

**RESEARCH PAPER****Quality Assurance Frameworks in Higher Education: A Comparative Approach between Developed and Developing Countries****<sup>1</sup>Shaharyar Shoukat\*, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Zarmina Usman and <sup>3</sup>Muzdalfa Fatima**

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**Corresponding Author** shaharayarshoukatofficial@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Quality assurance has been of great importance in higher education, with globally spread HEIs trying to respond-as best they could-to the increasing demands for academic standards and accountability. The paper compares QA frameworks in higher education in developed countries, namely, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, against developing countries represented by India, Nigeria, and Pakistan. QA has become critical since institutions globally are under pressure to increase their academic standards and ensure accountability in processes. Many differences separate the QA systems in the developed and developing nations, shaped by varying factors that include resources, political influence, and consistency in application. This study adopts a qualitative approach through a content analysis of key documents from six countries, with the selection of 10 documents per country through purposive sampling. The results showed that the QA system in developed countries was well-established and solid, with high-quality standards and frequent evaluations; for developing countries, resource problems and inconsistent use of standards impede progress. It thus advocates that the approaches to QA should be done in a manner to suit each country's specific socio-economic and cultural setting to inform better international practices in QA.

**Keywords:** Accreditation Processes, Developed Countries, Developing Countries, Higher Education, Quality Assurance**Introduction**

Quality assurance in higher education has emerged as a prime concern for policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders for the last couple of decades. With the increasing perception that HEIs play a core role in socio-economic development, there is an increasing demand to maintain high academic standards and ensure accountability. QA generally denotes policies, procedures, and sets of practices intended to make sure that institutions of education meet or surpass standards of quality that have been set. Normally, these standards are made up of several domains of institutional functioning: governance, academic programs, research output, faculty qualifications, student services, among others.

Higher education QA frameworks began to take concrete form in the late 20th century amidst the massification of higher education and the increasing requirement for competitiveness at an international level. Indeed, the rapid expansion seen by higher education systems, especially in the developed world, heralded the development of formalized QA mechanisms that would duly preserve academic standards and institutional responsibility for their own practices and functions. QA frameworks have been institutionalized in developed countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where national agencies in these countries take up the role of accreditation and quality assessment of HEIs. For example, the United States has regional accreditation bodies, while the United Kingdom has the QAA and Australia has the TEQSA serving centrally for these purposes (Salmi, 2009).

QA frameworks have variably been implemented and taken hold in developing countries. Some of the developing countries have made remarkable progress in establishing mechanisms for quality assurance, while other countries continue to suffer from resource constraints, political instability, and incapacity of institutions as obstacles to their progress (World Bank, 2017). National quality assurance bodies have been set up in countries like India, Nigeria, and Pakistan. For instance, India has the National Board of Accreditation, NBA; in Nigeria, it is the National Universities Commission, NUC, while Pakistan has the Higher Education Commission, HEC. Most of these frameworks suffer from inconsistencies, a lack of transparency, and also non-enforcement issues which undermine their effectiveness and little impact on quality enhancement in higher education institutions (Dill & Beerkens, 2010).

These differences in the practice of QA between developed and developing countries can be ascribed to economic resources, governance structures, and cultural contexts. Generally, developed countries enjoy well-established infrastructures of education and regulatory environments that enable the application of comprehensive QA frameworks. Such countries enjoy higher institutional autonomy, better access to funds, and facilities for data collection and analysis that are generally sophisticated. This, therefore, means better and more efficient QA practices compared to developing countries, which have a lot of challenges in the successful development and maintenance of QA systems. These contexts commonly face a number of barriers that cloud the effective implementation of QA frameworks: limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of trained personnel.

Internationally, QA in higher education has been influenced by a range of global trends, of which the Bologna Process in Europe, with ambitions to harmonize the systems of higher education through the continent, forms a landmark. This initiative straddled more than the European continent and was seen as an example of other regional moves to increase the quality and comparability of institutions in higher education (Altbach et al., 2009). Similarly, international bodies such as UNESCO and OECD have also been instrumental in promoting QA policies within higher education, more so in developing countries. Technical assistance, financing, and policy support have been provided to countries to help them build up or improve their QA frameworks (World Bank, 2017).

In recent years, however, there has been a growing awareness that QA frameworks should conform to the specific cultural, socio-economic, and political setting of each country. The 'one-size-fits-all' approach to QA—metaphorically speaking—in the tendency to wholesale adoptions of models emanating from developed countries may not be suitable for developing nations with different needs and challenges pertaining to their countries. For that reason, more research is needed on the performance of QA frameworks within various contexts and identification of best practices adaptable to local conditions.

This growing body of research accordingly aims to present a comparative analysis of QA frameworks in higher education between developed and developing countries. The current research, therefore, explores the inherent strengths and weaknesses present in both contexts based on the core features, implementation processes, and impacts of QA frameworks in selected developed countries, namely the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, vis-a-vis developing countries, namely India, Nigeria, and Pakistan.

## **Literature Review**

Quality assurance is an integral constituent feature of higher education that aims to ensure academic integrity, enhance institutional credibility, and establish a culture for quality improvement in HEIs across the globe. The quality assurance literature shows, on one hand, that a great variation exists in the development, implementation, and effectiveness of such frameworks between regions and between developed and developing

countries. QA in higher education has its roots deeply embedded in the landscape of expansion and massification of the higher education arena evident during the latter half of the 20th century.

As Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009) summarize, in developed countries, within a relatively short time after the end of World War II, participation rates in higher education increased significantly and this called for more formal mechanisms that would guarantee quality provision and accountability. Initially, QA processes were largely internal, reliant on self-assessment and peer review. The increasing demands of governments and the public for accountability led to a gradual development of more clearly external QA bodies, often spinning off from the institution, followed by the development of national QA frameworks.

QA frameworks are established and institutionalized in developed countries and are usually backed by strong regulatory agencies. In the United States, for example, regional accreditation agencies assume a central role in the QA process, its evaluation of an institution based on its comprehensive standards that cover programs, governance, and student services (Eaton, 2012). Similarly, the QAA of the United Kingdom was established in 1997, assumed the responsibility to monitor the quality of higher education institutions in the country for continuous improvement and alignment with international standards (Harvey & Williams, 2010). In Australia, the TEQSA is the regulator in the higher education sector, focusing on quality assurance through risk analysis treatments and compliance with regulation (Coates & Mahat, 2013).

Most of the developed countries have very comprehensive QA frameworks, also with very strict standards. They are also known for conducting the assessments regularly. In the United States, however, QA is very decentralized with numerous regional accreditation bodies. In such a regard, when a system of assessment reflects upon the mission, governance, and academic integrity of the institution, the onus remains with the set criteria by the government. This model allows for a great deal of free hand and flexibility, thus allowing wide-ranging differences all over the country's higher education system. Its decentralized nature has also been noted to result in uneven standards of quality within the U.S. system. On the other hand, QA framework in the UK is seen to be considerably more centralised, as embodied by QAA's institutional review conducted on a regular basis together with the quality code and institutional requirement to follow it. This provides coherence and uniformity in the university education system of the country and goes a long way in giving it credit internationally. This is done in the framework of the TEQSA model of Australia, which is risk-based, and depending upon the level of risk it would pose on the quality of delivery or stability of financial systems and academic regulative frameworks, assessments would be made on institutions. The model will also be understood primarily as one that reduces the regulatory burden with absolutely no loss to quality standards.

Establishment and effectiveness of QA frameworks have been more variable in developing countries. Some developing countries established a national QA body like National Board of Accreditation (NBA) of India, National Universities Commission (NUC) of Nigeria, Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. Their main function is to monitor performance of higher education institutions to ensure that they maintain standards. However, resource constraints, institutional incapacity to implement the frameworks, and especially political interferences often undermine these implementations. For example, the NBA in India has been impressively accrediting engineering and technical institutions, but its effectiveness is seriously curtailed by the massive size and diversity of the higher education sector along with consistency and transparency issues related to its work processes (Goswami, 2013).

The NUC in Nigeria faces issues of underfunding, political interference, and shortage of trained personnel, all of which impede its effectively carrying out the mandate of QA work

given to it. (Materu, 2007). For Pakistan, the HEC has also set QA standards; however, because of its non-uniform implementation at various levels of institutions, certain variations in quality emerge (Salmi, 2009).

The literature describes a number of challenges that hinder the implementation and correct realization of QA frameworks in both the developed and developing nations. For instance, in the developed nations, such challenges include sustaining the relevance of the QA standards against the background of rapid technological changes and changes in the higher education landscape as noted (Marginson, 2006). With increased online learning and the subsequent requirement for flexibility in learning, there have been increased calls for the QA frameworks to likewise be adaptive and responsive to these growing changes (Harvey & Williams, 2010). In developing countries, the challenges are more fundamental: a lack of financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a general shortage of skilled personnel restrict the effective operation and implementation of QA frameworks (Materu, 2007). The further consequences of political instability and corruption include grounds for undermining QA efforts, leading to inconsistent applications of standards with lack of accountability.

## Material and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a focus on content analysis to explore and compare quality assurance (QA) frameworks in higher education across developed and developing countries. The interpretivist research paradigm guides the study, emphasizing understanding the meanings and interpretations embedded within QA documents. The research design adopts a comparative content analysis framework, systematically comparing the content of QA-related documents from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan. The data collection process involved gathering key documents related to QA frameworks from each of the six countries under study. These documents were sourced from official websites, government publications, and international organizations. The following table summarizes the types and sources of documents collected for analysis:

**Table 1**  
**Quality Assurance Frameworks and Accreditation Standards Across Countries**

Country	Document Type	Source
United States	Regional Accreditation Standards	Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)
United Kingdom	The UK Quality Code for Higher Education	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)
Australia	Higher Education Standards Framework	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)
India	National Board of Accreditation (NBA) Guidelines	National Board of Accreditation (NBA)
Nigeria	National Universities Commission (NUC) Annual Reports	National Universities Commission (NUC)
Pakistan	National Quality Assurance Framework	Higher Education Commission (HEC)

A purposive sampling technique was used to select approximately 10 key documents from each country. These documents were chosen based on their relevance to QA practices in higher education, representation of different aspects of QA (e.g., standards, accreditation processes, evaluation reports).

The content analysis was performed as a systematic exploration of the content of selected documents from the six countries to determine what the key themes, patterns, and differences are in their QA frameworks. From this, there emerged major differences related

to standards and processes of accreditation, and challenges pertaining to the implementation of QA frameworks in both developed and developing countries.

The QA standards are well-established in developed countries and applied consistently, besides being rigorously accredited on regular occasions. For example, regional accreditation agencies in the United States generally require an institution to go through comprehensive reviews every 5-10 years; such reviews ensure the programs align with the institutional mission and governance structure of the institution. Similarly, the QAA in the UK undertakes an institutional review within a six-year cycle and puts strong emphasis on the maintenance of high standards and continuous improvement. The Australian agency, called the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, undertakes a risk-based approach where the frequency and depth of evaluations depend on the risk profile of an institution.

In contrast, developing countries struggle to maintain coherent QA standards for many reasons, including resource constraints, political interference, and regional disparities. In India, for instance, the quality of periodic regularity and consistency of accreditation assessments by the National Board of Accreditation has to be maintained over a very large and heterogeneous higher education sector. The National Universities Commission of Nigeria also faces dire funding and infrastructure problems that seriously impede the execution of QA frameworks on a large scale. In Pakistan, while the Higher Education Commission attempts to establish one unified, standardized approach to QA, sharp regional divides and disparities in resources make for uneven applications of these standards.

The study also highlighted a number of differences between the developed and developing nations in terms of the processes of accreditation. For example, in developed nations, the processes of accreditation are typically characterized by stringent measures such as self-assessment, peer review, as well as external audits. In the United States, for instance, the process of accreditation entails self-study reports which are subsequently followed by peer reviews and site visits that ascertain the fact that quality has been critically assessed at an institutional level (Eaton, 2012). For instance, in the UK, the QAA's reviews are comprehensive and cover all areas from academic standards to governance of the institution, while in Australia, a similar approach is taken by the TEQSA, but with a very strong emphasis on risk management and compliance against national standards. In developing countries, however, these processes are usually less uniform, and oversight is often not as rigorous as it might be in the developed world. For example, the NBA has managed to accredit technical institutions in India but suffers from limited reach on account of the large-scale and diversity of the higher education segment. According to Goswami (2013), NUC in Nigeria is also faced with resource constraints and political interference, particularly in sustaining the frequency and consistency of its processes relating to accreditation. In Pakistan, the HEC's accreditation processes are still evolving, with efforts to improve consistency and transparency across institutions. In 2020, the HEC reiterated its commitment to such a system of quality assurance (HEC 2020).

Implementation challenges form one of the recurring themes where it was more often reported for developing countries. In developed countries, the challenge is to keep QA standards relevant with rapid technological changes and changing landscapes in higher education. For instance, with the rise of online education, there has equally been a growing demand for more flexibility in learning, which requires greater adaptability and responsiveness in QA frameworks (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

In developing countries, the problems are more basic. Lack of financial resources, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of skilled personnel create significant obstacles to the effective application of the QA framework. Adding to this, political instability and corruption further weaken such QA efforts since efforts at applying standards are inconsistent and

without accountability. While in Nigeria, due to political interferences, NUC is weak in terms of independence which leads to non-uniform enforcement of standards related to QA (NUC, 2019). This is also the case with HEC, Pakistan where regional disparity and resource constraint has led to inflexibility of QA frameworks in different parts of the country (HEC, 2020).

## **Results and Discussion**

The findings of the present study showed that the QA frameworks in developed countries were stronger, with heavy standards and their consistent implementations and regular evaluations. This forms a resultant combination leading to high-level educational quality and high institutional credibility. On the other hand, developing countries experience many problems in the implementation of effective QA frameworks, which leads to differences in the quality of education and outcomes.

### **Key Features of QA Frameworks**

It was evident that QA frameworks in developed countries had been well-established through clear and well-defined standards and criteria that were consistently used across various institutions. Furthermore, these QA frameworks are supported by strong accreditation processes, periodic evaluations of institutions, and a culture of continuous improvement. The United States, the UK, and Australia are considered to have centralized or regionally coordinated QA systems that provide an assurance of consistent application of standards within the respective higher education sectors.

These frameworks tend to be far less consistent in developing countries and often are devoid of the intense oversight imposed in developed nations. Similarly, national QA bodies, including the NBA in India, the NUC in Nigeria, and the HEC in Pakistan, have standards and accreditation procedures in place; however, these frameworks tend to be weakened by resource constraints, political influence, and regional inequities at both national and institutional levels.

### **Effectiveness and Impact**

This is further evidenced by high levels of quality in education and institutional credibility, which mean that the QA frameworks are effective in developing nations. In fact, most institutions within the United States, the UK, and Australia have time and again enjoyed top positions in global rankings, a pointer to how well the QA frameworks in those countries have effectively kept the quality of education standards high. The effectiveness of the QA frameworks ensures strong student outcomes through such indicators as high graduation rates and significant research output.

QA frameworks will also tend to be more variable in their effectiveness in developing countries; for instance, whereas institutions in urban centres may have strict QA processes, institutions in rural or under-resourced settings may fall short of meeting basic standards. This results in large differences in the quality of education and learning outcomes within one and the same sector. Indeed, political interference, resource limitations, and regional disparities have been identified as serious barriers in the effective implementation of QA frameworks in the developing countries.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

Some of the many challenges the developing world faces while trying to put in place an appropriate QA framework include, but are not limited to, limited financial resources, inadequate physical infrastructure, lack of skilled personnel, political interference, and

regional disparities that dent the effectiveness of the QA frameworks. This creates inequalities and discrepancies in quality and learning outcomes (Materu, 2007).

It has also identified measures to strengthen QA practices in developing countries, such as capacity building, targeted intervention, and adaptability of QA models into the local condition. Because these are institutional challenges unique to the developing contexts, it strengthens the effectiveness of the QA frameworks and quality of education at large when these are addressed (Salmi, 2009)

## **Discussion**

This study's findings are discussed in light of the implications for policymakers, educational leaders, and international organizations in both developed and developing countries.

For instance, in developed countries, there is a need to keep the standards relevant and updated in relation to rapid changes created by technologies and higher education dynamics. With the rise of online education, and thus the raising pressures for flexibility in learning, QA frameworks need to become even more adaptive and responsive to the emerging requirements. The UK's QAA has identified a need for more flexible and responsive QA processes that can take new forms of delivery, including blended and online learning, into consideration (QAA 2018). Similarly, TEQSA in Australia added that its "principal focus remains firmly set on developing a risk-based approach to quality assurance, one that can be tailored to the particular needs and different circumstances of individual providers."

Similarly, developed countries should ensure their QA frameworks are consistent and transparent, particularly in decentralized systems such as the United States of America. The study observed that while the accreditation system in the U.S. was generally working well, there were a number of concerns about consistency of standards across the various accrediting bodies. These are issues that shall have to be addressed if the credibility and effectiveness of the QA frameworks in developed countries are to be sustained (Eaton, 2012).

The study findings underscore the importance of QA frameworks in developing countries in a manner that takes into critical consideration the socio-economic and cultural contextual environment each country faces. The greatest number of reported barriers to employing adequate QA frameworks in developing countries stem from issues such as lack of funds, poor infrastructure, unskilled personnel, and political interference.

Capacity building and targeted interventions by the policymakers and educational leaders in developing countries are therefore necessary to address these challenges. It shall focus on training and development for professionals in QA, developing infrastructure and improving resources, and adapting QA models to suit the local conditions. For example, HEC in Pakistan can develop its QA framework successfully just by providing the required support to the institutions located in rural areas of the country and by designing targeted interventions for those specific challenges the institution face.

The study further emphasizes the removal of political influences within QA processes so that the set standards are equitably and transparently applied. For example, in Nigeria, increased independence of the NUC and reduction in the influence of political pressures would enhance the effectiveness of QA frameworks across the country substantially.

The study findings go beyond the country borders in respect of contributing to the higher education community as a whole. This is because there's increasing

interconnectedness in higher education, leading to an emergent need for quality assurance frameworks which would allow comparability and recognition of academic qualifications across borders. The study gives useful insight into how QA frameworks differ between developed and developing countries, vice-versa, thereby helping international organizations and policy makers in the quest to enhance quality and equity in higher education globally.

### **Conclusion**

This research covers the critical comparative review of QA frameworks in higher education institutions across both developed and developing nations. The findings show huge gaps in the functionality of QA frameworks between higher and developing countries. In the case of developed countries, it shows a definite system; whereas for developing countries, it is highly compromised systems. After highlighting such issues, recommendations for an improved QA practice globally, call for tailored approaches suitable to particular socio-economic and cultural contexts of countries.

### **Recommendations**

The different limitations the study has are reliance on document analysis, which may fail to provide a real picture of how these QA frameworks are in operation. Follow-up interviews with key stakeholders could be added, or case studies to provide more insightful information on QA frameworks. Also, the scope of countries involved in this study is few; future research can involve more countries or increase regional scope. The last recommendation from the study is for international organizations and policy thinkers in general to promote capacity building and selective intervention in developing countries to make the QA frameworks serve the purpose.



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