



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Exploring Implementation Challenges in Sustaining Quality Assurance: A Qualitative Study in Universities of District Lahore**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the issues and approaches to maintaining Quality Assurance (QA) in Lahore, Pakistan, in both public and privately run universities. The study seeks to learn the barriers to implementation and how a leader can help in the creation of long-term quality. QA systems are important in the global arena of educational excellence. Nevertheless, in Pakistan, there is a big difference between the formal policies and the actual practice in many institutions that do not facilitate the real institutional enhancement. It was a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with five main stakeholders (academic leaders and a QA expert) with an analysis of data through thematic analysis. The results show that there is an existent gap that is critical between QA as required compliance activity and the promise of spurring real institutional change. The major obstacles are resistance by the faculty based on work load and competency challenges, and lack of consistency in leadership. Another disconnect was identified between policy and results especially in student employability and feedback reliability. To attain sustainability in QA, it is important to have a cultural change that is not just by compliance. Strategic recommendations involve development of strategic leadership capability, empowerment of faculty members with specific support, and inclusion of transformative technologies towards quality over the long term.

**Keywords:** Quality Assurance, SDG-4 for "Quality Education", Higher Education, Sustainability, Implementation Challenges, Lahore, Faculty Resistance, Leadership

**Introduction**

The global aspiration of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) is to provide inclusive and equitable quality education by 2030 and Quality Assurance (QA) systems could be viewed as governance processes to redefine the higher education territories (United Nations, 2015). UNESCO (2017) goes a step further to emphasize that QA is not only an act of accreditation but a strategic approach of change in education, which enables institutions to come up with outcomes that are aligned to world sustainability standards. External quality assurance bodies are shown to have a considerable influence in institutional change and quality improvement in a global context (Aslam, & Muzaffar, 2025; Stensaker, et al., 2011).

The introduction of QA is the central mechanism of monitoring the SDG-4 as the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan shifts its focus to international standards like ISO 9001:2015, due to the similarity of systems, pedagogical innovation, and accountability protocols that guarantee achievement of these goals (Iqbal & Masood, 2023). This is a requirement that is paramount in the developing world, where the quality of education is directly linked to the development sustainability implications, particularly in the regions where development infrastructural facilities and inequalities are a fact (Aslam, & Muzaffar, 2025a; Tikly, 2020). Limitations to the operation of robust QA systems, colleges

threaten to support systemic disparities in education that undermine developmental desires at a larger scale (McCowan, 2016).

Punjab is the leading province in higher education in Pakistan; approximately 40 percent of Pakistan's universities and over 58 percent of tertiary students can be found in the province (HEC, 2023). Lahore is a nerve centre in this ecosystem, and there are 12 government and 23 privately owned universities in the city, resulting in enrolment of an annual total of more than 300,000 students (Punjab Higher Education Department [PHED], 2023). Bringing together the presence of the best institutes (e.g., University of Punjab, LUMS), Lahore becomes a policy laboratory as the success or failure of QA reverberates around the country (Shah & Bano, 2020). Current HEC efforts are focused on sector-level QA systems, whereby Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) and ISO certifications are now required in the context of Pakistan adopting the principle of the 17 SDGs, with Vision 2025 (Government of Pakistan, 2018). However, there exist considerable differences between the public and the private educational establishments in terms of funding, management structure, and implementation strengths, which makes the QA environment disjointed (Malik & Haq, 2021). The divisions further worsen the situation around the provision of equal quality education in socioeconomic classes (Fazil & Ahmad, 2023).

Quality Assurance (QA) has moved on a great deal since the accreditation times that were not accompanied by compliance; now it has turned into a strategic measure of sustainability (Cheng, 2018). It is a contemporary consciousness, which best aligns with the demand of a non-discriminatory and equal quality education, established in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) (UNESCO, 2017; United Nations, 2015). The measure of quality and enhanced sustainability of the QA systems ceases to be viewed as a fulfilment of the external standards, but it becomes embedded in institutional governance and transformative educational outcomes (Harvey and Williams, 2010).

There is a strong theoretical foundation of sustainable QA that commonly includes cyclical frameworks of continuous improvement, including the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle (Medne et al., 2020). This model highlights the importance of an incremental process of quality incorporation in day-to-day procedures. In addition, the Three Horizons framework (Le Fort, 2023) has emphasized the urgent importance of institutions looking beyond short-term compliance (Horizon 1) into long-term transformative pathways (Horizon 2) to a future vision (Horizon 3) including long-term aspirations like SDG-4 alignment.

The success of the QA mechanisms depends on how these mechanisms are embedded over the long run in the institutional cultures rather than episodic compliance (Harvey, 2006). The situation is especially problematic in Lahore, where the QA sustainability and the attainment of SDG-4 are at risk due to systemic implementation issues among the universities despite regulatory requirements (Fazil & Ahmad, 2023). These trends have been shown empirically as lending institutions reported difficulty in QA compliance past superficial accreditation cycles in 70 percent of cases, indicating areas for systemic improvement (Maqbool et al., 2023). These difficulties can be summarized across three dimensions, which are inadequate leadership, instability of resources, and dynamic to stakeholders (Malik & Haq, 2021; Maqbool et al., 2023). As a result of this, QA can turn into a ritual of compliance as opposed to an agent of transformational education (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

There are no sustainable, critical areas of QA implementation that are not yet filled in Punjab. Studies currently in existence are very narrow in emphasizing strictly on structural compliance without taking into consideration leadership agency and stakeholder buy-in and SDG-4 operationalization (Iqbal & Masood, 2023). There is a shortage of empirical research on the issue of divergences between public-privates or the localization of QA in the context of the Pakistani weak system of governance (Shah & Bano, 2020). The

study findings will have policy implications on institutional roadmaps to the achievement of HEC policy reforms and SDG-4 goals amid resource constraints, and these findings shall have implications on the higher education system in the Global South, which are likely to be facing the same constraints (McCowan, 2016).

This research is a qualitative study focused on a select number of public and private universities in Lahore, Punjab. The study's findings are based on a limited sample of key informants and are not generalizable to all higher education institutions in Pakistan. The scope is delimited to exploring the perceptions and experiences of senior academic leaders regarding QA implementation, challenges, and strategies. It lacks a quantified analysis of QA measures or a direct observation of the institutional processes.

In spite of these strict precautions, the study does take into account some limitations that are likely to be part of a qualitative design. The limited generalizability of direct findings applies to the inherent small sample size that is only specific to the institutions and people involved in the interviews. In addition, the Lahore specificity of the context can also arguably lower the overall usefulness of results in the rural Punjab. Finally, although efforts were made to counter it, the chance of a social desirability bias could still be effective; the participants may, intentionally or not, be reporting fewer governance/implementation issues, particularly those are on board of senior leadership.

## **Literature Review**

The review, nice one to which the literature on the topic of QA sustainability in the context of the higher educational environment is systematized and explicitly relates to the challenges and strategies in developing countries, including Punjab, Pakistan. Sustainable QA requires a continuous cycle of improvements and accurate ownership of stakeholders and flexible models of resources that transcend the episodic audits (Cheng, 2018; Harvey & Williams, 2010). At the national level, QA sustainability has such additional challenges as the acceleration of institutional growth together with the significant gaps in the public and private sectors, and the inadequate regulatory infrastructure (HEC, 2023; Punjab Higher Education Department, 2023).

According to the research conducted recently, QA compliance and effectiveness deteriorate significantly, at least in 70% of such universities within a short period of time after gaining accreditation in the city of Lahore (Maqbool et al., 2023). It is said that this decay is due to problems of leadership and the culturalisation of QA in institutions (Iqbal & Masood, 2023; Maqbool et al., 2023). This is an indication of a dissociation of formal mandates and their real incorporation in institutional ethos. The universities of Lahore face significant challenges as they relate to QA policies, especially on how regulatory policies relate to the reality on the ground. This is witnessed along different dimensions.

More so, HEC standards often prioritize the inputs into infrastructure, that is, the construction of facilities, instead of key SDG-4.5.1 equity indicators, such as the balance in rural student enrolment (Fazil & Ahmad, 2023; Aslam, & Muzaffar, 2025b). Such a focus also unintentionally leads to the escalation of the extant urban-rural disparities in access to education and in the same quality. This kind of obsession may cause an insufficient connection between the work on compliance and the overall objectives of equitable education.

Hesitation among faculty is one of the continuing challenges, most of which is because of perceived inflation of workloads and training shortfalls. According to the research conducted, a remarkable 68 percent of faculty members in Lahore view QA processes as a bureaucratic burden that is not detracting from their core teaching obligations (Malik & Haq, 2021). Also, documents and documentation projects are met with reservations by senior academic staff, especially in the more traditional departments, due

to perceived deficient compatibility with professional incentives (Batoool & Qureshi, 2010). The latter phenomenon brings up the importance of a better change management approach and more effective communication of QA-related benefits to faculty members.

**Table 1**  
**Sector-Specific QA Challenges in Lahore**

Challenge Domain	Public Universities	Private Universities
Resource Allocation	Delayed governmental funding	Underprioritized QA budgets
SDG-4 Integration	Rural campus exclusion	Rankings-driven metrics
Stakeholder Engagement	Faculty resistance (72% in STEM)	High QEC staff turnover

Research shows that around 55 percent of Lahore university heads are satisfied with institutional rankings rather than focusing on the strategic pedagogical equity notion. Indeed, the studies prove that leadership is a key element of successful implementation of QA programs (Arif, et al., 2021). Moreover, with regards to the real-life application of QA into strategic plans, the fraction of actually implementing it with a time horizon extending beyond 3 years is small, and approximately 20 percent of respondents (Khuram et al., 2023). This is symptomatic of a greatly-reactive model of governance, rather than a pro-active one that transforms.

This gap can be well-described with the Three Horizons model: the majority of institutions are stuck in Horizon 1 (the present levels of compliance) with no transition to Horizon 2 (new practices) left or invested in it and no concept of Horizon 3 (a vision of the future of SDG-4 compliance). Such short-termism in strategy precludes long term quality cultures (Le Fort, 2023)

The development of effective collaborative ecosystems that are not necessarily formal is needed to achieve sustainable QA. Nonetheless, the existing approaches in the Lahore-based universities frequently fail; the percentage of QECs that vocalise students in the policy design process amounts to a meager 12 percent (Fazil & Ahmad, 2023). More than that, in most faculty development programs, a significant training-transfer gap has been reported, whereby up to 40 percent of a training program may not result in behavior change because of an inadequate follow-up (Batoool & Qureshi, 2010). International frameworks, like the ones of Swiss accreditation, remind that universal sustainability standards, albeit encouraging superficial compliance, do not usually trigger more profound changes that are represented in the systemic level of quality improvement (Le Fort, 2023). This implies that a more integrated/inclusive solution is essential in realizing these cultural and structural barriers.

However, in spite of the challenges, universities are experimenting and adopting diverse mechanisms and innovations in order to maintain QA continuity and adhere to SDG-4. Sound systems of maintaining QA continuity are critical to incorporating quality in everyday practice. These include the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycles that are also indispensable in the process of integrating continuous improvement of all aspects of the university functioning (Medne et al., 2020). The development of stakeholder-driven feedback loops, which are facilitated by learning analytics as an approach to ensuring equity, i.e. tracking the performance and progress of rural students, is another essential instrument, and the idea is put to practice (Sain & Vasudevan, 2024). In addition, digital traceability systems, such as dashboards characteristic of Farmonaut, can also be used to monitor the equity indicators and the QA performance in general in real-time (Khuram et al., 2023). These types of digital tools enhance transparency and enable taking corrective action on the spot.

Radical solutions are being developed in order to address gaps that remain in sustainability as well as enhance the conformity between QA and SDG-4. That will be doing equity audits provisioning specifically the Equity mapping of the rural enrollment parity using geospatial SDG-4.5.1 indicators (Fazil & Ahmad, 2023). An additional novel solution is

that of ESG-integrated training, which involves issuing micro-credentials in Environmental-Social-Governance principles to faculty, in doing so facilitating sustainable practices at the institutional level of operations and within the curriculum (PIQC, 2023). Moreover, the idea of cross-sectoral resource pools is under consideration, and it will facilitate sharing the digital platforms of QA within the universities of Lahore to leverage resources and collaborate in terms of quality improvement (Khuram et al., 2023). Such breakthroughs are a buildup move towards entrenching sustainability in post-secondary institutions.

There are some areas of major unresolved questions still left in the existing literature and these sources of questions are addressed in this work. First, it is evident that there is a serious shortage of strong measures of leadership accountability to be able to quantify effectively the contribution that governance has played in resilience in response to QA (Iqbal & Masood, 2023). The available instruments in most instances are not typically sufficient in assessing the level of leadership commitment beyond the superficial aspects of commitment. Second, the methodology of SDG-4 validation models has gaps, which makes it extremely hard to trace the direct effect QA has on the key indicators such as rural employability (Fazil and Ahmad, 2023). This is so because this has led to a failure to have an overarching picture of how the QA initiatives could be turned in to a tangible social and economic contribution.

Finally, shared QA resources both between the public and the private sector do not often employ hybrid governance models (Khuram et al., 2023). These collaborative structures can be discussed in ways that imply new opportunities of breaking the ties of inadequate resources and coherence. The educational center of Lahore in Pakistan is an uncommon and precious policy research laboratory in which to develop and experiment in scalable QA sustainability frameworks (HEC, 2023). The current study is important in the fact that it incorporates certain qualitative indications regarding these most important spheres and preconditions the subsequent research on the basis of more empirical material.

## Material and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design using semi-structured interviews. This approach was specifically chosen to delve into the nuanced and context-rich insights regarding the implementation challenges and sustainability of Quality Assurance (QA) systems within universities in Lahore. A qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate for this phase, as its primary objective was to gather in-depth perspectives from experienced higher education stakeholders, thereby informing and refining a subsequent, larger-scale investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Population and sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants possessing substantial expertise in QA implementation within higher education. This diverse selection aimed to provide a comprehensive range of perspectives, enabling triangulation across strategic, operational, administrative, and external consultancy dimensions. The sample comprised five key informants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5) from various roles and institutional affiliations:

**Table 2**  
**Study Participants' Demographic Profile**

Participant Code	Position/Role	Institutional Affiliation	Sector	Relevant Experience
P1	Pro-Vice Chancellor	Public University A	Public	20+ years
P2	Director QEC	Public University B	Public	15 years
P3	Director QEC	Private University C	Private	12 years
P4	Registrar	Private University D	Private	12 years

P5	QA Expert (University + Market)	Industry & Academia	Mixed	30+ years
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The data displays more detailed views on how QA is implemented, what may be difficult in it, and how it could be sustained in various institutional roles and sectors. A total of five interviewees were involved, one Pro-Vice Chancellor (P1), two QEC Directors (P2, P3), one Registrar (P4) and one Quality Expert (P5). Their reflections are provided below, having been collated on the basis of the themes that emerged during the analysis.

### Data collection Instruments

The main data collecting tool was semi-structured interview protocol. Such protocol was carefully structured in such a way to evoke strong reflections in four thematic areas: sector-specific impediments, leadership efficacy, stakeholder engagement, and consistency with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4). Examples of the questions to provide illustrative prompts were: sector-specific barriers to resource allocation after accreditation (and the question in this case was: Describe resource allocation challenges post accreditation), and stakeholder engagement (the question was: What drives faculty resistance to QA documentation?).

A rigorous content validation process of the protocol was used to achieve the robustness of the instrument. The study was reviewed by four independent experts who are not part of the research i.e. an HEC regulatory advisor, an ISO 9001:2015 auditor, a sociologist in higher education, and a cognitive psychologist. This was done by calculating Content Validity Index (CVI) of each question, interviewing participants over cognitive interviews to evaluate clarity and contextual relevance of questions, and also editing wording according to the specialized advisors. As an example, the overly technical terminologies such as pedagogical transformation replaced with simpler terminologies such as teaching improvement and probes questioning about the rural urban issues of equity were added, and the entire interview lasted 90 minutes now reduced to about 60 minutes in order to elicit more to-the-point yet substantive responses. **Data collection procedure**

Interviews were carried out in a very ethical manner as they were done strictly following the ethics provisions, and after authorization by the Institutional Review Board. All the participants gave written informed consent before each interview, promising them of anonymity and confidentiality. The interviews were mostly quantitative although the audio recording was done after the participants had given consent. The session time was on average 58 minutes. All the audio tapes have been then transcribed verbatim. In order to preserve anonymity, the names of all of the institutions were substituted with generic identifiers (i.e., Public University A) in the process of transcription. Moreover, to eliminate any possible response bias that could occur owing to perceived hierarchical relationships, the researcher made it clear to all the participants at the beginning of the interview process that he/she was not a member of the HEC.

### Data analysis techniques

Thematic analysis was employed in the analysis of the data collected relying on the well-established six-staged model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) getting to know the information by reading and rereading it, (2) the initial coding of the raw transcripts, (3) the broadening of the initially manifest codes to candidate themes, (4) the reviewing of these candidate themes against the full data, (5) the defining and naming of the final themes, and (6) the reporting of the come in the sixth and final step.

To enable the management of data and organization of data effectively and efficiently in the analysis exercise, the NVivo software was adopted. The in-vivo coding was also widely employed in the previous phase of the coding in a bid to preserve the original words that were used by the participants to convey themselves and in the effort of extracting

the original voice of the participants. The themes were also operationalized through conducting peer debriefing sessions where two independent researchers are involved in the process in hope of improving the rigor and credibility of the findings as far as the research objectives are concerned as stipulated in the study.

### Ethical consideration

One of the main priorities that were followed during this study was the need to adhere to ethical rules. To protect anonymity and confidentiality of participants, all participants signed informed consent forms prior to being interviewed and their identities were completely masked in all transcripts and research notes. Participants and their institutions were kept secret by the use of generic identifiers. To reduce the possibility of social desirability bias particularly among top managers, the researcher made it clear to them that they were not members of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) at the start of every interview. All the digital information such as audio records and transcripts have been preserved in a secure encrypted server with limited access and a clear procedure proposed on how to destroy this information five years after the study was completed. These were the steps, which ensured the integrity and ethical behavior of the research and preserved the privacy and rights of all participants.

### Results and Discussion

In this part, data of the research interviews with key stakeholders (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5), is displayed as a direct and detached account of the results. All this is powered and organized systematically around the research questions as an outcome of their thematic analysis based on the qualitative data.

**Table 3**  
**Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes**

Themes	Sub-themes	Description
<b>1. Conceptualization of QA</b>	Compliance vs. Culture	Tension between compliance-driven QA and culture-based, long-term quality improvement.
	Leadership Role	Leadership's impact on shaping QA culture: either enabling or impeding sustainability.
<b>2. Implementation Challenges</b>	Faculty Resistance	Faculty resistance due to heavy workload and perceptions of QA as a burden.
	Resource Constraints	Challenges stemming from financial constraints and administrative bottlenecks.
	Leadership Gaps	The gap between leadership's intentions and actual QA implementation.
<b>3. Role of Technology</b>	Digital Tools for Efficiency	Use of digital platforms and dashboards for real-time monitoring and reporting.
	AI and Technological Innovation	Potential of AI and technology to transform QA processes and assessment methods.
<b>4. Sustainability of QA</b>	Continuous Feedback	Use of internal reviews and stakeholder feedback to ensure continuity and improvement.
	Strategic Planning	Embedding QA goals into long-term institutional planning and day-to-day operations.
<b>5. SDG-4 Alignment</b>	Quality Education Goals	Aligning QA with the broader goals of SDG-4 (Inclusive and equitable quality education).
	Urban-Rural Disparities	Addressing the gap in educational quality between urban and rural campuses through targeted QA.

*QA Compliance vs. Culture:* QA as a Compliance as discussed in the interviews, there is an inherent conflict between QA as compliance and QA as a more widespread cultural approach to quality.

*Paperwork and audits as the primary objective:* The largest part of the respondents mentioned that QA is considered to be the ultimate purpose that is a pile of paperwork and audits.

- According to a Quality Expert, P5, it is about audit passes and forms. It is not like a quality improvement thing. This was also reflected by P2, a QEC Director at one of the public universities, who told me that he had felt that QA was far too formal a box-ticking exercise.
- P4, a Registrar, confessed that most universities pay more attention to the outcome of quality... than to the internal procedures that ensure quality. Such a view implies a gap between the perceived and real QA goals.
- On the other hand, P1, a Pro-Vice Chancellor, perceived HEC guidelines as a framework that must be utilized to have practical use: "HEC guidelines are good, but they should serve as a framework." We must look beyond the cross-compilation of paperwork for compliance-driven, get into the real-time observation and make those standards interactive." P3 is the Director QEC of a privately owned university who identified QA as a process that could identify gaps, stipulate goals and popularize an appropriate strategy.

*Leadership as an enabler or an impediment:* The role of leadership emerged as a critical determinant of QA conceptualization and implementation.

- P1 and P3 also explained that strong leadership commitment is an enabling feature. P3 reported: "We have had concrete gains in ranking with an effective leadership. It is philosophical and aspirational." P1 stressed the importance of leadership as it assists in the activities of QEC.
- Nonetheless, P5 provided a less-positive picture, proposing a gap between the declared intentions of the leadership and the true nature of the practice: "Leadership is concerned merely with reminding. They fail to make long-term commitments." P4 also appended that the senior management usually neglects the important role of quality assurance in performing above the basic expectations.

*Systemic challenges and innovative solutions:* There is an array of operational and strategic issues that the universities in Lahore face when rolling out QA, as well as, new innovative directions.

*Faculty tension and effectiveness:* This was seen as a problem that exists at every institution.

- P1 identified faculty push-back and workload concerns. P3 indicated that resistance is usually caused by inadequate incentives and a high burden of workload.
- P5 identified the issue as a more underlying competency and recruitment process: "Many of the faculty do not have the practical experience they need to understand QA. Training is only one issue; competence is the other issue." P2 noted that in the majority of cases, people like this sort of individual, who are not much oriented to the idea of quality, are mentally blocked without even checking, without entering into details.
- P4 asserted that it is a matter of view that many faculty members, particularly those at higher levels, consider the quality assurance activities as extra administrative loads.

*Digitalization and technology:* Digitalization and technology were considered as relevant current means of efficiency as well as a prospective instrument of revolutionary change.

- P1 and P3 mentioned the use of the so-called live dashboards and digital real-time monitoring/reporting platforms that have assisted them in advancing through reactive to proactive management of QA activities (P3).



- P5 offered an optimistic view, how AI can be used and transformed: AI technology has the potential to change our evaluation and instruction altogether: It will get us out of that box-ticking frame of thinking and foster critical thinking."
- P2 also advocated the introduction of what they termed the technological advances, app systems, and web-based systems in an effort to enhance ease of use.
- P4 pointed out that the process of getting feedback is simplified by the use of digital platforms and that courses can be tracked to their efficiency, as well as receiving student feedback in real-time.

*The gap between policy and practical outcomes:* This theme discusses the effectiveness of QA policies in being transformed into the learners and indeed, on the performance of learners and their career readiness.

*The feedback and measurements:* The quality and usefulness of feedback and measurements had been the basis of arguments among some participants.

- P5 in particular was quite harsh: "The feedback of students is not reliable. It is forced or fake. And how do you ever trust feedback that is motivated by outside constraints?" P2 referred to the dominated feedback as well: "most of the time, these kinds of people... mentally opposed without seeing, without entering the details."
- By contrast, P1 and P3 have stressed the importance of leveraging various feedback channels, such as student questionnaires, faculty comments and employer feedback "(P3), to obtain a holistic picture of strengths and weaknesses "(P3). P4, a Registrar, admitted that most universities are more concerned with the efficiency of quality results, rather than the processes involved internally to achieve quality.
- P4 meant that they engaged feedback in the strategic plans and gave the concrete value to create trust.

*The re-definition of what is considered successful in education:* This difference was fundamentally a re-definition of what is deemed successful in the end of QA activities.

- P1 and P3 were devoted to such measurable results as HEC ratings, rankings, and student performance: Success is measurable. We are tracking our placements, student achievement and post-graduate employability" (P3).
- P5 was the complete opposite, playing the role of a lesson in cutting off academic performance and practical skill: There was a graduate student whose grades were good, but when he was given a simple question by an industry contact he could not answer it. That is all the difference between academic success and practical skills, then. P2 also expressed the issues of not being able to provide the uniformity of the opportunities to the students by the universities despite the implementation of the QA and this has remained a mockery.
- The dichotomy between the following in P4, the student enrollment and revenue generation and the development of a holistic QA strategy also highlighted the idea that in some cases, the leadership did not take into consideration the long-term consequences of quality assurance in the quest to obtain an enrollment status.

## Discussion

This section evaluates, explains the results, and traces them to pertinent literature and outlines their implications and considerations in the running of the constraints of the research. The results of the research display a complicated and frequently logic-less condition of Quality Assurance practice in the universities of Lahore. Although there are formal QA structures in existence in various state institutions, required by the HEC, the

degree to which they actually promote a culture of quality differs widely. There is a central tension between QA as a checklist-led process to ensure an external audit can pass and QA as a total corporate process of continued improvement. This reflects the difference, observed by Harvey (2006), between QA as external accountability and internal improvement. The results indicate that in a number of institutions, the former is likely to become dominant and results in such dimensions as the participants refer to as a matter of box-ticking or paperwork exercise.

Quality assurance and sustainability would involve a multi-faceted nature. Some of the strategies we have employed include giving the departments autonomy and this has brought about competition and innovation. To improve the quality, departments should develop strategies to improve the process. This has resulted in more region-specific, personalized interventions to enhance quality within teaching, research and student services. However, sustainability conception is one of the gaps in the university industry. Many consider it to be a boxed, rather than a fluid developing concept" (Gull & Yusliza, 2023).

Faculty resistance remains an ongoing issue, not just based on the feeling of a heavy workload, but equally more essentially based on the feeling that QA does not have much or no practical use at all, or even ability, to apply QA principles, as vociferously promoted by P5. It means that the issue is more than just the lack of training, and reconsidering the concept of delivering the training to recruits alongside experience in exposing to the real world as the primary competency of the said professional on top of pedagogy as the main skill should be considered (Malik and Haq, 2021).

The results support and contribute to literature. The faculty inertia, resource constraint, and slowness through bureaucracy are also analogous issues when implementing QA in the developing environment (Malik and Haq, 2021; Maqbool et al., 2023). However, the current paper contains a qualitative aspect, which demonstrates the reason behind such resistance, which can be regarded as the perception of QA as a redundant burden, lack of practical competence and even manipulation of feedback.

Even the various opinions on the role of technology are questionable to mention. P1, P4, and P3 view digitalization as a means of efficiency and accountability first of all, whereas P5 indicates a new use of AI, which is, in turn, a reference to a more radical change that can be implemented than streamlining the processes. That causes a new horizon of QA, where the technology could in fact revolutionize the pedagogical practice and evaluation that is no longer based on compliance. This aligns with the higher extent of educational technology but it also suggests tremendous mismatch on methodical use of education technology in QA institutions in Pakistan.

However, most importantly, the results of the research in the area of the Gap Between Policy and Practical Outcomes overlap the sources that question the efficacy of QA on the actual learning and employment of students (Fazil and Ahmad, 2023). The good anecdotes given by P5 lead to the idea that, in the context of the academic performance, it is not necessarily the same as the skills in the real life and, therefore, the other indicators of success may not be sufficient or even false.

*Study implications:* The implications of the study are serious both practical and theoretical:

- *Practical Implications:* The study can be applied by policy-makers (HEC) to suggest that QA practice with the succeeding one-size-fits-all principle may not be applicable in the divergent conditions between public and private universities. There should be less rigid policies and encouragement of actual institutionalization; it is not supposed to be

inducing lawful obedience. When it comes to the administrators of the university, one can see that they must invest in the faculty development that they need and make regarding the development of practical skills and the integration of QA into the pedagogy, and not only documentation. The strength of advanced digital technologies, including AI, should be taken into account so that QA would become more relevant and engaging to the students and faculty.

- *Theoretical Implications:* The study is a contribution to the theoretical knowledge regarding QA sustainability even in the Global South. It emphasizes the fact that sustaining formal systems is not the sole connotation of sustainability because it also suggests a deep cultural shift. It can disrupt the status quo of what is considered a successful QA by providing qualitative assistance that there is a discrepancy that currently exists between the traditional measurements and the actual outcomes of the learning process which will lead the field to further develop theoretical knowledge on the way of achieving genuine quality enhancement.

## Conclusion

This is the final summary of the research, highlighting key findings and suggesting areas for future investigation.

This qualitative study into sustainability challenges and strategies to sustain Quality Assurance (QA) systems in universities in the city of Lahore, Pakistan, focused specifically on how relevant these systems are to SDG-4. The research conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with five significant stakeholders, such as a Pro-vice chancellor, two QEC directors, a registrar, and a quality expert, to obtain more sensitive perceptions by using thematic analysis.

The paper found that there is inherent conflict between QA as a conformance-based exercise and QA as a structural and ongoing development process. The large contributions identified the general resistance of the faculties (which was, nevertheless, linked most frequently to the perceived workload, and most prominently, to the perceived competence gaps), the philanthropic dedication of the leadership (which acted both as an enabler and an obstacle), and the lack of the connection between the policy and the practice, particularly, in the employability of the students and predictability of the processes associated with the feedback. The technological element has begun to be a two sided sword that is utilized in productivity as well as other cases that have turned out to be catalytic innovation.

The findings highlight the concept that even formal QA system is prescribed and present in the universities of Lahore, it still has a critical difference in its performance in creating the actual country of quality. The present tendency to box-ticking and paperwork as the way of meeting external audit requirements rather than the real wish of internal improvement may be a big challenge of turning QA in a ritual. The meaning of real sustainability lies in radical transformation of thinking in which QA is regarded as an element of the education mission. Without such cultural reconstruction and a leadership that underpins real change and makes inroads into long-standing issues like faculty competence and practical relevance of education, universities, it could be imagined, will not be in a position to realize the full potential of QA and play a significant role in achieving the high hopes of SDG-4.

## Recommendations

Resting on the results achieved in the framework of the present research work, it might be recommended to concentrate on the following aspects of the further research:

- **The Role of AI in Pedagogical QA:** Discuss the likely ways that high-tech digital tools and in particular AI can be systematically integrated into the pedagogical QA-how to make them accessible to the educational practices in effective teaching, assessment of students, and curriculum design, not as the enhancement of administrative efficiency.
- **Measure Competence Gap:** At the individual and institutional level: At the individual and institutional level, develop quantitative research to measure the perceived and actual degree of faculty competence in QA implementation, and the correlation with the student learning outcomes and employment process.
- **Develop Leadership Model Context-Specific:** Ask questions about leadership models that would be most applicable to advancing a culture of true QA in various institutional contexts (public and private, traditional and modern) in Pakistan with particular attention paid to strategies that will help overcome resistance to change.
- **Importance of Feedback Mechanisms:** Despite the academic nature, use focus groups and other instruments to test the validity and effectiveness of the existing student/employer feedback mechanism on actual pedagogical changes and graduate employment outcomes, and how to minimize social desirability bias.
- **Explore Hybrid Governance Models:** Find the opportunities of collaborating governance between the public and the private universities in relation to shared QA resources and best practices, particularly to find ways of overcoming the disparities and attaining more equitable education.

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