Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Afghanistan: Faculty Members' Perceptions From Selected Universities

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Abstract: This study investigated faculty members' perceptions of quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) in Afghanistan. The study aimed to examine how familiar faculty members were with QAA policy, quality concepts, QAA processes, and whether QAA process has improved the status quo. Through a sequential, exploratory mixed-methods design, the investigators interviewed seven faculty members at four universities and subsequently conducted a self-administered survey questionnaire at six universities (two public and four private). A response rate of 54 percent (N = 42) was obtained from the survey. The study findings suggest that faculty members had mixed impressions about QAA implementation. For instance, an overall sum of mean scores shows that faculty members have a positive view about QAA processes M = 3.5 (SD = .75); however, interview participants were less satisfied with QAA outcomes. Lastly, one important implication of the study is that successful implementation of QAA processes in Afghanistan is contingent on: (a) establishment of a quality culture wherein universities own the processes and outcomes, and (b) engagement of key stakeholders including faculty, staff, and administrators, who must internalize QAA processes to improve the status quo.

Keywords: higher education quality, quality assurance, accreditation, higher education in Afghanistan

Introduction

An increased focus on the quality of higher education (Ryan, 2015), particularly in under-resourced nations such as Afghanistan, promises hope, but also introduces challenges. Afghanistan, having suffered from thirty years of conflict and uncertainties, needs a long time to rebuild basic infrastructure and human capital (Hayward, 2015). However, the general public perceives higher education as a key path to success and prosperity; this has resulted in a tremendous growth in student enrollment and system expansion, as well as the emergence of a vibrant private sector of colleges and universities in the last decade (Ministry of Higher Education [MoHE], 2016). Due to the rapid increase in enrollment in higher education, the government no longer takes the issue of quality for granted, but has established a quality assurance policy to ensure that university activities are in compliance with higher education standards and that increasing access to higher education does not compromise quality (Babury & Hayward, 2013).
Quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) was introduced as a comprehensive national policy in the 2010–2014 National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP). It mandated that all universities be subject to the process of accreditation review (Hayward, 2015). In order to support this effort, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in 2011 established the Quality Enhancement and Accreditation Department (QEAD). Since then, MoHE has required all public and private universities to participate in the process.

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Many higher education institutions consider quality an integral part of the university's performance and preparation for accreditation (Garwe, 2013). Moreover, quality assurance transcends accreditation as a means for continuous self-improvement within the system. The accreditation process begins with the development of a self-assessment report by universities, followed by a desk-review, a site-visit by peer reviewers (coordinated by MoHE), a second cycle for the self-assessment report, a second stage for peer review, and, finally, the authorization and approval for accreditation issued by the MoHE (Babury & Hayward, 2014; Hayward, 2015; Taheryar, 2017). Accreditation in Afghanistan is implemented at the institutional level because the whole process is new, and MoHE still controls it (Taheryar, 2017).

However, given that QAA processes are relatively new, universities have not made equal progress. For instance, among the 38 public and 130 private universities, only a few have passed level-one and level-two candidacy in preparation for full accreditation (MoHE, 2016). The majority of these institutions struggle to develop qualified self-assessment reports and coordinate the peer-review process that is integral to accreditation (Ibrahimi, 2014). As a policy, QAA has attracted great attention and support nationwide; however, as a mechanism to regulate university activities, its implementation has remained a challenge.

Significance of the Study

Two main challenges suggest why this study is potentially significant. First, the concept of QAA is relatively new in Afghanistan and the government uses accreditation as a mechanism to improve quality (Ibrahimi, 2014). That being said, HEIs have not been successful in transmitting a culture of quality, as both university administrators and academics perceive QAA as an external agenda that serves the government's purposes: to inspect and control rather than improve and enhance quality. Second, the QAA process is treated as an end in itself, since participation seems limited to university administrators with little or no involvement of the academic staff. Because these two challenges stand in the way of systematic implementation, the current study can help develop strategies and processes to move implementation forward to a quality-driven higher education system.

Specifically, this study will challenge faculty's assumptions about the rationale for having a QAA process in place and clarify individuals' roles and responsibilities in quality enhancement initiatives. We highlight key areas such as faculty competency, commitment to teaching and learning, and curriculum and syllabus revision as primary duties of faculty members. In addition, the study examines the relationship between faculty members and their institutions by asking them to share their perceptions of various activities that occur in relation to QAA and the extent to which they participate in the process. More specifically, we question whether the faculty knows about quality standards, internal and external reviews, and levels of implementation, which indirectly asks how much the faculty is involved in the process.

In addition, the quality assurance and accreditation process as a new initiative has not been investigated before in the context of Afghan higher education. In particular, faculty members' perceptions of QAA, to a large extent, have been neglected in the limited literature on QAA. Thus, this study serves two important purposes: (a) to inform Afghan policy makers, university officials, faculty, staff, and students about quality improvement and QAA processes in higher education, and (b) to function as a starting point for future studies regarding quality assurance and accreditation issues in the Afghan higher education context.

Further, this study contributes to the scholarship on quality assurance and accreditation by analyzing the dynamics and challenges of implementing a Western QAA model in a developing

country such as Afghanistan. More specifically, it provides reflections on the existing challenges and gaps in terms of understanding the QAA process, its implementation, and ways to move forward.

Literature Review on Quality Assurance and Accreditation

Given the newness of QAA in Afghan higher education, limited literature exists to rely on local sources. Therefore, we examine these concepts within the broader literature. We begin this section by tracing the concept of quality and QAA in the literature and then draw out implications for quality improvement in Afghan universities. This literature review is organized into two main sections: (a) The definitions of higher education quality and QAA, and (b) the dimensions of implementing QAA policy in Afghanistan. These include QAA as a policy instrument to support improvement, the purpose of a quality assurance system, QAA implementation as a means to control quality, and institutional ownership of the QAA process.

Definitions

How Is Higher Education Quality Understood? The concept of quality as a complex discourse has received various interpretations in the context of higher education (Harvey, 2006; Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzan & Crawford, 2015). Many scholars define quality and quality assurance based on their individual philosophies and experiences. A focused review of the literature confirms that no agreement exists among either scholars or practitioners in providing a unified definition of quality that serves all purposes in higher education.

Similar to other contexts, quality is vaguely defined in Afghanistan (Abdulbaqi, 2009; Roof, 2016). Although a unified definition is not articulated by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) or other constituencies (Shakir, 2012), several studies refer to quality as a change to the status quo and suggest improvement in the area of curriculum development, faculty competency, physical resources and facilities, funding, and leadership (Aturupane, Sofizada & Shojo, 2013; Babury & Hayward, 2013; Hayward, 2015; Ibrahimi, 2014; Romanowski, McCarthy & Mitchell, 2007; Roof, 2015).

Nevertheless, Taheryar's (2017) recent case study suggests two distinct definitions for quality among Afghan faculty members. Some conceptualize quality as conformance to standards: "MOHE set 12 standards as the formal policy framework for quality assurance; therefore, this definition is the primary determinant of the understanding of quality in Afghan HE system" (Taheryar, 2017, p. 81). A second definition, however, emphasizes conventional assumptions of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993) by referring to educational "inputs, which suggests the notion that those institutions that have better inputs and have wealth of resources are high quality institutions" (Taheryar, 2017, p. 82). Although both definitions are addressed in QAA literature, the latter resonates more with Afghanistan, as ongoing war and conflict has severely damaged higher education infrastructure in the country (Babury & Hayward, 2013; Romanowski et al., 2007).

With reference to the broader literature on quality, Schindler et al. (2015) propose a conceptual model that argues that quality assurance should be "purposeful, transformative, exceptional, and accountable" (p. 7). For example, improvement in teaching and learning experiences is perceived as a measure of quality and an indicator of transformation (Hill, Lomas & MacGregor, 2003). Although a quality agenda may attract contested viewpoints, a definition of quality in higher education should satisfy key stakeholders such as government bodies/funders,

higher education institutions (faculty, staff, and administrators), recipients (students), and employers (Schindler et al., 2015).

Furthermore, definitions of quality can be placed into two broad categories: "standards-driven" definitions that imply pre-set criteria and "stakeholder-driven" definitions that satisfy users and provide accountability to individuals/organizations (Schindler et al., 2015, p. 5). This latter set of definitions reflects the conceptualization of quality as "purposeful, transformative, exceptional, and accountable" that serves as a broader structure for the definition of quality. Based on what the literature suggests, a definition of higher education quality will help individuals and institutions structure quality measures and prepare for accreditation. For instance, one study reveals that quality has often been defined from a corporate lens using terms such as customer satisfaction, worth for investment, exceptional/error free, and appropriateness for aims (Mizikaci, 2006). Some may find this definition troubling.

Thus, unlike the industry definitions, new endeavors help define quality through academics. Defining quality as excellence, improvement, and transformation largely captures an academic perspective (Harvey & Green, 1993). In this interpretation the central foci are (a) students' learning, skills, and knowledge and (b) continuous improvement in teaching. Also, this definition directly reflects the roles of academics (Houston 2008; Mizikaci, 2006; Ulrich, 2001). Baharustani (2012) implies that the quality discourse in Afghanistan underscores student learning and curriculum alignment with the labor market and notational economy. Similarly, Harvey (2006) puts forward a comprehensive definition: "Quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept that is related to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and objectives, as well as specific standards within a given system, institution, program, or discipline" (p. 2). This definition of quality resonates with the way higher education quality is being defined in Afghanistan, with an emphasis on robust accountability mechanisms to both satisfy external stakeholders and to facilitate improvements internally.

How Are Quality Assurance and Accreditation Understood? There is consensus among practitioners that a clear definition of quality simplifies the way quality assurance is defined (Bornmann, Mittag, & Daniel, 2006; Dill, 2007; Schindler et al., 2015; Usmani & Khatoon, 2016). Although no consensus exists in defining QAA, scholars have focused on "processes, policies, or actions performed externally by quality assurance agencies and accrediting bodies or internally within the institution" (Schindler et al., 2015, p. 7). QAA in Afghanistan is very recent (Shakir, 2012) and is meant to ensure two purposes: "initiating the country's first accreditation program and improving the quality of higher education in both public and private sector" (Ibrahimi, 2014, p. 12). When institutionalizing the accreditation framework as a way to improve quality, MoHE (2016) offers the following definition:

> Accreditation is a process of external quality review and assessment of higher education institutions and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement to insure that they meet existing standards of quality and effectiveness in terms of faculty members, teaching, research, and service, as well as infrastructure, financial viability, sustainability, outcomes, and compliance with existing laws (p. 1).

Although one may critique this hegemonic definition for failing to address diversity among higher education institutions (HEIs), Berger and Thoma (2015) maintain that higher education in Afghanistan is among a few exceptions since it is centrally controlled. However, defining quality assurance as a "collective process by which the university as an academic institution ensures that the quality of educational process is maintained to the standards it has set itself, its students and

interested external bodies" (Wilger, 1997, p. 2) promises an optimistic gesture to customize QAA processes in order to make improvements at the institutional level.

In addition, defining QAA from a corporative lens has received much criticism, based on the idea that the structure of HEIs is complex (Lomas, 2004; Skolnik, 2010). In other words, the issue of quality in HEIs barely corresponds to that of a business system, as business frames it as quality politics that drive agendas at various levels: "legitimizing changes in sectoral structure and funding, focusing on value for money and practices, reducing the autonomy of higher education institutions, and questioning the extent to which they produce work-ready graduates" (Lomas, 2004, p. 63). This observation points out at least three key interconnected concepts: legitimization, control, and accountability.

Further, a business orientation of QAA may satisfy some aspects of quality areas, but fails to address a more holistic view. For example, Mizikaci (2006) offers an academic perspective: "learning-centered education, leadership, continuous improvement, faculty and staff performance, partnership development" (p. 141) have been the focus of HEIs, and QAA should address them. In addition, an academic definition of quality will incorporate an institution's resourcefulness, goal setting, strategic planning, faculty creativity, student empowerment, and curriculum relevance (Harvey, 2005), which are key elements in assessing quality standards.

In the next section, four specific dimensions of QAA policy implementation in Afghanistan are discussed.

Dimensions to Implement Quality Assurance and Accreditation Policy in Afghanistan. **Quality Assurance and Accreditation as a Policy Instrument to Support Improvement.** Quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms have primarily been used as policy instruments by governments for various purposes such as improving quality, increasing HEIs' accountability, and others (Harman, 1998). However, QAA models, to a great extent, are the products of Western nations, such as the United States and Europe, and were adopted in developing nations, as iconic models that promise improvement (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2013; Houston, 2008). However, developing nations, such as Afghanistan, have often adopted these models as a whole package and have failed to consider institutional readiness (the extent to which stakeholders such as faculty, administrators, staff, and students know are informed and prepared) and organizational culture (norms, values, and processes align with new QAA standards) to implement QAA models.

Hayward (2006) asserts that lack of awareness among university stakeholders about the QAA process was a key concern in the African HEIs' context. A similar scenario applies to Afghanistan, as the QAA process is relatively new and stakeholders barely share a common understanding about its purpose and processes (Ibrahimi, 2010). Kopaleishvili and Lortkipanidze (2013) studied QAA in the Republic of Georgia and asked whether relevant stakeholders knew about the existing QAA processes and if these processes were effective. Their findings suggest that administrators and faculty knew about the process to a certain degree, while employers and students knew little. Regarding effectiveness, two-thirds of faculty respondents perceived the existing QAA standards effective, while 95% valued the internal quality assurance processes more than the external one. These responses suggest their familiarity with the external processes. These authors conclude by commenting that within the existing QAA process in the Georgian context, students and employers (labor market) have been excluded (Kopaleishvili & Lortkipanidze, 2013).

Filipakou and Tapper (2008) traced QAA policies in England and found that QAA is a legacy of a 1992 legislative act by which the government required funding agencies to monitor

universities' performance by establishing quality control boards. However, the authors acknowledged that no further guidelines were presented to serve as a roadmap for institutions and funding agencies. Filipakou and Tapper (2008) argue that QAA may have affected how universities function under this umbrella; however, they realized that the implementation of a quality audit is rather symbolic: lack of compliance with quality audits barely affected institutions in a negative way. In other words, poor performance had no effects on the amount of funding allocated for institutions (Filipakou & Tapper, 2008). Further, they argue that "the regulatory state appears to have become an end in itself rather than a means of securing this particular policy goal" (Filipakou & Tapper, 2008, p. 87).

Similarly, Taheryar's recent (2017) study of QAA perceptions in Afghanistan shows that HEIs continue to lack a structured mechanism for quality assurance other than accreditation processes. He illustrates that, although some universities in Afghanistan have made considerable progress towards accreditation, limited improvement is visible in substantive areas such as university curricula, pedagogy, and student services. In addition, Taheryar (2017) critiques the quantification of university services as a proper mechanism to assess quality. These two studies (Filipakou & Tapper, 2008; and Taheryar, 2017) imply that an awareness about the content of QAA barely satisfies successful implementation if institutions lack strategies and capacity to address the "how" question.

The Purpose of a Quality Assurance System. QAA mechanisms, at least in principle, are meant to improve higher education institutions' practices and/or provide accountability to the public (Harman, 1998). Studies that inquired into university stakeholders' perceptions about whether QAA policies and procedures serve internal vs. external interests, present mixed responses (Nabaho, Aguti & Oonyu, 2017). However, the majority seems to believe that QAA should serve internal rather than external purposes (Harvey, 2006). Szymenderski, Yagudina, and Burenkova (2015) assume that quality assurance processes benefit instruction and student learning, thus teaching and learning should be key areas of quality assurance systems. They critique earlier studies that primarily focused on external indicators of quality assurance. Similarly, Harvey (2010) notes that internal quality assurance processes have been neglected in the earlier literature on higher education quality.

Through an empirical study, Szymenderski et al. (2015) attempted to "define the conditions for improving the capacity of quality assurance systems practiced at universities to impact the quality of teaching and learning [in two universities,] KNITU-KAI in Russia and TU Dresden in Germany" (p. 16). Their findings suggest that a top-down structure of quality control provided barely useful results for the purpose of quality enhancement in the context of Russian universities. They have also found that an external control system influenced the extent to which faculty, staff, and students participated in the processes of quality management.

A similar assumption is true in the case of Afghan HEIs, as QAA was intended to serve as a remedy to improve the status quo and make HEIs accountable for the quality of scholarship and services (Babury & Hayward, 2014; Hayward, 2015). Nonetheless, Taheryar's (2017) findings suggest that QAA processes are primarily focused on reporting for external purposes and to some degree on surface issues. In another study of QAA impact on Pakistani universities, Usmani and Khatoon (2016) contend that program evaluation and self-assessment became institutionalized; however, they fail to address whether quality of services improved. In short, one may summarize that the purpose of QAA, at least in some countries, remains rhetorical, given the fact that too much attention is paid to reporting and evaluation.

Based on this study and those discussed above, three important assertions can be made: (a) internal QA processes are preferred over external ones; (b) external QA serves as a complement to internal processes; and (c) a "quality culture" plays a critical role in implementation of the quality assurance process (Szymenderski et al., 2015).

QAA Implementation as Control of Processes and Procedures. Filipakou and Tapper (2008) characterize QAA efforts as political. They suggest that quality is a complex construct that reveals contested views between two interest groups: the government and universities. Given this, one may wonder whether lack of an agreement in the process and product has implications for the likelihood of implementation. Clearly, this implies a power issue in terms of QAA: who has power and who controls the process? The logic behind this has roots in the government legislative acts intended to regulate external accrediting agencies, on the one hand, and to require universities to create justifications for individual programs they offer, on the other, by measuring the intended outcomes via quality assurance agencies (Filipakou & Tapper, 2008). The government's manipulative agenda, to a certain extent, affects higher education institutions in Afghanistan (Taheryar, 2017). However, a few questions arise: Do institutions actually comply with government mandates? Do MoHE mandates confirm QAA as a symbolic act? And does the quality of education improve?

Further, Houston (2008) observes that the process of QAA in higher education has attracted contested debates and reactions from various stakeholders; however, the key challenge is whether QAA is meant to serve as a control measure or an instrument to improve the status quo. Houston (2008) adds academic elements to the quality discourse incorporating faculty, staff, and student perspectives and addresses the concerns raised above about the omission of students and sometimes faculty in the process. Looking at QAA through a critical-system thinking orientation, he makes the observation that the language used to describe a phenomenon affects the way people perceive it. In universities particularly, he implies that individuals at different levels have their own contextual interpretations of quality and their views in turn determine the extent to which they should participate (Houston, 2008). This inference has implications for instilling a culture of quality in higher education institutions.

The literature on QAA also reveals that the way quality assurance is implemented shapes how people perceive it. For instance, Szymenderski et al. (2015) critique the European QAA model, which stems from the Bologna quality management process, for two reasons: (a) its homogenous structure offers a "one size fits all" approach; and (b) its mechanistic practice emphasizes procedural activities, rather than substantive improvement. Scholars argue that "quality evaluation in the Bologna process, which includes the institute of accreditation, is, as a matter of practice, aimed at monitoring and receiving reports from universities rather than at quality improvement" (Szymenderski et al., 2015, p. 16). Some investigators see a strong overlap between the superficial processes identified in European nations and the processes of QAA in the context of Afghanistan, as universities spend more time reporting than actually developing strategies to improve quality issues (Taheryar, 2017). To conclude, Harvey (2006) notes that the Bologna process was expected to serve quality improvement; however, in practice, the process primarily focuses on evaluating institutions' reports.

Institutional Ownership of the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Process

A common critique of the QAA process argues that a business-oriented quality assurance and accreditation system treats higher education as corporations, which should have correspondence to products and meet the interest of customers with close attention to predefined criteria (Harvey, 2006). A business view ignores the educative perspective of quality that emphasizes student growth, learning, and institutional readiness (Stensaker, 2007). And yet

another approach connects the issue of quality in higher education to organizational culture, values, and norms that ensure that individuals at universities feel accountable for their institution's goals and objectives (Szymenderski et al., 2015). In other words, a culture of quality will prevail when faculty, staff, and administrators internalize the processes of quality assurance.

An institutionally controlled quality agenda resembles bottom-up processes of quality improvement that encourage an institution to set criteria and standards and to complete the cycle of quality enhancement through strategic planning and structural adjustment. This view contrasts with top-down, deductive approaches that rely on external assessment and control exercised by governmental bodies; these top-down approaches are frequently found in developing nations (Kopaleishvili & Lortkipanidze, 2013). Thus, two questions arise: what kind of structure should be in place and what difference would it make to have an institutional orientation for quality improvement?

Lomas (2004) maintains that an institution owning the QAA process will contribute to enhancing a culture of quality in higher education institutions, assuming that universities at all levels will embrace the process of quality improvement. However, he warns of necessary preconditions: of utmost importance is identifying procedures and mechanisms that value the needs of all relevant stakeholders who contribute to the endeavor (Lomas, 2004). Based on this observation, implementation of quality culture well suits autonomous institutions that have control over their activities. This has been confirmed in the findings of Szymenderski et al. (2015) in which faculty and students hesitated to take their roles seriously as the state tightly controlled issues around quality.

In addition, Houston (2008) maintains that organized activities, such as teaching, research, and service, are seen as means to improve learning, to contribute to academia, and to serve societies. Likewise, QAA processes are expected to serve similar purposes; however, these are seen as ends in themselves when controlled by the state (Houston, 2008). For QAA processes to serve institutions, the following questions must be considered: Do institutions have the capacity and adequate resources to undertake these processes? Are structures in place to facilitate the process? Who has the authority to define the scope and boundaries of the analyses? How would the process serve various interest groups? With these questions in mind, Filipakou and Tapper (2008); Matimbo (2016); and Welsh and Dey (2002) embrace quality enhancement as an institutional property that is shaped by stakeholders, such as faculty, staff, administrators, students, employers, and others at the institutional level, as a means for ongoing improvement and creation of a culture of quality in universities. On the contrary, Babury and Hayward (2014) and Hayward (2015) clearly state that QAA in Afghanistan is a top-down process, which requires all HEIs to undergo the accreditation process.

Summary

A focused review of the literature on four dimensions of implementing QAA in Afghanistan reveals that, contrary to its intended purposes to improve and enhance, QAA processes have often been used as mechanisms to control and regulate higher education institutions. The QAA process may affect higher education institutions positively if two conditions are met: (a) the government facilitates a structure to encourage institutional ownership, and (b) key stakeholders such as faculty, staff, and administrators internalize QAA processes as an opportunity to improve the status quo and serve student learning. In addition, a successful implementation of the QAA process will highly depend on both institutional and external interests; thus, a procedure should be in place to ensure that all stakeholders, in particular faculty members, are involved. Their involvement may increase a sense of ownership and accountability. Finally, the QAA process in Afghanistan needs revisiting to assure that the policy is well articulated and higher education institutions develop practical strategies to address the problems.

Method

This study intended to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do faculty members know about QAA processes?
2. What are the perceptions of faculty members about quality assurance and accreditation processes in Afghanistan?

To address these questions, this study used a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design (Creswell, 2008; Creswell & Clark, 2017). Through this design, we collected and analyzed qualitative data and, based on these findings, designed and conducted a survey questionnaire.

We chose this design because it allows for both breadth and depth. We were able to triangulate data and deepen the analysis in order to have a better understanding of the QAA process in Afghanistan. Given the uniqueness of the context of higher education in Afghanistan, the investigators assumed that mono-methods would not provide sufficient information to fully understand QAA processes and address quality-related issues. Thus, using a mixed-methods design provided in-depth insight on the object of this study. The assumptions were that open-ended and close-ended data, when used together, would complement each other while provoking the investigators to look at the issue through various lenses (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In some instances, the quantitative data sparked insights into the qualitative findings, thus permitting each kind of data to enrich the other (Rossman & Wilson, 1994).

Having acquired Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the study started with qualitative data collection and analysis (mainly interviews), primarily to set the tone. Then, based on the qualitative results and insights from the literature, a self-administered paper survey questionnaire was developed to gather data from a larger sample. In sum, given the sequential exploratory nature of this study, qualitative data collection and analysis preceded quantitative. The quantitative section of the research was more substantial than the qualitative, and the notation for this study could be written as qual → QUAN (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

Research Participants

Interview participants were full-time faculty members (six males and one female) who were purposefully selected given two criteria: full-time affiliation with institutions and involvement in the process of QAA at either the institution, college, or department level, as most probably they would have more knowledge of their universities. These faculty worked at four public universities, selected because they were among the first cohort of universities to undergo accreditation and they have a high reputation and prestige nationwide. We made sure that participation in the study was voluntary, as informed consent forms were presented to each faculty member, and they were assured that their identity would remain confidential.

Similarly, participants for the quantitative section (N = 42), which included 36 males and six females, were selected through a stratified sampling procedure. The selection for institutions was done based on the following criteria: institutional prestige and reputation for having more faculty members with graduate degrees from overseas, admitting students with the highest scores in the national entrance exam for universities, and having a history of academic rigorousness based on faculty publications and teaching. Similarly, the selection criteria for faculty members included those who were tenure-track, full-time employed, with varied level of experience such as senior, mid-career, and novice, and were affiliated with the Kabul-based universities. We used this stratification because we assumed that sub-populations within the sample frame varied, and

that stratification would produce “a sample that is more likely to look like the total population” (Fowler, 2013, p. 19).

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative Data. We used a phenomenological approach to collect qualitative data. This approach corresponds to a generic orientation in qualitative research that allows a researcher to explore the nature and characteristics of a phenomenon. Since the focus of this study was to explore lived experiences of faculty members regarding higher education quality, we were interested in learning about participants’ experiences and perceptions. The rationale for choosing this method of inquiry relied on its promise to uncover deep understanding of the context through participants’ lenses and experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). In addition, a phenomenological approach helped us learn in depth about aspects and dimensions of higher education quality. Maxwell (2006) argues that using a phenomenological approach is important in “understanding meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with, and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences” (p. 8). We used semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data from the seven faculty members that participated in the qualitative section of the study.

We also included private universities in the quantitative phase of the study, since including both public and private HEIs would provide information about other factors such as institutional autonomy and the extent to which it might affect quality of services. A comparison of public and private was meant to confirm or contradict the implications raised in the literature that autonomous (private) institutions benefit more from the QAA process than centralized (public) HEIs (Szymenderski et al., 2015).

Quantitative Data. The quantitative procedure was conducted after the qualitative data collection, analysis, and development of findings. The quantitative data collection was meant to serve two purposes: (a) to gather information from a large sample so as to learn whether faculty members shared similar or different views about the QAA process, and (b) to be able to draw conclusions as to whether individual faculty members and institutional QAA members share similar views about the QAA processes. Quantitative data were collected via a self-administered paper-based survey questionnaire from faculty members who were affiliated with universities that have undergone QAA processes. Survey questionnaires were distributed to 80 faculty members with a response rate of 55% (42 people returned the questionnaires).

The survey questionnaire was designed based on the insights from the qualitative data findings and relevant literature. The instrument incorporated several categories that correspond to qualitative themes. After it was designed, the questionnaire was shared with the community of practice, faculty members, and graduate students at the home institution of the principal investigator at the time the study was conducted. Their feedback and comments were considered in the revised version of the instrument. Then, the questionnaire was translated into Dari/Farsi, the formal language of the country. A few native speakers were consulted to optimize language clarity. Their comments and feedback were important to confirm content validity, that is, whether the items in the questionnaire asked what they were meant to ask (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine & Walker, 2018). The revised translated questionnaire was pilot tested at two institutions, one public and one private, to assess whether the instrument was self-explanatory and to determine whether faculty members understood the questions. Respondents were asked right away how they felt about the questions; whether the instruction was clear; and whether they had problems comprehending them. Modifications were made based on comments from participants after pilot testing.

Research Site. This study was conducted in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, for two main reasons: accessibility and universities' involvement in the QAA process. Kabul city is a major setting for the higher education industry. Currently, there are four public universities and around 65 private HEIs functioning there. The public ones are referred to as "mother universities," given their age and prestige in the country. Kabul universities have a long and distinguished history. Other institutions, particularly provincial institutions, talk about them as reference universities both in the area of faculty expertise and resources. All public universities and some private universities have undergone the QAA process since the establishment of the QAA department in 2012. The majority of these institutions passed level-one and level-two candidacy in June 2016, and they will be entitled to full accreditation in the near future (Taheryar, 2017). Therefore, an investigation of faculty members' experiences about QAA process from Kabul universities was presumed to help develop a deeper understanding of the topic as compared to the provincial universities that have only recently started the process.

Analysis. To analyze the qualitative data, we followed several steps. Initially, we translated the data from Dari into English. Then, we consulted with professionals who are fluent in both languages to check the translated version for clarity. Next, we conducted a generic thematic analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Rossman & Rallis, 2016). The processes involved: consolidating interview responses, field notes, and analytic memos in one folder; organizing and sorting data for analysis; conducting a thorough reading of interview responses and notes; and coding the data by hand, highlighting with markers and labelling on margins of the papers (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Our intention for coding was to search for commonalities, contrasts, and alternative interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2008). The process was followed by developing themes and categories and interpreting those meanings into academic language (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Rossman & Rallis, 2016). As we used a phenomenological approach as an analytic lens, we avoided using pre-set codes and categories; instead we used an inductive approach by reading between lines and paying attention to emerging themes and categories (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). We particularly paid attention to how participants made meaning of quality and QAA processes and provided a description to reflect their understanding (Rossman & Rallis, 2016).

To analyze and interpret the quantitative data, we used three procedures: descriptive statistics, one-way nonparametric ANOVA (Kruskal-Wallis test), and t-test. We performed further interpretation by intersecting qualitative and quantitative results in the discussion section. Through rigorous and meticulous analysis and reasoning, we related findings to personal experiences, by reflecting on existing practices, challenges, and gaps and information in the data that emerged to address the problem or aspects of the problem.

Research Findings

This section presents the findings from the qualitative and quantitative perspectives used to analyze the data collected.

Qualitative Results

All interview participants were working as institutional QAA committee members. As a result of meticulous analysis and reflection, the following categories emerged.

Faculty Members' Interpretation of Quality. The faculty members had various interpretations of quality in higher education institutions in Afghanistan. For one, effective teaching

and learning were mentioned among the core areas that affect higher education quality. According to the interviewees, if teaching activities are based on academic norms and standards, and faculty use alternative pedagogy to be engaging, students benefit. Faculty also asserted that high-quality programs put students at the center of attention by preparing them to be reflective, critical, and self-confident individuals who have the potential to apply their skills in real contexts. One interpretation is that the faculty emphasizes learning as the main indicator of quality.

Along with teaching and learning, curriculum and course relevance had a role in the way quality was defined by interviewees. Some faculty asserted that universities should prepare students with decent skills and knowledge to be competitive in the labor market. However, they were concerned that Afghan universities lack adequate physical resources, facilities, and capacity to provide such services. An analysis of these observations offered by research participants suggests that quality, according to faculty in Afghanistan, falls into three categories: (a) quality as transformation—teaching and learning prepare student with knowledge, skills, and competence relevant to economy; (b) quality as conformity to standards; and (c) conventional view of quality which equals the resourcefulness of a university. This conceptualization of quality satisfies Harvey and Green's (1993) definition of quality and complements Taheryar's (2017) findings about the meaning of quality among Afghan faculty.

Quality Assurance and Accreditation Purposes. Based on the policy, QAA processes are meant to improve higher education quality across all universities in the country. However, what emerged in the process of analysis is that the universities primarily focused on technical issues such as writing self-assessment reports and creating banners and flyers to exhibit, rather than including self-assessment findings in an institutional strategic plan and investigating what revenues would be needed to improve the situation. Interestingly, one faculty member said, "as institutional QAA committee members, we do not have any authority to report our findings to MoHE. Our findings are often censored by the university administrators" (participant 3, interview 3). This suggests that QAA processes, to a great extent, may well be political and self-assessment reports barely reflect the idea that QAA processes are intended to explore and raise discussion.

In addition, results show that institutions were following what the MoHE requires. Unfortunately, some institutions barely had a mechanism to internalize the process and to feed assessment results into their action plans. However, a few institutions seemed to have an organized plan. For instance, one faculty member shared that his institution had a consistent process for performing self-assessment each semester. According to him, faculty evaluation was one of the key areas that they performed regularly. Other participants added that evaluation results were shared with faculty members to inform and improve their practices. However, none of the participants knew whether sanctions existed for faculty members who ignored the results, or, conversely, if incentives existed for those who implemented changes. In other words, participants were unsure about a follow-up program to trace the extent to which gaps were filled by faculty members and whether the leadership provided any support. In sum, two conclusions can be drawn based on an analysis of faculty responses related to purposes of QAA: (a) that the current accreditation process primarily serves the interests of the government as HEIs regularly produce reports to comply with particular requirements; and (b) that HEIs failed to internalize QAA processes and integrate findings from self-assessments to improve the status quo.

Quality Assurance and Accreditation Processes. Interview participants were asked to discuss the QAA implementation process at their institutions. Although responses varied from one institution to the other, a consensus emerged that all institutions used checklists to collect information and they analyzed the information collectively, as the results contributed to writing institutional self-assessment reports. Participants were also asked whether institutional reviewers

used alternative methods such as interviews and questionnaires. Faculty members' responses revealed that internal reviewers only relied on checklists as their primary source of information. According to one faculty representative, "we [internal reviewer] work hard to complete the self-assessment report. We created these checklists [to ask about percentage of curriculum implementation, to ask about using alternative assessment methods, and others] to collect information from departments and administrative staff" (participant 1, interview 1). Based on these assertions, one may observe that internal QAA reviewers lack systemic plans and effective methods to gather quality-related information. An over-reliance on one form of information (checklists) may not help in deeply understanding the problem, which would consequently affect how the institution addresses it.

Outcomes of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Implementation. According to the interviewees, the quality assurance process has positive impacts on faculty members' performances: "the majority of faculty members now feel responsible; they develop their course syllabi [which wasn't common before], modify their teaching activities, update their lecture notes, and apply the assessment model advised by the MoHE," said one of the faculty members (participant 7, interview 7). She regretted that some senior faculty members avoided QA measures and preferred to follow their own ways. The interviewees agreed that the main reason senior faculty ignored QAA processes was because their universities lacked mechanisms for appraising good practices and improving poor performances. A closer observation of the context suggests that, in addition to applying QAA processes, HEIs need to practice robust leadership to applaud good practices and to have corrective actions, improvement plans, and perhaps even sanctions in place to address instances of ongoing poor performance or overlooking particular processes.

In addition, some participants admitted that QAA processes had been effective as they assessed institutional resources and informed the university leadership about specific circumstances. However, they all agreed that all of their universities lacked sufficient resources and the autonomy to fulfill some needs, such as laboratory equipment, classroom infrastructure, and others. Based on these data, QAA processes have the potential to affect institutions in a positive way but without adequate resources—and no clear way to obtain them—HEIs will not be able to attain the goals of continuous improvement.

Scope of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Implementation. We were interested in exploring whether QAA processes were used across the institution or if they were limited to administrators. Interestingly, faculty responses indicated that QAA processes are practiced at various levels: institutional, college, department, and faculty. They also indicated that students were involved in course evaluations. More specifically, the interviewees added that faculty must complete two portfolios: (a) a personal action plan focusing on a semester or a year-long duty and (b) a quality improvement plan that emphasizes faculty's research activities, publications, presentations, and services. It is not clear whether faculty members develop or use portfolios to improve their practices or whether they are serving either political or symbolic purposes. It may well be that the administration intends to control faculty by insisting on these products.

Despite the above issue, interviewees observed that the QAA standards serve as a blueprint against which to measure institutional quality. One may assume that internal evaluation may only serve reporting and documentation purposes. However, according to some participants, institutions lacked a systematic strategy to improve quality in areas such as research, strategic planning, physical structures, community service, and institutional leadership. This echoes the political and symbolic nature of the QAA process, which suggests that it might be treated as an end to itself rather than as a means to facilitate improvement.

Critique of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Implementation. Participants were asked if they suggested any changes in the process of internal review. In response, they said that the internal QAA process needed serious supervision by university administrators. For instance, one faculty criticized existing procedures for lacking systematic monitoring and having poor strategies to assess faculty's teaching and research efforts. Another faculty member doubted the transparency of the internal QAA process. He said, "QAA process is controlled by a few people who are in authority positions" (participant 5, interview 5). This suggests the political nature of QAA processes even at the institutional level. Moreover, other participants perceived the internal QAA process as symbolic. According to a senior faculty member, "QAA is no more than words on paper, the process is less practical" (participant 4, interview 4). Faculty assumed that unless the QAA process was well implemented, they would not be able to comment on its effectiveness. In sum, participants' comments suggest that QAA procedures were relatively bureaucratic and were less visible at the institutional level.

Quantitative Results

A total of (N = 80) participants were recruited to complete a self-administered survey questionnaire at six universities. The response rate was 55% as (N = 42) faculty members returned completed questionnaires. A summary of the demographic results shows that 36 were males and six were females. Nineteen respondents were from public universities; the remaining 23 respondents were from private universities.

The questionnaire had 30 items that assessed faculty's perception of QAA on a Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree). The reliability of the QAA questionnaire was evaluated by subjecting the data to internal consistency/reliability (Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient) for all variables. The data show that the QAA questionnaire has high reliability of 0.85 across the 30 items.

Comparison of Perceptions Across Four Groups Based on Number of Years of Experience. To test the hypothesis that the number of years of experience that faculty members held had an effect on their perceptions of QAA processes, one-way nonparametric ANOVA (Kruskal-Wallis test) was used to test for differences in faculty members' perceptions of QAA process across four categories (1–5, 6–10, 11–15, 16–20 years of experience). Prior to conducting the test, the assumption of normality was evaluated and it was determined to be satisfactory since the four groups' distribution was associated with skew and kurtosis less than [2.0] and [9.0], respectively (Schmider, Ziegler, Danay, Beyer, & Buhner, 2010). Furthermore, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was tested and resulted in not satisfactory based on Levene's test (3, 38) = .5.30, p = .004. This shows that the test is significant and the variance is un-equal in the sample.

The Kruskal-Wallis test result shows that faculty's perceptions based on the number of years of experience do not differ significantly, $\chi 2 = 1.598$, $p = .660$. All comparisons were tested at $p = .05$. Based on the result, a conclusion could be made that there is no statistically significant difference in the outcome among the four groups of faculty members.

However, the descriptive statistics in Table 1 and the frequency plot in Figure 1 show that faculty representation in categories that presented a greater number of years of experience is numerically low in comparison to the less experienced faculty members. One interpretation could be that an overrepresentation of faculty in the less experienced group may dominate the outcome of responses.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics Associated With Perceptions of QAA Across Groups of Faculty Members According to Years of Experience*

Number of Years of Experience	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
1-5 years	27	3.61	.620	.119
6-10 years	10	3.43	.688	.219
11-15 years	3	2.97	1.082	.624
16-30 years	2	3.02	2.239	1.583

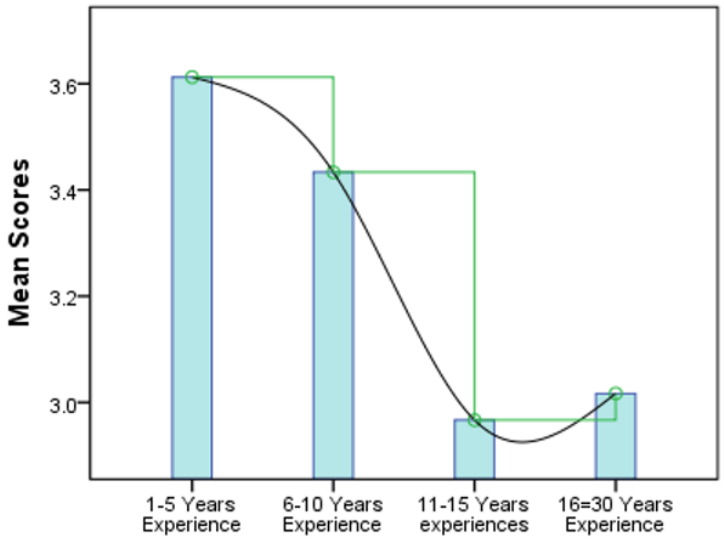

Figure 1. Comparison of Mean Scores Across Groups of Faculty Members According to Years of Experience

A Comparison of Public Versus Private Universities Faculty's Perceptions of Quality Assurance and Accreditation. An independent sample t-test was performed to determine if the mean scores between faculty members working at public and private universities were significantly different. The faculty from private institutions (N = 23) had numerically higher scores with M = 3.61 (SD = .61) compared to faculty from public universities (N = 19) with M = 3.35 (SD =. 83). To test the null-hypothesis that the mean score between faculty members from private universities and those from public universities was statistically different in terms of their perception of QAA process, an independent sample t-test was performed. As shown in Table 2, the perceptions of faculty members of QAA processes of both private and public institutions were sufficiently normal for the purposes of conducting a t-test (i.e., skew < [2.0] and Kurtosis < [9.0] (Schmider et al., 2010). Additionally, the assumptions of homogeneity of variances were tested and determined satisfactory via Levene's test, (40) = 1.40, p = .243. The independent sample t-test was not associated with a statistically significant effect, t(40) = -1.11, p = .271. Thus, the perceptions of QAA of faculty members working at public universities were not associated with statistically significantly smaller mean value than those working at private universities. Cohen's d was estimated at .036, which is a medium effect based on Cohen's (1992) guidelines. A comparative analysis of mean scores between both categories of faculty members across all

items shows limited variation in faculty perceptions as well. See Figure 2 for a graphical representation.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics Associated to Perceptions of QAA of Faculty Members From Private and Public Universities*

	N	M	SD	Skew	Kurtosis
Public Universities	19	3.61	.83	-.54	-2.87
Private Universities	23	3.35	.61		

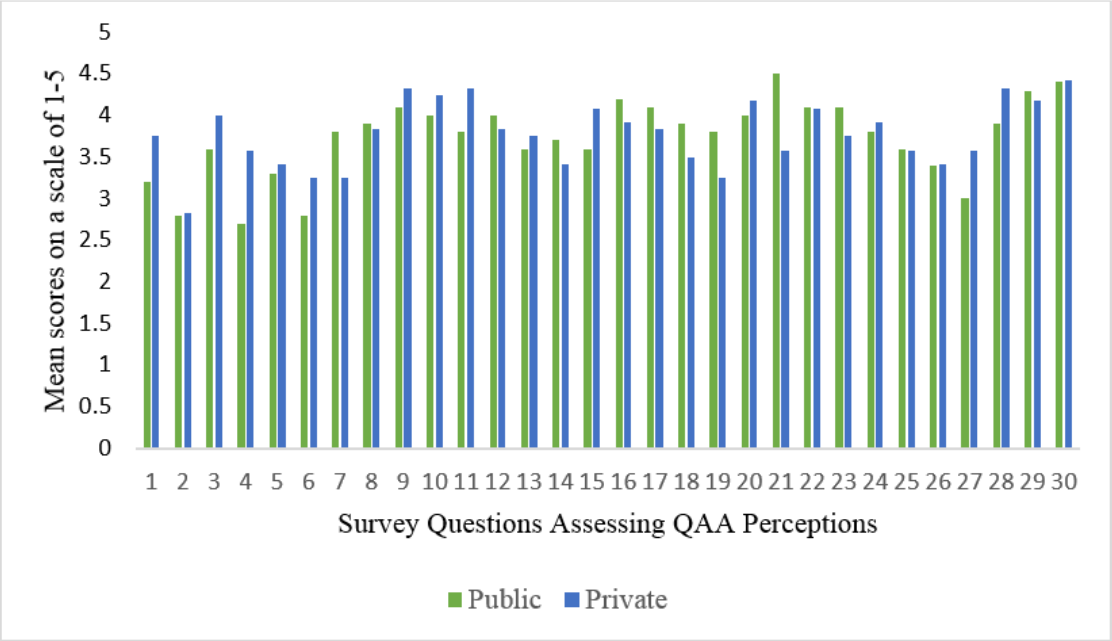

Figure 2. Comparison of Mean Scores for Perceptions of QAA of Faculty Members From Private and Public Universities. This figure shows similarities and variation of faculty perceptions from selected private and public universities in Afghanistan.

Descriptive Analysis of Individual Survey Items Assessing QAA Perceptions. The results show that the average score for the QAA questionnaire is relatively high M = 3.5 (SD = .75), which indicates that faculty members are optimistic about quality assurance and accreditation in Afghanistan universities. See Table 3 for a descriptive analysis of all individual items.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics, Mean Scores Across All Items.*

NO	Individual Items	N	Mean	Std. D.
1	I think that overall, the current quality assurance and accreditation mechanism is effective.	42	3.48	1.330
2	Everyone knows the meaning and purpose of each standard at our institutions.	40	2.72	.905
3	I have been involved in the process of QAA at my department, college or university.	37	3.73	1.239
4	I am aware of the external quality assurance processes.	39	3.33	1.108
5	Peer-reviewers are knowledgeable about the processes of QAA.	38	3.21	1.277
6	Peer-reviewers provide useful feedback to our university.	40	2.98	1.121
7	Peer reviewers share their findings with our university.	40	3.33	1.228
8	I think QAA is the job of university administrators.	39	3.9	1.390
9	QAA has facilitated improvements in the area of curriculum development and revision.	42	4.14	1.049
10	QAA has facilitated improvements in the area of teaching and learning activities.	42	4.12	1.087
11	QAA has facilitated improvements in the area of syllabi revision.	42	4.10	.878
12	QAA has improved students' services.	42	3.86	1.002
13	Our university has a process to evaluate faculty teaching through student evaluation forms.	41	3.54	1.164
14	The university has a process evaluate university services through students' surveys.	41	3.46	1.185
15	QAA implemented at Institutional level	41	3.78	1.151
16	QAA implemented at College level	40	3.80	.992
17	QAA implemented at Department level	40	3.70	1.018
18	QAA implemented at Faculty level	42	3.57	1.107

19	QAA implemented at Student level	40	3.25	1.276
20	The current internal QAA processes prepare our institution for external accreditation.	42	3.88	1.109
21	Our university has a regular mechanism to self-assess at least once a year.	40	3.72	1.261
22	Our university uses self-assessment results to improve performance.	40	3.80	1.114
23	Our university shares self-assessment reports with faculty members.	40	3.58	1.318
24	Our university commits itself to the development of a quality culture.	39	3.87	1.056
25	Our institution has clear procedures to assure the quality of student support services.	40	3.50	1.261
26	Our institution has a system to collect information on the quality of research activities.	41	3.20	1.167
27	Our institution has formal mechanisms for periodic review of the courses and curricula.	41	3.34	1.153
28	Our institution has mechanism to ensure that its faculty/staff are competent to teach.	42	3.95	1.125
29	Our institution has means to satisfy itself that its staff is competent to conduct research.	41	3.93	1.191
30	Our institution has means to satisfy itself that its staff is qualified to provide services.	41	4.17	.892
Average total of mean scores		42	3.5	.754

Item #1 in Table 3 shows that faculty members perceive the QAA process as highly effective in their institution M = 3.48 (SD = 1.33). However, in regard to the extent to which faculty members are informed and know about the QAA process (item #2), the average score is numerically smaller M = 2.72 (SD = .905). Based on the scales, an average score M < 3.00 implies a negative interpretation; in this case, M = 2.72 indicates that faculty members do not know enough about QAA processes in Afghanistan.

Quality Assurance and Accreditation Outcomes in Academic Areas. Faculty's responses show that QAA has positively affected institutions in four academic areas: university curricula, university courses, teaching and learning activities, and students services. Faculty responses range between M = 4.14 (SD = 1.04) in the area of curricula to M = 3.86 (SD = 1) in the area of students' services. An average score of (M = 4) and above indicates that faculty members are certain about their choices, which suggests that the QAA process substantially benefited universities in these areas. Figure 3 shows that mean scores for the first three items are above 4, while the item on student services is slightly lower, M = 3.86. Our interpretation suggests that faculty members perceive that QAA positively affects their institution in academic areas.

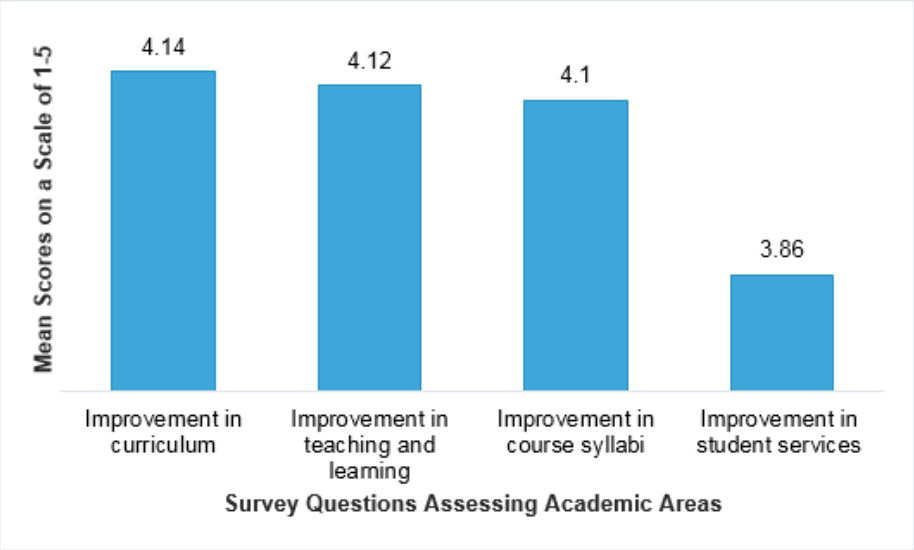

Figure 3. QAA Effect on Academic Areas. This figure illustrates how faculty members perceive the effects of QAA on curricula, teaching and learning, course syllabi, and student services.

Level of Implementation of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Processes. Faculty members were asked to specify how QAA was implemented at various levels: institution, college, department, faculty, and student. The mean scores for these items are in a range of M = 3.8 for college level to M = 3.25 for student level. These results show that QAA processes have been implemented at these institutions in all five levels. Table 4 shows that QAA was equally implemented at university, college, department, and faculty levels. In general, results are positive as the QAA process was implemented at all levels.

Table 4. *Quality Assurance and Accreditation Implementation at Various Levels.*

Scale of Measurement	Institutional Level	College Level	Department Level	Faculty Level	Student Level
Mean	3.78	3.80	3.70	3.57	3.25

Institutions' Commitment and Strength to Implement Quality Assurance and Accreditation. Results show that faculty members were optimistic that their institutions had regular mechanisms to evaluate research and teaching activities, students' services, curriculum and to disseminate evaluation results to inform practices. The average mean scores are in a range of M = 3.8 (the university used self-assessment results to improve performance) to M = 3.20 (the university had a structured system to evaluate research activities). The sum of average scores for these items 22–26 is M = 3.59, which reflects that faculty members were confident that their universities had means to collect information about academic programs, analyze the data, and use the results to improve performance.

In addition, statistical results show that faculty members seemed assured that their universities had a high commitment to perform quality teaching, research, and service. For instance, the average score for faculty's capacity to conduct teaching is M = 3.95 (SD = 1.12), the mean scores for faculty's strength to conduct research and provide student services are M = 3.

93 (SD = 1.19) and M = 4.17 (SD = .89), respectively. These scores suggest that faculty members were very optimistic about their university's capacity and strength to provide quality teaching, research, and service. However, these results could be questioned by arguing that teaching, research, and service are the main responsibility of faculty members, and they might have been biased, as they are actually faculty members at these institutions.

Discussion

This empirical study inquired into faculty members' perceptions of QAA at six selected universities in Afghanistan. We had two underlying assumptions: (a) that faculty perceptions vary based on the number of years of experience, and (b) that institutions with more autonomy (private universities, in this case) would perceive the QAA process more positively than their public counterparts. After running statistical analysis (One-way ANOVA, and t-test), we learned that no statistical variation exists between faculty's responses based on experience and the type of HEI where they worked. However, overall descriptive results show that faculty had a positive perception of QAA processes in selected universities in Afghanistan. In addition, both qualitative and quantitative findings support that faculty had some basic awareness about QAA as a policy and the extent to which they participated in these processes.

Our findings are consistent with other studies that inquired into faculty perceptions and examined their engagement in QAA processes (Cardoso, Rosa & Videira, 2018; Szymenderski et al., 2015). Faculty perceptions and participation in both internal and external quality assurance have been raised as a critical concern in the QAA literature (Szymenderski et al., 2015), and empirical studies in other countries found that faculty not only avoid active participation in quality assurance processes but they also perceive them as alien to their roles (Cardoso, Rosa & Videira, 2018).

In addition, some studies even question the quality of faculty participation and whether it influences educational outcomes (Agasisti, Barbato, Dal-Molin & Turri, 2017; Tavares, Sin, Videira & Amaral, 2017). Further, Martensson, Roxa and Stensaker (2014) argue that faculty buy-in becomes meaningful when quality assurance turns into a prominent element of organizational culture that endorses institutional history and guides improvement. However, our findings demonstrate that selected universities in Afghanistan have a long way to go to meaningfully integrate quality assurance as a part of their organizational culture. Therefore, faculty's responses were limited to what they knew about the process and how they perceived it.

A similar case is true regarding faculty perceptions of QAA (Stensaker, Langfeldt, Harvey, Huisman & Westerheijden, 2011; Tavares, Sin, Videira & Amaral, 2017). More specifically, Tavares et al.'s (2017) study suggests that QAA contributes to an improved consciousness of teaching quality; however, changes in a practical sense require a long-term commitment by HEIs as a whole. Interestingly, we drew a similar conclusion that faculty's positive views do not directly translate into improved outcomes, but do legitimize QAA as a useful intervention.

An analysis of the qualitative data revealed that a consensus existed among interview participants that the QAA process had affected their institutions positively in terms of raising awareness of faculty's main responsibilities. Likewise, quantitative results (M = 3.48) suggest that the overall QAA process has been perceived as effective at Kabul-based universities. In addition, both quantitative and qualitative results support that the QAA process had positive effects on institutions in the area of teaching pedagogy, learning outcomes, curriculum revision, and syllabi development. This finding is consistent with the findings of De-Vincenzi, Garau, and Guaglianone

(2018), as they suggest that QAA resulted in improvements in academic-related areas such as teaching and learning and curriculum in the Argentinian context.

However, a few faculty respondents were skeptical by admitting that improvements were mainly words on paper, but not real in practice. Tavares et al. (2017) drew a similar conclusion, as they summarize, “apparently, in Portugal, internal quality assurance is still more associated with an increase in bureaucracy and less with substantive improvement in teaching and learning” (p. 1302). One implication is that the QAA process may have facilitated some improvement in the area of academic affairs, with an emphasis on course revision, curricula, and instruction. However, unless change occurs in practice, the QAA process will be more symbolic and will primarily serve to satisfy reporting purposes.

In addition, qualitative analysis revealed that faculty members barely had a grasp of substantive issues associated with the QAA process. Their responses lacked references to macro-level discourses associated with higher-education quality, such as governance, strategic planning, and others. A similar pattern was realized in the case of Turkish universities. For instance, Bugday-Inc and Gounko (2014) maintain that a “lack of awareness and, in some cases, resistance to implement QA policies pose concerns for Turkish higher education, particularly as QA is at the heart of the Bologna” (p. 194). We argue that a comprehensive understanding of QAA should incorporate both micro-level issues, such as teaching and learning activities, and macro-level discussions that bring attention to the issue of graduate employment, research and innovation, quality of services, and others.

Furthermore, qualitative results show that faculty members were uncertain about external reviewers’ competence to conduct external reviews. This implies that, in order to perform a rigorous review, external reviewers need extensive training and capacity development. Contrary to the interview results, quantitative results suggest that external reviewers were knowledgeable about QAA processes (M = 3.21) and that they shared their findings with institutions (M = 3.33). However, faculty was skeptical as to whether external reviewers provided constructive feedback to improve the status quo (M = 2.98). Our findings, to a certain extent, support Stensaker et al.’s (2011) conclusion that the impact of external quality assurance was limited to an administrative burden in Norwegian universities, as it barely affected substantive quality areas.

In sum, referring back to our earlier argument of whether a Western QAA model works in a low-resource nation, the results suggest that Afghan universities have the potential to apply such a model. However, preconditions are required to raise awareness, mobilize QAA policy, and allocate relevant resources so that the faculty body buys into it and embeds it in their routine activities. Given this scenario, the current methods and procedures of QAA are criticized for lack of consistency and absence of a solid impetus to improve the situation on the ground, rather than merely checking the box.

Limitations and Recommendations

Low representation from private institutions for the qualitative section is a limitation to this study, and we recommend that future studies consider recruiting participants from public and private institutions equally. In addition, the sample size for the quantitative section was relatively small in number, which affects statistical analysis and generalization. Furthermore, individuals interviewed for this study were proposed by and pre-screened by the participant public universities. It is possible that these faculty members’ responses might have been influenced by the selection process, as their institutions knew that they would provide the information. Moreover, we incorporated only faculty perceptions; to capture a holistic picture, future studies may recruit

participants from various stakeholder groups such as administrators, faculty, staff, students, parents, and employers. Lastly, we suggest that a future study should use a case study design to investigate the processes of QAA implementation at one institution in order to have a deeper understanding of the topic and related processes.

Conclusion

The study found that faculty members' responses were more optimistic in the quantitative section, seeing QAA processes more positively than in the qualitative section. The university representatives in the interviews felt current QAA processes functioned as compliance to submit paperwork on time, with fewer efforts on improving practice. In regard to the first research question (to what extent faculty members know about QAA process) the findings confirmed that less is known among university faculty about the QAA process. However, the data support that all respondents agreed about the effectiveness of QAA processes at their respective institutions.

In regard to the second research question, an overall analysis suggests that faculty members have positive perceptions about the QAA process in Kabul-based universities. More specifically, faculty perceptions of QAA were assessed in five areas. Among these, they had more optimistic views in the areas of institutional capacity and strength to conduct quality teaching and research. Another positive perception among participants was that the QAA process was implemented equally across all levels at their institutions (institution, college, department, and faculty).

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