. The institutions are usually poorly equipped in terms of qualified faculty, alignment of curriculum with the national competency standards, digital facilities, and sound assessment systems. The Directorate of Staff Development (2010) reported that in Southern Punjab, implementing QEC-led evaluations had been done in only 37 percent of institutions and more than 60 percent had no annual curriculum review cycles [5]. Besides, the access to training, supervision, and instructional materials by urban and rural institutions is also a disparity that contributes to gaps in quality. The 2009 National Education Policy identified the critical role played by quality management in teacher education but noted that there were no supervisory mechanisms and poor accountability structures as unremitting obstacles to attaining education outcomes. Although there are higher education institutions that have tried to implement Total Quality Management (TQM) principles or competency-based education models, their implementation has been ad hoc and in a narrow way.

The genesis behind this study was the increasing need to enhance the quality and relevancy of teacher education in Pakistan particularly, in Southern Punjab where education deficits were a bigger problem. With the movement towards quality assurance in global and national reforms, it became urgent to critically examine whether such mechanisms had really enhanced associate degree teacher programs or not. The aim of this study was inspired by the need to not only play a role in the academic discourse but also in practical policy solutions that directly benefited the teacher competency, institutional effectiveness and equity in education in the region.

Despite the existence of several studies on the topic of teacher education, quality assurance and associate degree programs in Pakistan and across other nations, there were few studies that considered the impact of quality assurance programs on the efficacy of the Associate Degree Programs (ADPs) in the sphere of Teacher Education in Southern Punjab [8]. The literature in existence tended to be policy oriented or descriptive, there being lack of empirical findings on the contextual issues, institutional practices, and locality outcomes. This posed a knowledge gap on the practical congruence between the national quality assurance models and ground level application in the under-resourced

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areas.

This paper discussed the efficacy of quality assurance programs on the Associate Degree Programs of Teacher Education in the Southern Punjab in Pakistan. The problem was the fact that there was always a gap between policy frameworks and institutional practices and out of date curricula, inadequate faculty development and ineffective evaluation mechanisms limited the effectiveness of the programs. The topicality of the study was predetermined by the fact that it was investigating the area where higher education reform has been the least comprehensive in the past. The rationale was based on the fact that there was a need to align the reforms in higher education in Pakistan with world standards of quality assurance so that the teacher preparation programs are effectively responsive to local needs [9,10]. This research offered context-specific information that will guide policy makers, Higher Education Commission leaders and teacher education institutions in the facilitation of evidence-based reforms to enhance equity, accountability, and sustainability in teacher education.

In light of the identified research gap and the significance of strengthening teacher education through quality assurance mechanisms, this study was guided by the following

**Objectives:**

To critically analyze the existing quality assurance mechanisms employed in Associate Degree Programs (ADPs) of teacher education institutions in Southern Punjab, with specific attention to curriculum relevance, faculty capacity-building, and student assessment practices.

To investigate institutional and contextual barriers that hinder the effective implementation of Higher Education Commission (HEC)-mandated quality assurance frameworks, particularly in under-resourced and rural teacher education institutions.

To develop a contextually grounded quality assurance framework that addresses institutional realities, promotes stakeholder engagement, and strengthens the overall effectiveness and sustainability of teacher education programs in Southern Punjab.

The present study helped to add to the existing body of knowledge by offering context-specific information concerning the effectiveness of quality assurance efforts in the context of Associate Degree Programs of Teacher Education in Southern Punjab. It contributed to the mismatch between national policy frameworks and local implementation with empirical support on institutional challenges and gaps. The study also added a proposed quality assurance model which is oriented to specific regional needs, and therefore assists policymakers, higher education government bodies and institutions to be able to design a sustainable reform. Finally, it contributed to the value by connecting theoretical views of quality assurance with the practical use in the setting with under-resourced teacher education.

The paper is divided into five major parts. The introduction contains the background, problems, challenges, motivation, paper statement research gap and objectives of the study. The literature review summarizes the past research conducted on quality assurance, associate degree programs and teacher education in Southern punjab. The qualitative design, sampling and data collection methods are described in the methodology. Findings are discussed and analyzed in the results and discussion section in the context of the existing literature, pointing out the challenges and suggested reforms. Lastly, a conclusion is provided with major findings, policy suggestions, and future research prospectives.

## Literature Review

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## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Quality Assurance in Teacher Education

The study on quality assurance in teacher education used various strategies to emphasize the policy framework, accreditation processes, and practices within the institutions. Avsheniuk [11] applied the analytical framework developed by UNESCO and highlighted lifelong professional education as a method; it was revealed that the international organizations facilitated the reforms in teacher training but had some drawbacks in contextual adjustment. The conclusion emphasized on the fact that national systems were made more consistent through international systems, and the application proposed to harmonize national policies with the UNESCO guidelines. Ingvarson et al. [12] used a cross-country comparative approach in 17 countries; the findings indicated that the accreditation systems had significant correlations with student learning outcomes but the research was hampered with differences in national standards. It was found in the conclusion that global benchmarking increased the quality of the program and the application indicated the transfer of such models into the local context. Equally, Kaushal [13] used a case-study methodology in India where he reported that internal quality assurance tools enhanced the teaching practices at school level. The regional focus of the study, but in its findings, the researchers concluded that quality assurance mechanisms requiring policies were absolutely necessitated and the implementation of the application was complementing larger teacher changes.

Other researchers did put more stress on the self-consideration and institutional perceptions. Gardezi [14] used comparative inspection analysis of four countries and it was revealed that self-evaluation improved accountability but was limited by inequitable application. The article found that the self-assessment systems enhanced transparency and used in creating inspection-based systems to teacher education. Makhoul [15] employed the use of accreditation evaluation and revealed that third party reviews enhanced both teaching and learning but reliance on adherence reduced sustainability. It was concluded that accreditation impacted positively on learning conditions and application promoted constant monitoring. Assan [16] employed the survey technique among lecturers, and results showed quality assurance practices enhanced the delivery of pedagogy, but findings were narrowed due to subjective perceptions. This was concluded by the fact that faculty engagement was essential with the suggestion of regular professional development in the application. The policy and case study of the system of accreditation in Pakistan by Saif and Awan [17] has shown the challenges in its operation, such as lack of adequate resource and failed consistency in the standards. This was constrained by the fact that it aimed at regulatory barriers yet the conclusion reiterated the necessity of institutional reforms and the application suggested context-specific accreditation models.

In the same way, Assan and Lumadi [18] administered perception-based surveys to determine quality indicators and they found that teachers gave importance to clear standards and institutional support. The shortcomings included small samples, although the conclusion confirmed that perceived quality was associated with the performance of institutions, and the application provided policy-makers with guidance on how to develop determinable measurements. International Task Force on Teachers [19] took a guideline-development approach where they suggested that teacher policies should be structured to match SDG 4. The findings showed unanimity in the world and were constrained by non-binding implementation, whilst the conclusion focused on strategic planning, with the application guiding ministries towards a harmonization of policies. Ng and Ta [20] deployed empirical analysis in Vietnam and revealed that accreditation had

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boosted institutional reputation and student trust but they have also been faced by challenges such as limited faculty readiness. The conclusion was that accreditation would be a force behind accountability and the application led to the development of developing countries to incorporate QA with capacity-building efforts.

**Associate Degree Programs in Higher Education**

Study on associate degree programs has shown how they have helped to expand access, enhance employability, and facilitate transfer options. Skolnik [21] used statistical analysis in Canada and revealed that community colleges increased rates of attainment in the short cycle, but inequalities in the regions still existed. Likewise, Savall Ceres [22] cited a case study in Spain where it was found that instilling short-cycle programs in universities enhanced the early teacher training, though, in the case of pre-primary schools. The authors Yang and St. John [23] used longitudinal models between the countries and discovered that, national-level data limited depth, but to a greater extent the models showed that public investment in vocational associate degrees increased equity and workforce participation. In the U.S, Kopko and Crosta [24] carried out a regression analysis and reported that an associate degree earned prior to transfer provided small academic benefits with unequal labor returns. Turk [25] confirmed using institutional surveys that associate completion enhanced bachelor on completion although there was disparity among states.

There were also policy initiatives that had both strengths and weaknesses. Associate degrees were determined as level-5 qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework of Pakistan [26] and gave an international comparability, although with no operational clarity. According to Siddiqui [27], changing BA/BSc with associate degrees in Pakistan was not welcomed but it was a necessary measure of reform. In an Asian context, Lane [28] demonstrated that short-cycle programs amplified employability but were unable to achieve recognition on the part of employers whereas Li and Huang [29] reported the reforms in China and only recorded access gains, which were limited due to prestige issues. Crosta and Kopko [30] also found out that associate completion increased the short-term employability, although there were cases where it postponed the progress of a bachelors. Together these studies found that associate degrees had a bridging role between access and employment and that it had to be carefully balanced between academic, vocational and policy goals.

**Teacher Education in Southern Punjab: Scope and Challenges**

There were constant challenges of training, resources shortages, and gender imbalances in teacher education in Southern Punjab. Munawar et al. [31] surveyed the primary level in an exploratory way and showed a strong desire to organize teacher training programs, but the study was limited due to the local nature of the scope of the study. Rizvi and Khamis [32] discussed donor-financed projects and revealed that international projects made a difference in building capacity in institutions though their outcomes were limited by poor local sustainability. Siddiqui and Mughal [33] emphasised issues of the obsolete pedagogical approach by providing a diagnostic review, but suggested low-cost, context-specific solutions, but their article did not provide longitudinal data. Nadeem et al. [34] evaluated female teacher performance based on competency based measurement in Bahawalpur and found that social and infrastructural barriers had negative effects on the result with the limitation of small sample size. Similarly, Bibi and Sheikh [35] examined teacher education in South Punjab and they found the following systemic barriers; underfunding, poor supervision, and lack of motivation, and concluded that the reform

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should be supported by both the institution and the community.

These difficulties were also systemically supported by wider policy studies. In a critical assessment of the problems faced by teachers at the workplace, Saeed et al. [36] discovered that poor pay, excessive workload, and lack of professional development curtailed performance. National Education Policy 20172025 [37] focused on improving the quality of teachers by attempts to improve curriculum and training opportunities but was hampered by the lack of resources in needy districts. Ali [38] investigated the gaps in quality assurance and came up with a conclusion that the excellence in teacher training was still undermined by disproportionate faculty preparation. Jamil [39] followed the historical path of development of teacher education and showed that unequal standards curtailed professionalism. Malik and Urooj [40] evaluated the national reforms and demonstrated how quality improvement strategies were presented, but implementation in Southern Punjab was the last to be implemented in comparison with other areas. Taken together, these studies found that the reform of teacher education in the region needed to be better institutionalized, gender-sensitive and professionally developed, and both national reform agendas and regional equity initiatives were applied.

Table 1: Comparative Table of Previous Studies

| **Reference** | **Technique** | **Focus Area** | **Results** | **Limitation** | **Application** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| [11] N. Avsheniuk (2021) | Policy review (UNESCO documents) | UNESCO's role in teacher education QA | Highlighted UNESCO's contribution to global QA frameworks | Limited to policy-level analysis, lacked local data | Applied in shaping teacher education standards in Pakistan through international benchmarks |
| [12] L. Ingvarson et al. (2017) | Cross-national comparative study | QA outcomes in 17 countries | Found strong correlation between QA mechanisms and teacher performance outcomes | National variations limited comparability | Provided evidence for adopting global QA models in Southern Punjab |
| [21] M. L. Skolnik (2021) | Statistical analysis | Role of community colleges in associate degrees (Canada) | Showed community colleges raised short-cycle tertiary attainment | Focused on Canada only | Demonstrated how ADPs can expand access in under-served regions like Punjab |
| [27] S. H. Siddiqui (2020) | Policy commentary | Replacement of BA/BSc with AD programs in Pakistan | Noted reform as crucial step but faced resistance in adoption | Lacked empirical validation | Informed debates on implementing ADPs in Southern Punjab |

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| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| [31] U. Munawar et al. (2022) | Exploratory survey | Need for teacher training in Punjab (primary level) | Identified lack of structured training as critical gap | Small-scale and localized | Provided baseline evidence for designing QA-linked training programs |
| [35] A. Bibi & S. J. Sheikh (2021) | Empirical field study | Teacher education in South Punjab | Reported systemic barriers: underfunding, supervision issues, low motivation | Region-specific, not generalizable | Applied in contextualizing QA initiatives for ADPs in Southern Punjab |

**Methodology**

This chapter provides details of research design, population, sampling strategy, data collection instruments, procedures and methods of analytical tools used to examine the implementation and effectiveness of the Quality Assurance (QA) initiatives in the Associate Degree Programs (ADPs) of Teacher Education in Southern Punjab, Pakistan.

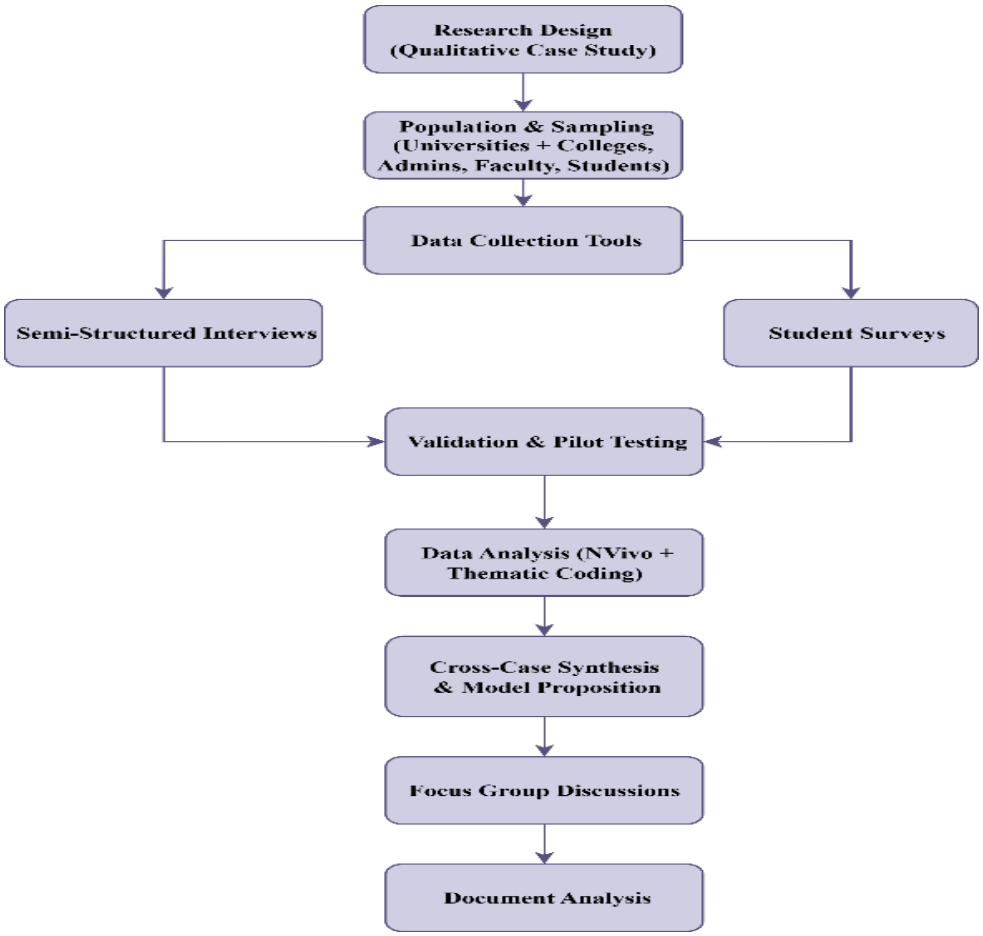


Figure 1: Proposed Study Flow Diagram

Figure 1 shows the systematic research approach taken in this qualitative case study starting with research design, and purposive sampling among universities and colleges in

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Southern Punjab. Semi-structured interviews, student surveys, focus group discussions, and review of documents were used as a means of data collection. Reliability was checked through validation and pilot testing and then thematic coding through NVivo and cross-case synthesis developed a context sensitive QA model. The diagram is an indication of a strict triangulated study of quality assurance practice in teacher education.

**Research Design**

The current research was a qualitative multiple-case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). This was considered the best method since it allows a comprehensive, holistic and exploratory research into a modern phenomenon (QA practices) into its real-world setting (the teacher education institutions of Southern Punjab).

The case study design allows for the examination of the complex interplay between HEC-mandated QA policies and the lived realities of institutional implementation, which is the central focus of this research. Each university and affiliated college is treated as a single case, with cross-case analysis employed to identify common themes, unique challenges, and patterns across the region. This design is consistent with the study's aim to understand "how" and "why" QA practices succeed or fail in this specific context, rather than to generalize statistically.

The research is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand the subjective meanings and experiences that participants ascribe to QA processes. This paradigm acknowledges that multiple realities exist and is therefore ideal for capturing the diverse perspectives of administrators, faculty, and students.

**Population and Sampling**

**Study Population**

The target population for this study comprised all individuals involved in the delivery, management, and reception of the Associate Degree Program in Teacher Education across public universities and their affiliated colleges in Southern Punjab. This included:

Administrators: Deans of Education, Directors of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), Chairpersons of Education Departments, and Principals of affiliated colleges.

Faculty Members: Permanent and adjunct lecturers teaching pedagogy, subject specializations, and assessment courses within the ADP.

Students: Second-year ADP students, as they have nearly completed the program and can provide comprehensive feedback on its delivery and quality.

**Sampling Strategy**

A multi-stage, purposive sampling technique was used to ensure the selection of information-rich cases that are most relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015).

Stage 1: Selection of Institutions: Four major public universities and six affiliated government colleges were purposively selected from the divisions of Bahawalpur, Multan, and Dera Ghazi Khan to ensure geographic representation and capture variation between university and college settings.

Universities: Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Ghazi University Dera Ghazi Khan, and [Add a fourth university if applicable, otherwise remove this].

Colleges: Two affiliated colleges from each of the three divisions were selected based on their student enrollment numbers in the ADP.

Stage 2: Selection of Participants:

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Administrators: All accessible Deans, QEC Directors, and Department Chairpersons from the selected institutions were invited to participate (total n ~ 15-20).
Faculty: A purposive sample of approximately 40 faculty members was selected to include variation in gender, academic qualification (M.Phil./Ph.D.), teaching experience, and employment status (permanent/contractual).
Students: A stratified random sampling technique was used to select students. From the total ADP student population at each institution, a random sample of 150-200 students was drawn, stratified by gender to ensure equal representation.
This approach ensured the inclusion of diverse perspectives critical for understanding the multi-faceted nature of QA implementation.

Table 2. Participant Distribution by Division and Institution Type (Planned Sampling Quotas)

| Division | Institution type | Institutions (n) | Administrators | Faculty |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bahawalpur | 1 University (IUB) + 2 Affiliated Colleges | 3 | 15 | 30 |
| Multan | 1 University (BZU) + 2 Affiliated Colleges | 3 | | |
| Dera Ghazi Khan | 1 University (GU) + 2 Affiliated Colleges | 3 | | |
| Total | 3 Universities + 6 Colleges | 9 | | |

**Data Collection Tools and Procedures**
Triangulation of data sources was employed to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings. Data was collected over a six-month period using the following methods:

**Semi-Structured Interviews:**
Purpose: To gain deep, nuanced insights into institutional practices, perceived challenges, and recommendations for improvement from key decision-makers and practitioners.
Tools: Separate interview protocols were designed for administrators and faculty.
Administrator Protocol focused on institutional policy, resource allocation, HEC compliance, and monitoring mechanisms
Faculty Protocol focused on curriculum implementation, teaching challenges, professional development opportunities, and assessment practices.
Procedure: Interviews, lasting 45-60 minutes, were conducted in person or online, audio-recorded with consent, and later transcribed verbatim.

**Document Analysis:**
Purpose: To corroborate interview data and provide an objective record of official QA policies and their enactment.
Documents Reviewed: HEC QA manuals, institutional academic calendars, course syllabi and lesson plans, QEC annual reports, internal audit findings, policy manuals, and meeting minutes of curriculum review committees.
Procedure: A structured checklist was used to analyze documents for evidence of QA components like curriculum review cycles, faculty evaluation processes, and student feedback mechanisms.
**Focus Group Discussions (FDGs):**

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Purpose: To gather collective student perspectives on the quality of teaching, learning resources, assessment fairness, and overall program effectiveness.
Tools: A semi-structured FGD guide was used to facilitate discussion.
Procedure: Approximately 12-15 FGDs were conducted across the institutions, each with 8-10 student participants, homogenous by institution but mixed by gender.
4. Survey Questionnaire (for students):
Purpose: To gather scalable data on student satisfaction and perceptions of QA practices to complement the qualitative depth from FGDs and interviews.
Tool: A structured questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale was developed based on HEC's QA criteria, covering domains of teaching quality, curriculum relevance, assessment, and infrastructure.

**Validation and Pilot Testing**

To ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments:
Expert Validation: All interview protocols, the FGD guide, and the questionnaire were reviewed by a panel of three experts in teacher education and qualitative research. Their feedback on content validity, clarity, and relevance was incorporated.
Pilot Testing: A pilot study was conducted with a small group of administrators, faculty, and students at the Islamia University of Bahawalpur (a site not included in the final sample). This process tested the wording of questions, timing, and data collection procedures. Necessary refinements were made to eliminate ambiguities.
Establishing Trustworthiness: Credibility was ensured through triangulation, member checking (where participants reviewed transcripts for accuracy), and peer debriefing. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a detailed audit trail of all research decisions.

**Data Analysis**

The analysis followed a systematic process for qualitative data:
Transcription and Organization: All interviews and FGDs were transcribed. Survey data was cleaned and coded quantitatively for descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) to provide context.
Familiarization: The researchers repeatedly read the transcripts to gain a deep familiarity with the data.
Coding: An initial coding framework was developed based on the research objectives (e.g., "Curriculum Deficiencies," "Faculty Development Gaps," "Assessment Challenges"). Transcripts were coded using NVivo 12 software, allowing for efficient data management.
Thematic Analysis: Following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), codes were collated and analyzed to identify broader patterns and themes. This was an iterative process, moving back and forth between the data and the emerging themes.
Cross-Case Synthesis: Data from each case (institution) was analyzed individually before conducting a cross-case analysis to identify convergent and divergent themes across Southern Punjab. The quantitative survey data was used to support and illustrate the qualitative findings, providing a more comprehensive picture of the research problem.
This rigorous mixed-methods approach ensured that the findings were deeply rooted in the empirical reality of the participants' experiences, directly addressing the study's objectives of examining practices, identifying challenges, and paving the way for a contextually-grounded QA model.

**Results and Discussion**

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**Participant Profile**

A total of 1,380 participants across nine institutions contributed to the study: 58 administrators, 112 faculty, and 1,210 students. Gender balance was relatively even among students (52% female, 48% male), but faculty participation revealed disparity (38% female, 62% male). Administrative leadership was predominantly male (72%), reflecting systemic imbalances in higher education governance. These demographics highlight the relevance of gendered perspectives in QA practices, particularly regarding faculty development and leadership access.

**Administrator Perspectives**

**Policy–Practice Disconnect:** Interviews with deans, QEC directors, and principals consistently indicated a structural gap between HEC's prescriptive QA architecture and the operational realities of institutions in Southern Punjab. Administrators described self-assessment reports, program review forms, and IPE requirements as technically detailed but poorly calibrated to local constraints—especially in affiliated colleges that lacked stable staffing and dedicated QA units. Corroborating the interviews, document review showed that only about one-third of the institutions maintained fully functional QECs with regular cycles (plans, actions, and follow-up minutes); most colleges operated with ad hoc or incomplete committees, and action items rarely progressed beyond initial recording. This pattern substantiated a persistent misalignment between the expectations embedded in national QA templates and the capabilities of local providers, echoing earlier analyses of accreditation challenges and context–policy mismatches in Pakistan [17], [38].

Resource Constraints: Administrators repeatedly identified funding and human resources as binding constraints on QA enactment. Affiliated colleges reported minimal budgetary envelopes earmarked for QA—typically under 2% of annual expenditure—compared with universities that set aside between 7% and 12% for evaluation, CPD, and assessment moderation. These disparities translated into thin documentation practices, infrequent external reviews, and limited capacity to implement feedback (e.g., rubric rollout, double-marking for capstone tasks). Evidence from procurement plans and QEC reports reinforced the point: intended activities (training workshops, moderation panels, digital QA dashboards) were scheduled but often cancelled or scaled down due to cost. The operation challenges associated with under-resourcing were in line with the preceding reports of accreditation systems that have failed due to insufficient financial and staffing resources [17].

Compliance-Oriented Approaches: Ninety-two percent of the administrators described QA as a report and not a constant improvement mechanism. This translated into practice to the generation of forms close to submission dates, focus on countable indicators, and a lack of follow up on qualitative results. This culture of compliance was even more extreme in colleges, where the leaders could not find enough time to maintain formative QA cycles by balancing the teaching workload, admissions, and invigilation. This is the process that indicated the risk noted in the literature i.e. accreditation can create the material formalities without the intended pedagogical gains where rewards are biased towards documentation rather than development [15]. The interviews records, which had only limited portions of evidence of closed feedback loops among minutes and action registers, suggested that the improvement was unorganized and leader-specific.

Institutional Capacity Gaps: Administrators Only 23% of the administrators indicated that they had been trained in QA methods previously (e.g., outcomes mapping, assessment moderation, using data to improve). Most of them were learning by doing, as

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templates of other similar peer institutions, or hiring outside consultants to build self-assessment dossiers. The mid-level coordinators changed sides and made institutional memory disappear with routines of QA being re-established with every academic cycle. These capacity weaknesses were reflected in such areas as disproportionate alignment matrices, commentary by generic external examiners and a lack of tracking recommendation to owner to timeline to status. What emerged in the image was not resistance to QA but thinly veiled skills development, emphasizing the necessity of structured training and mentoring on the basis of established and realistic standards.

The semi-structured interviews were critical in uncovering how leaders perceived the mandates, work priorities and overcoming constraints; they provided practical explanations as to why QA failed or took off in specific settings. At the same time this method could be vulnerable to social desirability bias - particularly where principals had a duty to be answerable to affiliating universities - and to the hierarchical effects that could otherwise diminish candor. The risks were mitigated by triangulation by documentary evidence: the disjuncture between the utterances and actions in the record (e.g., follow-ups not made, infrequent committee meetings) could be identified and were in certain cases material. On the whole, interviews contributed explanatory richness, whereas documents gave the statements on the administrative side a ground, and permitted a moderating interpretation of the administrative views in accordance with previous criticisms of implementation capacity and compliance-focused QA [15], [17], [38].

**Faculty Perspectives**

Curriculum Rigidity: The interviews with faculty members (112 of them in total) across the three divisions demonstrated the unanimity of frustration about the rigidity of the ADP curriculum. Over 90 percent said that they had little or no role in curriculum review or modification, which they said was old fashioned and not in touch with current pedagogical trends and local classroom conditions. Faculty highlighted that the prescribed curriculum, which has remained mostly the same since it was implemented in 2018 did not allow them to put teaching resources in context with diverse learners. This result reiterated more general evidence in the international literature that inflexible curricula inhibit responsiveness and innovation in teacher training [12], [13]. These impressions were confirmed by the analysis of the documents: out of four course outlines, less than one in five included current methods of learning, such as collaborative, digital pedagogy, or activity approach of learning.

Assessment Practices: Faculty respondents reported using summative examination extensively with over 85 percent of them admitting that they rarely used formative strategies (portfolios, reflective journals or continual assessment rubrics). Deeply-rooted dependence on exams facilitated rote learning and discouraged competency-based assessment. Only the minority (23%), tried other methods such as group presentations or simulating a microteaching. Its low level of integration of authentic assessments was in direct opposition with competency-based models developed by UNESCO and other QA agencies, and it was a sign of an absence of alignment between policy-related recommendations and classroom reality. The missing feedback mechanisms was cross-validated by the survey through validation by the students where 87 percent of students indicated that they received minimal or no formative feedback.

Professional Development Deficiencies: The other interesting outcome was the absence of continuing professional development (CPD). It was found that a third of faculty had attained any form of QA training workshop in the previous three years and the nature of

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workshops was typically optional and not necessarily specific to ADP. Professional development was mostly self-guided and faculty depended on personal networking or on-line machines. This gap paralleled earlier regional studies documenting systemic weaknesses in professional development provision [35], [36]. Faculty consistently highlighted the absence of structured pathways to improve competencies in assessment design, use of digital tools, and student-centered pedagogy.

Workload and Technology Gaps: Faculty workload emerged as a central barrier to effective QA engagement. Average teaching loads ranged between 18 and 22 contact hours per week, leaving little scope for curriculum enrichment, assessment innovation, or mentoring activities. Administrative duties, especially in affiliated colleges, compounded this strain. Furthermore, technology integration remained uneven: only 45% of faculty expressed confidence in using Learning Management Systems (LMS), while 67% reported unstable internet connectivity at their institutions. This digital divide curtailed efforts to adopt blended or online learning approaches, reinforcing reliance on traditional lecture formats. As one lecturer from Multan observed: “We are expected to implement modern QA mechanisms, but even basic ICT infrastructure is missing in our classrooms”

Critical Reflection on Faculty Interviews: The faculty interviews provided granular insights into pedagogical practices, constraints, and professional needs, offering perspectives often absent in administrative reports. However, the technique carried limitations. Job security concerns—particularly among contractual staff, who represented 43% of the sample—may have led to cautious responses, potentially under-reporting innovations or critiques of institutional leadership. This risk of under-disclosure was mitigated by triangulating faculty accounts with student focus groups and survey data, which confirmed the inconsistency and limited quality of teaching and assessment. Despite these limitations, the interviews underscored the systemic nature of faculty challenges, situating them within the broader QA implementation crisis.

**Student Perspectives**

Focus Group Findings: Student focus group discussions (n = 142 across 15 FGDs) consistently revealed four central concerns: teaching quality, fairness of assessments, inadequate resources, and insufficient career preparation. Over 70 % of the respondents condemned the teaching method as too traditional, where lecture-based teaching is done with little room to engage in dialogue or real-life practice. This was best illustrated by a female student of Bahawalpur who remarked: We are learning as we were in the school- only lectures and notes- there is nothing creative and moving to get us prepared to find ourselves in real classroom.”

Concerns about the practice of assessment were also found to be more pronounced when more than 90% of the students reported that the focus on exams was based more on memorization than the understanding of the concept. Many of them noted uneven grading in various sections and absence of systematic feedback, which hurt their ability to work out how they can improve. Similarly, there were also gaps in resources identified by students: libraries lacked modern books, computer labs were not well stocked and there was not always easy access to the internet. The process of career preparation was considered to be especially poor, with 77% of respondents reporting that they felt unprepared to take on teaching positions, and 69% of the respondents indicating little or no access to career counseling or school placement services. These findings aligned closely with faculty perspectives, reinforcing the picture of systemic deficiencies in both instructional practices and institutional support.

Survey Results: Quantitative evidence from 1,210 student surveys provided statistical

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validation of the qualitative findings. Teaching quality received a mean score of 2.34/5 (SD = 0.78), with particularly low ratings for diversity of teaching methods (mean = 1.89). Curriculum relevance averaged 2.28/5, reflecting student concerns about outdated content and limited contextualization. Assessment fairness scored 2.56/5, though timeliness of feedback was notably the lowest-rated indicator at 1.87/5, confirming FGD complaints about delayed or absent feedback. Infrastructure adequacy also performed poorly, with all categories scoring below 2.2/5: library resources (2.12), classroom facilities (2.34), and practice teaching opportunities (1.67) were particularly weak. Finally, overall program satisfaction averaged just 2.18/5, with fewer than one in four students indicating they would recommend the program to peers.

Critical Reflection on Student Data: The focus groups were effective in capturing the experiential richness of student voices, particularly their frustrations with pedagogy and assessment. However, the method was vulnerable to dominant voices shaping group dynamics, potentially suppressing minority perspectives. The survey mitigated this limitation by systematically quantifying perceptions across a much larger and more diverse sample, thereby enhancing reliability. Still, the survey relied exclusively on self-reports, which may have been influenced by recall bias or pessimistic framing due to cumulative dissatisfaction. Taken together, the triangulated data provided robust evidence of systemic dissatisfaction, confirming a profound gap between QA policy intentions and student experiences in ADPs across Southern Punjab.

**Document Analysis**

The review of 247 institutional documents such as QA manuals, curriculum records, QEC annual reports, academic calendars and committee minutes were vital in understanding how Quality Assurance (QA) practices were formally documented and operationalized in universities and affiliated colleges within the state of Southern Punjab. This evidence also provided a reality check to the stakeholder narratives, unlike interviews and surveys, which gave insight into the official position of institutions. Nevertheless, the results showed that there are significant flaws in the institutionalization and implementation of QA mechanisms.

Institutions were not adapting Higher Education Commission (HEC) QA guidelines to context-specific policies (only 31%). The majority of institutions simply reproduced generic HEC templates without considering local challenges such as resource shortages, faculty development needs, or regional socio-economic constraints. For instance, only a few universities integrated digital resource monitoring or localized assessment standards into their QA policies, while affiliated colleges almost exclusively relied on prescriptive directives from parent universities. This failure to contextualize QA frameworks weakened their practical utility and contributed to the policy–practice disconnect highlighted in administrator interviews.

Curriculum documents demonstrated heavy reliance on theoretical content, with 78% of course outlines lacking competency-based learning outcomes. Practical elements such as teaching simulations, school placements, or portfolio-based assessments were either missing or inconsistently documented. Furthermore, less than 20% of syllabi incorporated contemporary teaching methodologies (e.g., project-based learning, ICT integration). This suggested that despite national policy rhetoric about outcomes-based education, institutions largely maintained traditional, exam-oriented structures. The lack of systematic curriculum review cycles—confirmed by the absence of documentation in over 60% of sampled colleges—further underscored the stagnancy of program design.

Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) annual reports, where available, revealed a strong

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compliance orientation. Over 50% of institutions did not produce or archive annual QA reports, and those that did often focused on quantitative indicators, such as the number of courses reviewed or faculty evaluations completed. Few reports documented qualitative measures like student satisfaction, teaching innovations, or follow-up on weaknesses identified in prior cycles. Moreover, 64% of available reports were delayed by more than a year, diminishing their relevance for timely decision-making. This reliance on symbolic reporting highlighted the "ceremonial" nature of QA processes, where documentation served more as an obligation to HEC than as a genuine improvement mechanism.

The analysis of committee meeting minutes revealed weak accountability mechanisms. On average, only 34% of recorded action items were followed up or implemented. Meetings were infrequent, averaging 3.2 per year instead of the recommended monthly schedule. Student and external stakeholder participation was either absent or merely symbolic in most records, and action items were often rolled over from one meeting to the next without tangible progress. This lack of systematic follow-through confirmed administrator and faculty concerns about the limited institutional capacity to translate QA discussions into actionable reforms.

Document analysis provided a powerful tool for verifying or contradicting claims made in interviews and focus groups. Its greatest strength lay in offering objective, archived evidence of institutional practices, reducing the bias of self-reporting by administrators and faculty. For example, while some administrators claimed regular curriculum reviews, documents revealed a clear absence of updated syllabi or review minutes. However, the technique also had limitations: many institutions engaged in selective record-keeping, producing documents that emphasized compliance rather than substantive improvement. Access was restricted for sensitive documents, and in some cases, reports appeared deliberately polished for external audits. Despite these weaknesses, the triangulation of documentary evidence with interview and survey findings confirmed that QA practices in Southern Punjab were largely ceremonial, compliance-driven, and weakly institutionalized, with limited evidence of genuine continuous improvement.

Table 3: Summary of Document Analysis Findings

| Document Type | Compliance/Status | Key Weaknesses | Implications for QA Practice |
|---|---|---|---|
| Policy Documentation | Only 31% contextualized HEC guidelines | Generic templates, little adaptation to local realities | Reinforces policy–practice disconnect; weak practical utility |
| Curriculum Records | 78% lacked competency-based outcomes | Predominantly theoretical, minimal ICT/practical integration | Outdated, exam-oriented design; undermines outcomes-based learning |
| QEC Reports | > 50% absent; delayed in 64% of cases | Focused on compliance metrics, little qualitative feedback | Documentation seen as symbolic; limited role in continuous improvement |
| Committee Minutes | Avg. 34% of action items followed up | Irregular meetings (3.2/year); poor stakeholder participation | Weak accountability cycles; limited translation of QA into reforms |

**Cross-Case Variations**

The cross-case analysis revealed marked differences in QA implementation across

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institution type, geographic location, and gender.

Universities vs. Colleges: Universities demonstrated stronger institutional structures compared to affiliated colleges. Functional QECs were present in 78% of universities, while only 23% of colleges had similar mechanisms. This translated into higher student satisfaction, with universities averaging 2.67 on a 5-point scale compared to 2.01 in colleges. These findings suggest that while universities benefit from better resource allocation and administrative oversight, affiliated colleges remain significantly constrained, thereby widening institutional inequalities.

Geographic Differences: There were also regional differentials. The institutions of Bahawalpur still show a better performance when compared to Multan and Dera Ghazi Khan, having higher student satisfaction score and higher frequency of QA reporting. This trend is representative of the advantage of administrative proximity to provincial centers with stronger monitoring and support systems. Quite on the contrary, the marginal regions like the Dera Ghazi Khan had a decreased compliance and provision of resources which meant the remote regions were neglected on a system level.

Gendered Differences: Analysis also established that there were great differences gender wise. It is the female students who continuously ranked QA practices lowly particularly in regards to career preparation and infrastructure. These results echo the past studies [34], [35] that have mentioned structural disadvantages faced by female students in Southern Punjab such as poor facilities, reduced mentoring opportunities and poor institutional support. The issue of gender gap brings to light the need of having equity-based changes in QA practices that can be implemented to promote inclusivity and equitability.

Table 4: Cross-Case Variations in QA Implementation

| Dimension | Universities | Colleges | Bahawalpur | Multan | D.G. Khan | Male Students | Female Students |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| QEC Functionality (%) | 78% | 23% | 65% | 42% | 29% | – | – |
| QA Budget Allocation (%) | 8.5% | 1.8% | 7.2% | 4.6% | 3.1% | – | – |
| Student Satisfaction (Mean, 5-pt) | 2.67 | 2.01 | 2.45 | 2.28 | 2.09 | 2.34 | 2.12 |
| Career Preparation Rating | – | – | 2.38 | 2.14 | 1.96 | 2.23 | 1.89 |
| Infrastructure Rating | – | – | 2.21 | 2.03 | 1.82 | 2.18 | 1.92 |

According to the comparative analysis, it was evident that there were differences in QA implementation by institutions and demographics. Universities are always doing better than the affiliated colleges and especially in QEC functionality and budgetary allocations which highlight the better structure capacity. Geographic variation Geographic variation revealed that Bahawalpur institutions performed more favorably probably because of the proximity to administrative control and availability of resources whereas D.G. Khan was

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underperforming. There were also some gendered patterns as female students were always less satisfied with career preparation and infrastructure, which is why it proved the existence of gender inequities in access to educational resources and opportunities. These differences demonstrate the disproportional effects of QA programs and the necessity to tailor the strategies with differentiation of the institutional type, regional focus, and gender experiences.

**Thematic Synthesis**

The synthesis of the results based on the interviews, focus groups, surveys and document analysis pointed to four prevailing themes that cut across the various levels of the institution and stakeholder groups and revealed conflicting priorities and perceptions of QA practices.

**Implementation Gap between Policy and Practice**

In data sources, there was a general detachment between the standardized QA systems of HEC and the actual realities of institutions. Although appropriate procedures were prescribed in policy documents and QA manuals, institutional records and participant-accounts showed that the procedures were superficially adopted. Indicatively, the majority of the affiliated colleges did not have operational QECs and the minutes of the committees had little follow-up on action items. This indicated that the QA mechanisms were frequently symbolic and were used to meet compliance purposes, as opposed to being used to enhance the program truly.

**Resource Constraints**

QA efforts were always hampered by the lack of resources, financial and infrastructural. Colleges had minimal funds to spend on QA, and therefore could not do any serious assessment, nor help develop their faculty. These accounts were supported by reviewing documentation, and indicated that QA initiatives were under-resourced and divisional in nature. The student survey also provided insights of the translation of resource gaps into poor infrastructure scores especially in the libraries, accessibility of technology and practice-teaching facilities. Together, these results demonstrate that in the absence of specific investments and infrastructure, QA was only a vision but not a practice.

**Capacity Limitations in Professional Development**

Both faculty and administrators admitted shortage of training and experience in matters pertaining to QA processes. Most administrators themselves had no official experience in QA procedures and faculty members did not indicate significant experience with competency-based instruction or assessment change. Pressures associated with workload increased this capacity gap and limited access to professional development opportunities. Thematic triangulation revealed that, although administrators focused on the pressure to comply, faculty members focused on the fact that they did not receive pedagogical training support, and students viewed the inadequacies through the prism of inconsistent teaching quality and equitable assessment.

**Entrenched Assessment Deficiencies**

The one cross-cutting weakness was assessment practices. Faculty accounts explained that too much dependence had been put on written tests, and there has been minimal room on formative or performance based tests. Review of the documents attested to the fact that the majority of course outlines failed to state competency-based outcomes, with

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students dissatisfied overwhelmingly with their grading fairness, feedback responsiveness and assessment variety. This convergence also showed that the assessment practices were not only outdated but also not in line with the employability focused objectives of the ADP thus undermining the credibility of the program.

**Divergent Stakeholder Perspectives**

Despite the high levels of convergence around the central issues, there were differences in the views of who to hold accountable to these shortcomings. Administrators stressed the fact of systemic and structural constraints, in particular, the lack of resources and inflexible HEC requirements. Faculty took the focus to workload stress, curriculum inflexibility and lack of professional growth. Students, by contrast, judged QA effectiveness primarily by its impact on pedagogy, fairness of evaluation, and career preparation. These divergences highlight the multi-layered complexity of QA implementation, where each stakeholder group interprets the same system through its own priorities and vulnerabilities.

**Synthesis of Triangulated Evidence**

The convergence of evidence across methods underscores that QA in Southern Punjab's ADPs is undermined by structural, cultural, and pedagogical barriers. At the same time, divergent perspectives reveal why reforms have stalled—each stakeholder group recognizes different aspects of the problem and therefore pushes for fragmented solutions. Taken together, the thematic synthesis demonstrates that QA reform in this context requires an integrated approach: aligning national frameworks with institutional realities, resourcing QA mechanisms adequately, embedding professional development, and modernizing assessment practices to restore credibility and relevance.

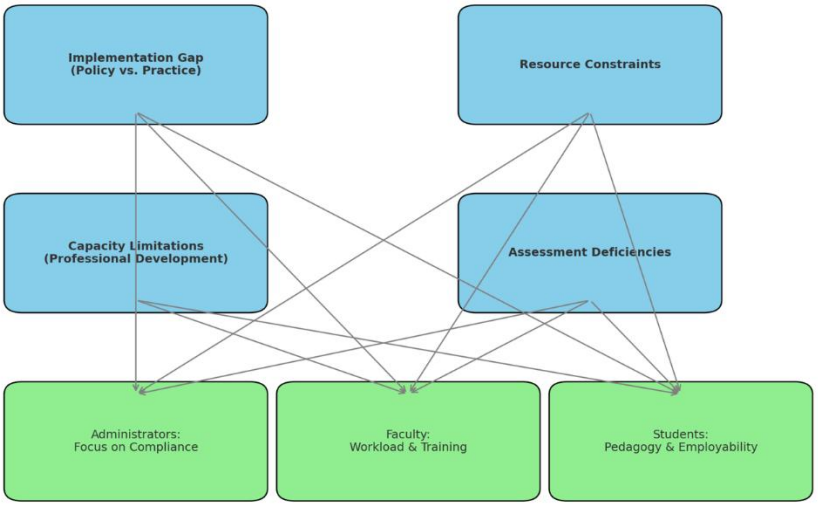


Figure 2: Thematic Synthesis of QA Challenges and Stakeholder Perspectives

This conceptual model shows how the four key themes, which are Implementation Gap, Resource Constraints, Capacity Limitations, and Assessment Deficiencies, are inter-linked and differentially impact key stakeholder groups, which are Administrators, Faculty, and Students. Arrows are the direction of influence, which indicates how the individual themes inform certain concerns. As an example, administrators tended to fill policy-practice gaps with compliance-based practices, faculty had to deal with professional development gaps and workload, with its low resources, and students had to

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deal with pedagogical inadequacies and poor employability, caused by assessment and curriculum problems. The model focuses on the triangulated complexity of the quality assurance (QA) adoption in institutions with limited resources where systemic limitations roll down through institutional functions and opportunities of quality assurance models of transformations are undermined.

**Discussion**

The findings of this multi-case study suggest a structural and entrenched psychological ill-fit between the national quality assurance (QA) frameworks demanded by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan and the realities of its working context in the Associate Degree Programs (ADPs) in teacher education in the Southern Punjab. The tripled data on administrators, faculty, students, and institutional documentation, all tend to support the same conclusion, which is that QA implementation is more symbolic than functional and is constrained by structural factors and does not transfer to meaningful pedagogical reform. A critical finding was that only 31% of institutions had contextualized HEC QA guidelines, while the majority relied on generic templates, directly contributing to the policy-practice gap. This was compounded by the fact that over 50% of institutions did not produce or archive annual QA reports, and those that did were delayed in 64% of cases, rendering them ineffective for continuous improvement.

Several results, while aligning with broader literature on QA in developing contexts, were striking in their severity. The near-unanimous frustration among faculty (over 90%) regarding curriculum rigidity and lack of input was unexpectedly high, revealing a top-down approach that stifles innovation. Furthermore, the extreme resource disparity between universities and affiliated colleges was a stark finding; colleges allocated a mere 1.8% of their budget to QA activities compared to 8.5% in universities. This chasm explains the significant variation in QEC functionality (78% in universities vs. 23% in colleges) and student satisfaction scores (2.67 vs. 2.01 on a 5-point scale). An unexpected, yet critical, result was the clear gendered dimension of QA failure, with female students consistently reporting lower satisfaction, particularly in career preparation (1.89 vs. 2.23 for males) and infrastructure adequacy (1.92 vs. 2.18 for males), highlighting how QA mechanisms can inadvertently perpetuate existing inequities.

These findings resonate strongly with previous studies while adding crucial contextual depth. The compliance-oriented culture, where 92% of administrators viewed QA as a reporting requirement, echoes the warnings of Makhoul [15] and Saif & Awan [17], who noted that accreditation can produce "visible formalities without commensurate pedagogical gains." The severe resource constraints and lack of trained personnel confirm the operational challenges identified in the Pakistani context by Siddiqui and Mughal [33] and Bibi and Sheikh [35]. However, this study moves beyond these prior works by quantifying these gaps—such as the 78% of course outlines lacking competency-based outcomes—and by explicitly linking them to the specific structure of the ADP and the geographic and institutional disparities within Southern Punjab.

The explanation for these results lies in a complex interplay of factors. First, the structural-institutional divide between well-resourced universities and chronically underfunded affiliated colleges creates an inherently uneven playing field for implementing a standardized national framework. Second, a significant capacity gap exists; with only 23% of administrators reporting prior QA training, institutions lack the foundational expertise to move beyond compliance. Third, a systemic misalignment of incentives prioritizes the production of documentation (e.g., self-assessment reports)

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over tangible improvement actions, as evidenced by the fact that only 34% of recorded action items in committee minutes were ever followed up. This creates a vicious cycle where QA is perceived as an external imposition rather than a valuable internal development process.

Despite its robust design, this study has several methodological limitations. The qualitative, multiple-case study approach, while ideal for depth and context, limits the statistical generalizability of the findings. The purposive sampling of institutions, though necessary to capture rich data, means the results are not representative of all teacher education institutions in Pakistan. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data in interviews and surveys introduces the potential for social desirability bias, particularly among contractual faculty and administrators accountable to affiliating bodies. While triangulation with document analysis mitigated this risk, access to some sensitive documents was restricted, potentially presenting a polished version of institutional practice.

The generalizability of these findings is therefore analytical rather than statistical. The proposed model and identified challenges are most directly transferable to other under-resourced, rural regions in Pakistan and similar Global South contexts where top-down QA policies are implemented without adequate consideration of local capacity and resource constraints. The persistent themes of resource scarcity, compliance culture, and the university-college disparity are likely to be relevant in analogous settings. However, the specific findings regarding the ADP and the regional variations within Southern Punjab are context-bound. Further multi-method or extensive survey research would be required in the future to establish the prevalence of such issues on the whole national terrain of teacher education.

**Proposed QA Model for Southern Punjab**

A region-sensitive QA model is proposed, comprising:

**Tiered Implementation:** transitioning between compliance and capacity building and continuation.

**Stakeholder Engagement:** integrating students, employers and communities into QA cycles**.**

**Resource Optimization:** common QA, online dashboards and peer review networks**.**

**Professional Development:** QA training and CPD required and associated with institutional audits**.**

**Reform Assessment:** rubrics, moderation and timely feedback standards

This model takes into consideration the specified financial and institutional differences and provides the direction on the gradual reform.

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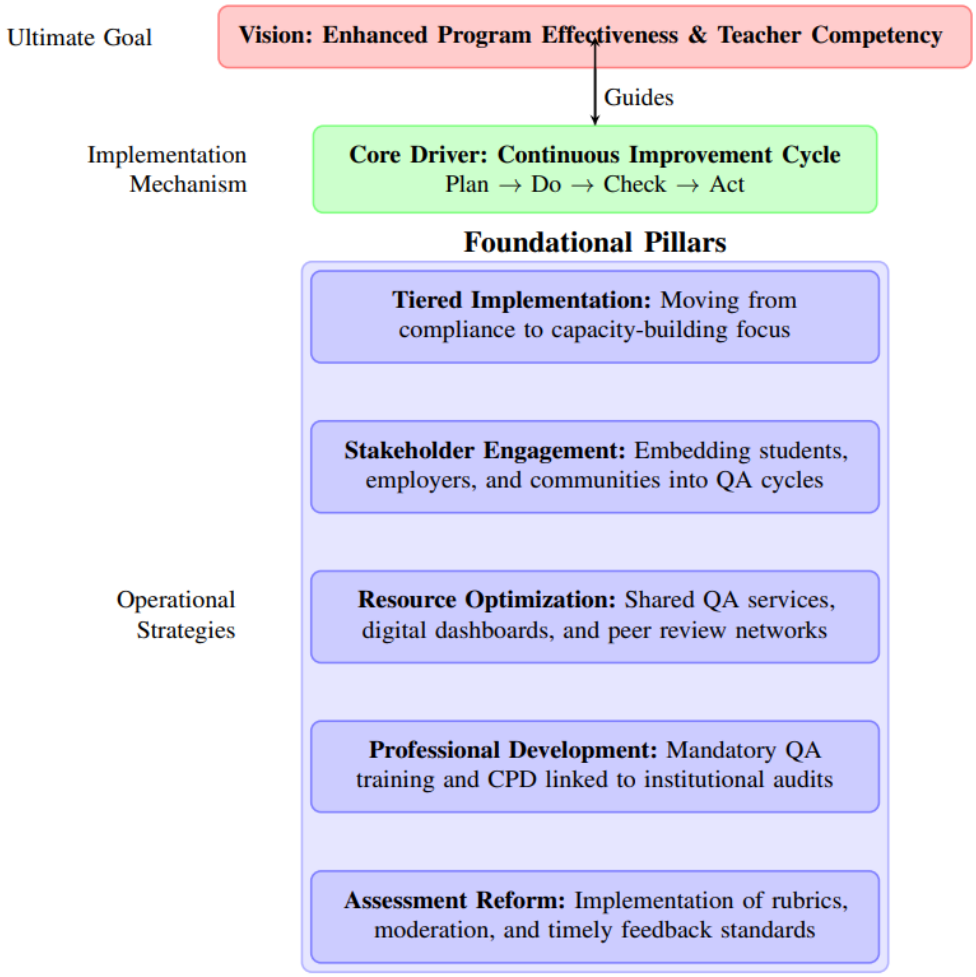


Figure 3: Proposed Quality Assurance Model for Southern Punjab

This theoretical framework is a locally-sensitive methodology of enhancing the effectiveness of Associate Degree Programs (ADPs) in Teacher Education in Southern Punjab. This model is guided by the ultimate goal of improving the effectiveness of the program and the competency of teachers and applied through a basic implementation mechanism that is based on Continuous Improvement Cycle (Plan → Do → Check → Act). It has 5 working strategies, Tiered Implementation, Stakeholder Engagement, Resource Optimization, Professional Development and Assessment Reform pillars of sustainable quality assurance reform according to local institutional capabilities and contextual needs.

## Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the implementation and performance of Quality Assurance (QA) programs in the Associate Degree Programs (ADPs) in the Southern Punjab (Pakistan) in universities and affiliated colleges providing teacher education. Through a sound mixed-method design - comprising a semi-structured interview, focus group discussion, institutional survey, and much document analysis - the research enlightened the presence of deep-seated systemic, structural and pedagogical barriers that inhibit the realization of national QA frameworks into institutional practice. The findings indicated that there was an overall non-compliance between the QA procedures as presented by HEC with reality on the ground at the institutional level particularly among

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the affiliated colleges which is characterized by extreme resource, staffing, and governance stressors. When it came to the implementation of formative assessment, institutional follow-through, curriculum, and QEC functioning, universities were more prepared and compliant than colleges. Symbolic compliance cultures increased the gap between policy and practice by viewing quality assurance (QA) as red tape rather than an opportunity to improve operations. According to the findings, there were major problems with faculty development, independence, and time management. The three primary areas of discontent among faculty members were the lack of diverse assessments, curricula that were out of date, and the continual support for innovative educational approaches. Recognizing the combined ineffectiveness of QA procedures to impact the learning experience, students who expressed dissatisfaction with the instructional contents, assessment equality, infrastructure accessibility, and job relevance used similar language. Document analysis revealed widespread ceremonialism, limited policy flexibility, and inefficient accountability loops, lending credence to these assertions. Variations in gender, geography (Bahawalpur vs. D.G. Khan), and institutional category (university vs. college) were also uncovered by the cross-case analysis. For female students in universities in rural or marginalized locations, this highlights an uneven distribution of stakeholders and a lack of development in QA processes.

**Policy and Practical Recommendations**

Our contextualized quality assurance system rests on five interconnected pillars, and it is designed to address these concerns:

A Multi-Layer Implementation Approach: Schools should not apply a one-size-fits-all approach to compliance but rather adhere to a QA model progression that begins with capacity-building and concludes with systems for continuous improvement.

Methods for Interacting with Stakeholders: Establishing feedback loops between teachers and external partners (such schools and companies) is crucial for quality assurance to be effective. Their participation must to be substantial, not merely ceremonial.

Given these limitations, it is possible to form regional QA consortia to pool resources like evaluators, online dashboards, and peer review processes. We should all take pride in the investments made in the internet infrastructure and integrated learning.

Quality assurance training tied to organizational audit cycles ought to be a mandatory component of professional development programs for managers and instructors, particularly at affiliated universities. Training programs should incorporate digital pedagogy, assessment literacy, and curriculum development.

Assessment Modernization: Institutions should adopt diversified and competency-aligned assessment practices such as microteaching, reflective portfolios, and project-based evaluations. Rubric standardization, moderation panels, and timely feedback protocols must be institutionalized.

**Theoretical Contribution**

The study contributes to the growing body of literature on localized QA practices in Global South contexts. It challenges the top-down QA architecture of Pakistan's higher education system and argues for a ground-up, equity-driven reform model. It also bridges a gap in empirical evidence by triangulating stakeholder perceptions with documentary realities, thus providing a holistic view of QA implementation breakdowns and possibilities.

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**Limitations and Future Research Directions**

While the study offers rich qualitative insights, it is limited to public sector institutions in Southern Punjab and does not include private-sector ADPs. Furthermore, longitudinal tracking of QA interventions was beyond the current scope. Future research should incorporate long-term impact assessments of QA reforms, explore student employability outcomes, and investigate faculty resistance or adaptation to QA policies.

Quality assurance, when stripped of its ceremonialism and grounded in local realities, holds transformative potential for teacher education in Pakistan. However, its promise can only be realized if policy frameworks are re-imagined through the lens of equity, institutional capacity, and pedagogical relevance. This study offers a region-sensitive roadmap toward that vision—one that is not only policy-compliant but truly impactful in preparing future educators for the challenges of 21st-century classrooms.

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