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Perceptions of Quality in Higher Education in Afghanistan: A Case Study of Shaheed Rabbani Education University

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Perceptions of Quality in Higher Education in Afghanistan:

A Case Study of Shaheed Rabbani Education University

Homayoon Taheryar

Capstone Project

Center for International Education

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

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Abstract

This study investigates how the concepts of quality and quality assurance (QA) standards are understood in the Afghan higher education system. First, I carried out a literature review of the available literature globally and then reviewed the available literature about Afghanistan’s higher education quality assurance system. Second, I conducted a case study at Shaheed Rabbani Education University (SREU), a public higher education institution in Afghanistan, to explore how academic staff at this university understand the concepts of quality and the QA standards. The study included qualitative interviews with seven key respondents at SREU. The findings from the case study suggest academic staff at SREU perceive quality and the fulfillment of QA standards mainly as the need for more inputs and resources such as more classrooms equipped with modern technology, better libraries, and more qualified faculty with Master’s and PhD degrees. In addition, the findings suggest that QA standards and practices at SREU need to be clarified further and should be revised to better match the available resources allocated to it and other public higher education institutions by the government. SREU needs to operationalize quality improvement practices in their daily activities by focusing more on student learning outcomes and improvement in administration using currently available resources.
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### Acronyms

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<thead>
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<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>AQP</td>
<td>Academic Quality and Planning</td>
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<td>ASQ</td>
<td>American Society for Quality</td>
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<td>CHEA</td>
<td>Council for Higher Education and Accreditation</td>
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<td>ESG</td>
<td>European Standard Guideline</td>
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<td>HoD</td>
<td>Head of Department</td>
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<td>HE</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
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<td>HEIs</td>
<td>Higher Education Institutions</td>
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<td>IQEU</td>
<td>Institutional Quality Enhancement Unit</td>
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<td>MoE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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<td>MoHE</td>
<td>Ministry of Higher Education</td>
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<td>NHESP</td>
<td>National Higher Education Strategic Plan</td>
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<td>NQEB</td>
<td>National Quality Enhancement Board</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>QA</td>
<td>Quality Assurance</td>
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<td>QAAD</td>
<td>Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate</td>
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<td>QASs</td>
<td>Quality Assurance Standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>SREU</td>
<td>Shaheed Rabbani Education University</td>
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<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
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<td>USWDP</td>
<td>University Support and Workforce Development Program</td>
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I also want to greatly thank the respondents in this study, who despite all the risks present in a conflict-affected environment and one with the densely bureaucratic and centralized system of Afghanistan, made themselves available for interviews. I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to my colleagues and friends, Ghulam Yahya Ahmadi, Javid Mussawy and Nasir Ahmad Kaihan for connecting me with the respondents in this study.

Sincerely,

Homayoon Taheryar
Introduction

Quality is a desirable goal, but also a highly disputed one everywhere including in higher education. I chose to explore this concept from the perspective of educators at Shaheed Rabbani Education University (SREU) in Afghanistan. Academic staff at any institution in Afghanistan including SREU have limited access to resources in a country where conflict has had a strong negative impact on quality of everything, including higher education. Quality improvement perhaps has not been a priority for academic staff at SREU and other public institutions across the country. Understanding what quality means and how educators see quality at the higher education institutions (HEIs) in a country like Afghanistan was a topic interesting to me for two reasons. First, the booming growth of higher education sector including an increase in enrollment and an increase in the number of public and private HEIs in Afghanistan during the past 15 years incited my curiosity to understand better why the quality of teaching and learning has been declining in these institutions. Arguably, one major reason is the commercialization of education and bourgeoning economic interest of the private sector, but I was curious to know why and how quality has been affected in public HEIs.

Second, I began working in the field of higher education (HE) four years ago when I chose to pursue my professional career in this field for the rest of my life. My purpose, since the start of my career in this field, has been to play an effective role to improve quality in my country’s higher education system. To pursue my curiosity about quality, this study provided me a good opportunity to explore and understand how this concept is perceived in a typical Afghan public university. When speaking about quality in HE, the concepts of quality assurance, quality enhancement and quality improvement are often used interchangeably. Furthermore, quality is not really a single concept; rather it embodies a variety of concepts like quality assurance, enhancement and improvement.
Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study was to explore the understanding and perceptions of educators at SREU about the concept of quality and selected quality assurance standards. The main research question was “How are quality assurance standards understood and used in Afghan higher education?” Guided by the main research question, I asked a set of sub questions. A sample of those sub questions presented here:

- What does quality in Higher Education mean to you?
- Who should define quality in Higher Education?
- What does Standard X mean to you?
- Do you think Standard X is a relevant standard for SREU?
- What could SREU do to meet standard X?

For a complete list of questions, see appendix II. Also, see Methodology and Interview Process under Methodology section for a detailed description about the main research and interview questions.

Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in Afghanistan adopted 12 standards to evaluate and assure quality in public and private HEIs, but my study focused only on three of them. With questions about the standards, I sought educators’ reflection about the application of those three quality assurance (QA) standards. In addition, I wanted to know to what extent those standards match the reality and available resources at SREU. Finally, how those standards and available resources could help the academic staff at different levels use those standards for quality improvement in different academic and non-academic activities in the institution.

After extensive growth in the number of HEIs across Afghanistan, the topic of quality in these HEIs is hidden behind the claims, optimistic assumptions, and goals for the improvement of access to higher education in the country. Next, lack of attention to quality improvement is a matter of concern because higher education can be seen as a potential economic interest for businesses and private sector and can be used as a tool of influence and to recruit followers for
the political aims of political parties. Factors such as these, among dozens of similar potential factors reinforce the importance of quality issues in both public and private HEIs.

Since higher education is free in public HEIs, the MoHE is under immense pressure to increase access. Such pressure comes from the people, the legislative power such as the parliament and the national importance of producing more graduates for the economic growth. MoHE then pushes the public HEIs without considering the quality factor in public HEIs. Such forces raise concerns that quality improvement is not given priority. For these reasons, I sought to study quality as a concern in public higher education from an independent researcher lens. I thought the first step would be to investigate how educators understand and conceptualize the concept of quality in public HEIs. Therefore, the selection of the research question and sub-questions included in this study mainly focused on educators’ understanding about quality rather than focusing on challenges and solutions for quality improvement.

There were many options for me to explore this concept. However, first I chose to look into the literature to familiarize myself with the concept of quality and quality assurance and choose a theoretical framework to later use in the analysis of my findings from the case study. The case study is the major part of this capstone project where I asked the respondents at SREU how they perceive quality. The next section describes how the literature, case study and other sections are organized in this paper.

**Organization of This Paper**

The literature section presents definitions and discussion of the concepts of quality, quality in higher education and quality assurance, types of quality assurance universally and in the Afghanistan HE context. This section is followed by methodology for this study. In methodology, there is a detailed description of the rationale for the selection of SREU for this
study, the selection of respondents, descriptions of the interview process, limitations and my position as a researcher.

The third section presents both the actual words of the respondents, as well as my comments and analysis of their responses. This section includes many questions that I asked around several themes. Questions about the three standards provide insight into how academic staff at SREU understand and apply three of the 12 QA standards in this institution.

The next section is discussion where I tried to connect the findings from the analysis with the literature. I used the five concepts of quality suggested by Diana Green (1994) as a framework for analyzing the data. It is clear that not all findings fit within those five concepts. The study findings may fit within some of the concepts, but not all of them.

The study ends with the conclusion section that presents implications for future policy, future practice and research. For the convenience of the readers, I have included in the appendices the text of 12 Quality Assurance standards, the complete set of questions used with participants and the summary of responses, specifically for the three selected standards.

Literature review

Definition of Quality

Philosophers, scholars, and civilizations throughout the history had put a lot of effort and thought into how to perform better in their daily lives and improve their day-to-day living situation. Before discussing the definition of quality both as an individual concept and as a concept in the higher education, the following quotes remind us that philosophers and scholars in the past had something to say about the meaning and definition of quality.

*Quality means doing it right when no one is looking - Henry Ford*

*Quality is not an act...it is a habit – Aristotle*
When we speak, and think about quality and quality assurance, we are often faced with the question of “what is quality?” We may also need to think about how to have a similar understanding and a shared concept of quality so that our discussion about quality can be relevant and consistent. Therefore, before defining the concept of quality in the higher education, first, it will be useful to have a basic understating about the concept of “quality” as a general term.

Quality is a highly disputed concept among scholars and practitioners (Martin & Stella, 2007). The meaning and underlying conception of quality is not only a matter of concern but it is also very much a matter of who defines it, in what interest, where and for what purpose (Martin & Stella, 2007). There is no general agreement on the concept of quality and an absolute definition for quality does not exist because just like beauty, the eyes of the beholder identifies quality (UCEA/DAAD, 2010). According to Westerheijden (2016) from the University of TWENTE in the Netherlands, quality means an “extent to which a good/service satisfies stated needs” (p. 7). American Society for Quality (ASQ) (2017) in its glossary list defines quality as following:

[It is] a subjective term for which each person or sector has its own definition. In technical usage, quality can have two meanings: 1. The characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs; 2. A product or service free of deficiencies. According to Joseph Juran cited by ASQ “quality means “fitness for use” [and] according to Philip Crosby, it means “conformance to requirements” (ASQ, 2017).

Lee Harvey (2004 -17), who is a widely cited author in the area of quality assurance on his website “Quality Research International”, defines quality as following:

- *As a noun, [quality is] the embodiment of the essential nature of a person, collective, object, action, process, or organization.*
- *As an adjective, [quality] means high grade or high status (as in a quality performance).*
- *In higher education, [quality is used] for evaluation processes.*
Noha Elassy (2015) argues that quality is a “unitary concept” (p. 251) and that authors and scholars have defined it by using a variety of approaches. Diana Green, a widely cited scholar in the literature on quality, (as cited by Elassy, 2015) pointed out five approaches to the definition of quality (1994).

First, “quality as the conformance to standards” (Green, 1994, p.23): Elassy (2015) argues that the concept of quality in this approach usually used in the public services in a sense that “quality of a product is measured in terms of its conformance to the specifications” (p.252) and to see if it meets the standards. According to CHEA (Council for Higher Education and Accreditation) (2002), the higher education sector defines the term “standard” as the level of conditions that the programs and institutions must meet to be accredited by accreditation agencies (as cited by Elassy, 2015). Informed by CHEA’s definition for standard, Elassy (2015) then argues that “if quality is the answer for the question of ‘is it good?’ then “standards gives the answer to the question [of] ‘is it good enough’?” (p. 252).

Second, “Quality as fitness for purpose” (Green, 1994, p.25): According to Green (1994), policy makers in the higher education sector have mostly adopted this definition for quality. Green argues that quality does not have a meaning except in relation to the purpose of the product and services. Quality evaluators can judge and measure quality based to the extent that the products or services fulfill its predetermined purpose (Green, 1994). That is why this definition suggests a model for determining the specifications for a quality product and service (Green, 1994). Gibbs (2011) contradicts this definition and suggests an alternative approach to this definition as he calls quality as the “good-enough practice” (Book Title). He indicated that the application of “good enough practice” has superficial similarities to “fit for purpose” (as cited by Elassy, 2015, p. 252). Green (1994) also maintains that this definition of quality for higher
education has problem because it is difficult to be clear on what is or what will be the purpose of higher education.

Third, “Quality as effectiveness in achieving institutional goals” (Green, 1994, p.25): According to Green (1994), one version of “fitness for purpose” (p.25) model focuses on assessing quality in HEI level. That said, high quality HEIs are the ones that clearly state their mission and purpose and are efficient and effective in meeting their stated goals (Green, 1994). Institution’s mission and purpose is also one of the three standards that I discussed and asked respondents’ perceptions in my case study that will be presented in the data analysis section.

Fourth, “Quality as meeting customers’ stated needs” (Green, 1994, p.25): According to this definition, “fitness for purpose” should be related to customers’ needs (Green, 1994). Green (1994) argues that this definition has a number of complications when defining quality as fulfilling customers’ needs. One of the complication is to understand whether students are the customer, the product or both. If we agree to consider students as customers, then the main critique of this definition will be the challenge to understand whether students were in a position to determine what their needs are and how to meet their needs (Elassy, 2015). Bornman (2004), in his article on South African Quality Assurance System states, “Quality is the extent to which the product meets the demands” (p.373). While this definition fits well for business and industry, it does not work that well for higher education.

Fifth, “The traditional concept of quality” (Green, 1994, p. 13): The traditional concept of quality connects with the notion of delivering distinctive and special products and services (Green, 1994). Such products and services express the status of the owner or user (Green, 1994, p. 23). This notion infers that owners set extremely high standards for production and delivery of services, which can be achieved only with great expense and use of scarce resources; therefore, it can make it inaccessible for majority of people (Green, 1994). This approach causes exclusion
and Green (1994) called it “the notion of exclusivity” (P.13). In higher education, it can be equate when people think to study in Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge or other highly popular HEIs. Green (1994) also maintains that this notion is not useful when assessing the quality of higher education as a whole. Elassy (2015) points out three major difficulties with the traditional concept of quality when perceived as excellence:

1. Reputation easily becomes a proxy for excellence, which gave the advantage to the old and the rich, and lead to imitation.
2. The notion of quality as excellence has the drawback that “elite universities” so easily came across as being elitist, evoking images of unfair advantage.
3. If quality was construed as excellence, we were led from a substantive notion to a relational one. (p. 253)

Elassy (2015) further adds, “Excellence in the sense of exceptional quality” (p.253) is not the answer to question of “is it good”. Rather, it answers the question of whether is it better than the others are.

Belawati and Darojat (2014) also agree that the concept of quality is multifaceted and that quality can be observed as “conformance to requirements”, it can be “best for certain customer conditions”, and in addition to fitness for purpose, it can be “fitness for use” (p. 2). Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) assert that the “term of quality can only be determined by customers who are recognized as the final authority on quality” (as cited by Belawati & Darojat, 2014, p.2). Internationally, institutions and concerned agencies and scholars have frequently pursued the quality-oriented practices at the new national contexts; however, conceptualization of quality has not advanced at the same rate (Blanco & Berger, 2014).

To sum up, quality is a complicated concept that often remains undefined (Blanco & Berger, 2014). According to the literature presented in this section, scholars, agencies, individuals, and public and private organizations, who are interested or working in the area of quality, define quality as a concept to measure the existing condition of goods and the way
services are delivered. Agencies and organizations define quality according to their organizational values, visions, and strategic objectives.

Following the five approaches introduced by Green (1994), to the extent appropriate, I will frame my findings from my case study analysis into one or more of Green’s five approaches. The questions about the concept of quality and the three standards (*Mission and Purpose, Governance and Administration, and Academic Programs*) that I asked in the case study can be better connected to Green’s five approaches for defining and understanding the concept of quality. This is further explained in “Discussion” section of this paper.

**Definition of Quality in Higher Education**

Higher education community often use the notion of quality to legitimize their particular vision and interests (Martin & Stella, 2007). According to Martin and Stella (2007), there is no one adequate definition of quality for the entire higher education system. Martin and Stella (2007) present the following reasons: First, because based on the relationship between teachers and learners, higher education is a multi-dimensional and complex process. Second, as higher education becomes more inclusive, student population becomes more heterogeneous; demands on HIEs, and delivery of courses increasingly grow diverse. Third, there is no consensus on the exact objectives of the higher education as Martin and Stella (2007) distinguish four diverse objectives for higher education:

- *higher education as the production of qualified manpower;*
- *higher education as training for research career;*
- *higher education as the efficient management of teaching provision; and*
- *higher education as a matter of extending life chances (p. 15)*

Therefore, one definition does not fit for all objectives.

Finally, we do not have one unique or “one size fit all” definition because one definition might seem adequate for one category of courses or institutions but it might be inadequate for others (Martin & Stella, 2007). Berger and Blanco pointed out that a closer evaluation of quality
assurance policies reveals that practices failed to define quality in theory (2014). Therefore, no one definition is perceived adequate because various higher education stakeholders define quality from their own perspectives. For example, Academics emphasize on the quality of research done by a HEI, students will evaluate quality based on the quality of teaching, their learning experiences and learning environment, whereas professional bodies will focus on professional standards and skills related to the professions that students are trained for (Martin & Stella, 2007). As stated earlier, we use the term quality to define the status or condition of product and services. The concept of quality in higher education is very confusing because it is not always clear what is the product, who is the client and whether the services are offered or products are offered to the client (UCEA/ DAAD, 2010). Is the graduate a product that we offer to society and job market? Is the student and graduate our client to whom we offered services of teaching, or is our academic programs are the product that we offer to students as our clients?

Bornman (2004) also adds to this concern that, in higher education, there is no clear evidence whether the “customer” is the HEIs, the student, the future employer of a student, or society as a whole. It can be a broader discussion and can take us out of our main discussion on quality definition in HE for the purpose of this paper. However, we understand that higher education is a system that produces multiple products for multiple or different types of clients, therefore, it needs multiple definition for each product that could fit according to the context, purpose, mission, and pre-established standards for those contexts (UCEA/ DAAD, 2010). The quality of education also seems to be context bound (Bornman, 2004).

The concept of quality has gained “importance as a policy issue, as a focus in the practice and as a concern in the higher education research” (Berger & Blanco, 2014, p.89). In the context of South Africa, Lategan asserts that the concept of quality does not necessarily offer a straightforward interpretation; therefore, educators should follow an open and flexible approach
when dealing with quality in higher education (as cited by Bornman who cited from Strydom et al. [1997], 2004). A number of authors (Fourie, 2000; Harvey and Green, 1993; Strydom et al., 1997) argue that educators should rather use notions of quality instead of a definition. Notions such as “quality exemplified in an exceptionally high standard; quality as transformation; quality in terms of fitness for purpose; quality as quest for zero defect; quality as value for money; and quality as a product evaluated against customer satisfaction” (as cited by Bornman, 2004).

Biggs (2001) defines quality as “value for money, fit for the purpose of the institution and quality as transforming” (p. 221). Biggs argues that the notion of “Quality as value for money” suggests that a quality institution is the one that satisfies the demand and expectations of public accountability (2001). For the “fit for purpose” notion, Biggs (2001) specifically refers to few purpose of an institution, namely: the students’ effective learning, to accredit that they have learned according to the highly recognizable standards, and the teaching programs producing the results required for students’ learning. Finally, for the “quality as transforming”, Biggs maintains, “Quality teaching transforms students’ perception of their world, and the way they go out applying their knowledge to real world problems” (2001, p. 222). He adds that quality teaching also transforms teachers’ conception of their roles, and teaching culture at the institution. Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) states that “quality, whilst not easy to define, is mainly a result of the interaction between teachers, students and the institutional learning environment” (p.15, 2015). Finally, Vlasceanu, Grunberg, and Parlea (2007) present the following complicated definition of quality in higher education:

*Quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional, multilevel, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and objectives, as well as to specific standards within a given system, institution, program, or discipline. Quality may thus take different, sometimes conflicting, meanings depending on the understanding of various*
What is quality assurance?

The concept of quality assurance (QA) is not originally founded in the higher education sector but it was brought in from the business sector into the higher education around 1980s (Elassy, 2015). El-Khwas (2013) argues because QA has a central place in the higher education policy, scholars and agencies attempted to define it in many studies (as cited by Elassy, 2015).

QA is one of the 10 action lines in the Bologna Process (EURASHE, 2013). Harvey (2004-17) on his website about Quality Research International defines the QA in higher education as “a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to threshold minimum requirements”. ISO states, “QA is a management approach to focus on the quality of organization and is based on the participation of all stakeholders in order to satisfy their expectations and aims as long as possible” (as cited by Bollaert, 2014, p. 6)

European Standard Guidelines (ESG) (2015) advises the quality assurance should ensure that a learning and teaching environment the “content of programs, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose” (p.7). Belawati and Darojat (2014) argues that QA is referring to an on-going and continued process that evaluates the quality of higher education system, institutions, and academic programs. Belawati and Darojat further add that QA is a mechanism that regulates and focuses both on improvement and on accountability. It also generates data and informs decisions, but does not offer ranking based on pre-established criteria and consistent process that were pre-agreed (Belawati & Darojat, 2014). QA requires the HEIs to follow a dynamic and self-motivated process and apply strategies that are applicable for the institution
and could be used for external agencies when they evaluate the institution (Belawati & Darojat, 2014).

Warren, McManus and Nnazor (1994) maintain that QA is not simply a system of assessment and evaluation to check error and fix them, it is rather a non-stop and never ending process for any institution for maintaining, enhancing, and improving quality (as cited by Belawati & Darojat, 2014). Harvey and Green (1993), Sallis (2002), Jung (2004), Jung and Latchem (2007) state that QA in higher education also includes a systematic and integrative procedures applied to assure quality (as cited by Belawati & Darojat, 2014). Westerheijden (2016) define QA as a mechanism “to assure, to give confidence” and to “making quality clear to stakeholders” (p.8).

On the importance of QA for HEIs, a number of scholars and agencies have presented their views at various occasions. The Berlin Communique, for example, states that “consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself” (EURASHE, 2013, p. 4). The Bucharest Ministerial Communique (April 2012) states that QA is essential to build trust and to reinforce the attractiveness of higher education offerings (EURASHE, 2013, p. 5). According to EURASHE in the same source, QA should be based on learning outcomes where opposition between the employment-oriented and the more generic and humanistic parts should not exist (2013). Harvey and Newton (2007) argues that the beauty of QA from the government’s point of view is that QA ensures accountability. QA can encourage compliance to a degree that the government policy requires or have control over the burgeoning private institutions (Harvey & Newton, 2007).
Types of Quality Assurance

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) and External Quality Assurance (EQA) believed to be the most generic types of quality assurance (QA), which are also the most popular ones and are widely used across the higher education context around the globe and in the literature (Hou, Ince, Tsai, & Chiang, 2015; Asia Pacific Quality Network, 2017; Neubauer & Hawkins, 2011). Although QA types and QA systems may significantly differ, many scholars and institutions use the phrase of quality assurance systems. Many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) make a distinction between IQA and EQA. (Hou, Ince, Tsai, & Chiang, 2015; Asia Pacific Quality Network, 2017; Neubauer & Hawkins, 2011).

They refer to IQA as intra-institutional practices in view of monitoring and improving the quality of higher education from within the institution (Hou, Ince, Tsai, & Chiang, 2015). While, they refer to EQA as supra-institutional schemes that assures the quality of higher education programs through external institutions such as QA agencies (Hou, Ince, Tsai, & Chiang, 2015).

In addition to the above classifications, some scholars present a number of specific types of QA within the IQA and EQA. Cheng (2003) offers three different paradigms for QA in education – internal, interface and future quality assurance. For internal QA, Cheng points out the improvement of the internal environment and process that ensures the effectiveness of teaching and learning based on the planned goals (2003). The Interface QA stresses on ensuring that “the education services satisfy the needs of stakeholders and are accountable for public” (Cheng, 2003, p. 203). The Future QA asserts on “ensuring the relevance of aims, content, practices and outcomes of education for the future of new generations” (Cheng, 2003, p. 203).

On the other hand, Biggs (2001) argues that the QA maybe divided into “Retrospective” or “Prospective”, categories depending on the type of quality to be assured. Retrospective QA perceives QA in terms of accountability, and complying with externally posed standards.
However, Prospective QA sees QA as sustaining and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching in the institution (Biggs, 2001). In the case study, the data suggest that SREU aims to work to comply with the suggested standards by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). It can be implied that the QA practices at SRE falls under the retrospective type because SREU tries to comply with externally posed standards suggested by the MoHE.

Defining quality in Afghan public higher education system

Given the international discourse and disagreements over the definition of quality in higher education at the international level, it is also not easy to define quality of higher education in a post-conflict context such as Afghanistan where state building efforts started from ruins since 2001. Therefore, a general and generic notion of quality in higher education may fit well. Such generic notions in a war-turn country like Afghanistan may seem more appropriate first to have extensive access to inputs and physical resources before the educators could enhance their teaching and administrative performances, as well as their conceptual and intellectual abilities. Based on this argument, quality in higher education will mean:

- An increase of access to HE
- An increase in the number of faculty members with PhD and Master Degrees
- An increase in the number of classrooms and campuses, male and female dormitories, and other essential infrastructures
- Improved faculty development and research, increase in libraries, laboratories,
- Increased access to Information and Communication Technology, especially high speed internet, and
- Increase in the employability rate of graduates from HEIs.
Many respondents in the case study, which will be presented later, pointed to the above concepts. Most respondents see quality as a concept and as a situation where an institution has broader access to sufficient inputs such as classrooms, labs, technology, financial autonomy, adequate number of teachers and so on.

Despite the unclear definition of quality and lack of scholarly resources to define quality in the Afghan context, I present my understanding on how quality is understood and defined within the literature, which I reviewed. However, it needs further studies and research to have a better understanding of quality and its definition in Afghanistan. Because in the case study I asked the key respondents how they define, understand, and perceive the concept of quality in Afghan context, it will be more appropriate and fit to define quality later in the analysis and discussion section of this paper.

The bylaw on Afghanistan’s “Quality Assurance and Accreditation” (2015) does not specifically define quality. It only includes the definition for the concepts such as accreditation, candidacy for accreditation, institutional accreditation, and program accreditation. The bylaw emphasizes the accreditation and offers guidelines and clearance for the accreditation process rather than providing a definition of quality. For example, in the definition of accreditation, it says “internal and external quality review and assessment of HIEs, programs… and quality improvement to insure they meet existing standards of quality effectiveness in terms of faculty members...” (p.1). Such descriptions, I believe, do not clearly contribute to the definition of quality.

Since 2001, Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and major donors to higher education (HE) strove to reestablish high quality tertiary education to meet the rapidly growing demands of the country’s economic development and increased access to HE (Berger & Thoma, 2015). However, neither MoHE, nor the major donors clarified that what is the acceptable level of
“high quality tertiary education” system. The most essential goal for the MoHE since 2009 has been to improve quality at various levels such as faculty and staff development and curriculum (Babury & Hayward, 2014).

The published literature indicates that Fred Hayward and Mohammad Osman Babury played important policy-making roles in the establishment of quality concept and practices in Afghan HE system during the past 15 years. Hayward (as an HE expert and scholar representing USAID) and Babury (deputy minister for academic affairs at MoHE 2007–2016) have reflected at various occasions on quality improvement both in their published articles as well as in their professional work in Afghan higher education system. However, they have not presented any specific definition for quality. In an attempt to develop the higher education system and improve quality in HE, Heyward and Babury, together with other HE stakeholders such as USAID and World Bank (WB) developed the two recent versions of Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) for the years 2010–2014 (NHESP-I) and 2016–2020 (NHESP-II). In addition, they published a number of scholarly articles, but none of those articles presents any clear and direct definition for quality in HE for the Afghan context.

The only major emphasis for quality can be seen in NHESP II’s second goal as quality improvement is referred as “focusing on the curriculum, governance, faculty development, and facilities” (Babury & Hayward, 2015, p. 18). The accreditation system, which was perceived as the new policy framework for quality improvement, begin in 2011 (Babury & Hayward, 2015). Literature and MoHE’s public documents suggests that MoHE links the quality improvement to the implementation of the accreditation practices such as institutional self-assessment, peer-review and candidacy for accreditation and then accreditation. Babury and Hayward (2014) maintain, “Graduates of Afghan HEIs had not reached that level of quality in terms of academic and technical competence and needed to work on soft skills” (p. 9).
MoHE has begun major efforts to increase the number of faculty members with PhD and Master Degrees, improve the curriculum and enhance the overall quality of instruction (Babury & Hayward, 2014). Another implication is that Hayward and Babury (2015) cite the slow increase in the number of faculty members with PhDs and master’s degree as a challenge in quality improvement. They further add that the return of faculty members from abroad can bring new energy thus improve teaching and research quality and that the availability of funding for research is another implication for quality improvement.

Finally, Babury and Hayward (2014) argue that the growing pressure to expand access make it more critical to maintain existing quality and push to improve it. It implies that increased access can be very relevant to the status of quality. “The establishment of accreditation system, faculty development, curriculum upgrading, and commitment to merit recruitment and promotion” of faculty members are among the other factors that were linked to quality improvement (Babury & Hayward, 2015, p. 19). Quality and quality improvement is also stated as a “focus on academic performance of students relating …to international standards, the economic and social relevance of graduates, and the research output of academic staff in the form of journal publications, books and monographs” (Aturupane, et. al. 2013, p. 24). Afghan National Development Strategy emphasize the importance of quality improvement in education at a broader level but it did not specify what type of quality for which aspect of education, quality for what purpose or what is an accepted level of quality in each aspect of HE sector (as cited by Roof, 2014).

Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) is the only and major policy maker institution for the HE system in Afghanistan. MoHE in NHESP-I (2010-2014) states that it has a number of goals to improve the quality in higher education and they are as following:
Curriculum development, a merit based recruitment and promotion system...increase in research and publications, improvement of facilities (e.g. libraries, ICT, internet access) ...improved student services, advising, health and placement as well as enhanced capacity to ensure the integrity, transparency, and independence of national entrance examination (p. 4).

NHESP-I also refers to the standardization of private HEIs as the quality improvement practices. Roof (2014) argues that the World Bank targets quality at various levels. First at the national level focusing on agencies and policy makers; second, on individual level focusing on lecturers and professors; and third, at institutional level focusing on academic managers within universities and policies and strategic framework for institutions. A comprehensive study report by Afghanistan Investment Supporting Agency (ASIA) states that the discussion of quality in higher education includes learners, learning environment, content, processes, whether study outcomes fulfills the nation’s goal (Baharustani, 2012).

The above citations and arguments suggest that there is not one specific or agreed definition of quality for higher education in Afghan context either. However, improvements in practices such as: increased number in faculty members with PhD and Master’s degree, curriculum upgrading, faculty development, funding for research and others are the most common implications that covered under quality improvement discussion, which can contribute and inform the definition of quality. This can also mean that quality in Afghan HE can be defined more as change, enhancement, and improvements in the present situation across HEIs and the MoHE.

MoHE as a state-led policy maker institution has the primary responsibility to define and operationalize the concept of quality. MoHE has taken serious measures to improve quality practices across public and private HEIs. The measures it has taken so far can be interpreted as mechanisms for improving quality – not defining quality. It has established the Directorate of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in 2011 to plan the implementation and oversee the quality
assurance and accreditation processes, which is a mechanism to improve quality across HEIs. In a recent program revision, the name of the directorate and the overall process changed from the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate to the Quality Enhancement and Accreditation Directorate (QEAD) (MoHE, 2017). QEAD adopted 12 QA standards for the HE system in Afghanistan (recently revised and reduced to 11 standards). The 12 standards established the foundation and framework of quality assurance and accreditation system in Afghanistan. The 12 standards include 52 sub-standards or sub-criteria (Standards and criteria are interchangeably used in all available QA literature on Afghan HE system) provide detailed instructions for the public and private HEIs to follow and standardize their educational services across the country. See Appendix (I) for a complete list of 12 QA standards and their sub-standards.

The 12 QA standards are also designed to provide guidance for the self-assessment process across HEIs. The standards are meant to use as a tool to help the institutions and faculty members to assess their “current condition, level of compliance with the MoHE criteria for self-assessment and need for action (if any)” (MoHE, 2009b, p.1). The 52 criteria under the 12 standards provide clear guidance and help institutions and faculty members to match the 12 standards with the current conditions of their institutions and write a self-assessment report. However, the standards provide flexibility for the institutions that if any sub-criteria or topics are not included, they can add them to better reflect the current situation of their institution when conducting self-assessment review (MoHE, 2009). The documents offer further instruction on ratings and important elements to be met by the faculty members and institutional QA committee members for an effective review. Below, I state only the titles of the 12 standards:

1) Mission and Purpose, 2) Governance and Administration, 3) Academic Programs 4) Faculty Members and Staff, 5) Students and Learning, 6) Library and other Information Resources, 7) Physical and Technological Resources, 8)

Each of the 52 criteria has a specific guideline in the column next to it. The guideline gives specific information to the reviewer on what type of data to collect.

This literature review reflects bits and pieces from the body of literature about quality definition and quality assurance system in higher education around the world and in Afghanistan. The limited number of authors and scholarship works about the Afghan higher education quality assurance system also limited my access to use a broader number of scholarly literature in this review. The literature presents several theoretical frames that I can use to discuss the analysis of the data I collected from the case study, but I primarily followed the five approaches presented by Green (1994) because they provide clear guidance on how to look at quality from five different lenses.

Context

Afghanistan Higher Education is only 85 years old (MoHE, 2014a), and it has already experienced periods of dramatic fluctuations. During the 1970s and 80s, Kabul University, for example, was considered one of the most prestigious universities in the region (MoHE, 2014a). However, during the civil war and Taliban regime (1990-2001), the higher education system was significantly damaged and it lost most of its academic and institutional capital including physical and human resources. In the past 15 years (2002 – 2016), Afghanistan Higher Education has been transformed and expanded from 18 public universities and institutions to 36 public institutions. Meanwhile, since 2006, private higher education institutions have emerged in a bid to increase access to higher education. Currently more than 120 private HEIs and universities
with most of them higher education institutions are operating throughout the country (MoHE, 2014a). Enrollment into public higher institutions has also increased significantly from around 6,000 in 2002 to 170,000 students in 2014 (Hayward, 2015, p.10).

During the past 15 years, MoHE continue to work on some key issues to expand access and improve quality of higher education in the country. Dr. Fred Hayward (2015), who recently authored a book, Transforming Higher Education in Afghanistan, on Afghanistan’s higher education, outlines some of these important issues as follows:

Curriculum review, reform and updating; merit hiring and promotion; faculty development focused on master’s and Ph.D. training; recruitment of more than 1,600 faculty members since 2008; new student rules and procedures including those regarding plagiarism, publications, and research expectations; preparation of a higher education gender strategy; increased access leading to a doubling of enrollment between 2008 and 2013; and the first steps in granting financial autonomy and the decentralization of authority to universities (p.11).

Recently the Afghan higher education law was passed by parliament. The cabinet council in the president’s office also ratified the bylaw for institutional autonomy. MoHE is now starting to pilot and then institutionalize institutional autonomy. Higher education is developing rapidly but concern over quality improvement remains a significant challenge for the government.

Ministry of Higher Education

The higher education sector, like other public institutions and sectors in Afghanistan, is highly centralized (Hayward, 2015, p.66). Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) is the only leading government institution that controls the higher education system and serves as the top policy making entity for HE in the country (MoHE, 2014a). Led by a minister, MoHE has 4

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1 In Afghanistan, there is a difference between HEI and University in terms of their legal and academic status. HEI is more like a college with no authority to offer graduate level programs and offering a limited number of bachelor degree programs. HEIs also offer two-year associate-level programs. However, universities can offer both graduate level programs and are home to many undergraduate level programs.
deputy ministry offices, and 16 directorates. The deputy ministry offices are: academic affairs, student affairs, administration and finance, and physical structure development also known as construction.

The higher education law and more than 20 by-laws are the legal instruments that regulate the higher education system in the country. During the past 15 years, with the technical support from USAID (through HEP and USWDP) and the World Bank, MoHE developed two National Higher Education Strategic Plans (NHESP I and NHESP II) for Afghanistan. NHESP-I covered the period between 2009 and 2014 while NHESP-II was recently developed for the years 2016 through 2020 (MoHE, 2014a).

The Afghan constitution mandates the government to provide free higher education up to bachelor level for students. Government (through the Ministry of Finance) is the main source of funding for the higher education in Afghanistan. In addition, international donors also provided substantial financial and technical support to the MoHE and public universities during the past 15 years. According to Hayward, the World Bank and the United States have been the major donors to the higher education for Afghanistan with some additional funding coming from France, Germany, Norway, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Japan, and ISAF (Hayward, 2015).

Financing higher education in Afghanistan remain as a big challenge for both the government and the international donors.

**Current Policy Issues**

Access, quality assurance and accreditation; gender equity; financial, administrative and academic autonomy for public universities; and financing public higher education are among the key policy issues in today’s higher education system in Afghanistan. However, financing and the quality of higher education are the top two policy issues. Hayward argues that “the quality improvement process to bring at least the research and graduate universities up to a level of
quality within the next five years that will allow them to reach the international standards” is essential for the success of Afghanistan higher education, in today’s highly competitive environment (2015, p.66).

Due to decades of war and political turmoil, Afghanistan higher education experienced a number of problems and challenges. As the international community had been withdrawing from Afghanistan during the past 3 years, concerns over economic and political instability grow. Lack of funding and increased demand for higher education are pressing factors in today’s higher education in Afghanistan. While quantitative growth of private higher education institutions improved access to higher education, the quality of the programs and the legitimacy of the degrees that these institutions offer, are of a great concern for the higher education practitioners and leaders in the country.

While government has the primary responsibility to offer higher education for its citizens, during the recent decade private higher education institutions have emerged as competitors of public higher education, which is a secondary option to access higher education in Afghanistan for many people. The key stakeholders in higher education system in Afghanistan are as follows: Ministry of Higher Education; public universities and private universities; Ministry of Finance (as the prime funding source); Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs; international donors (with USAID and World Bank as the major ones), students, faculty members and administrative staff.

In a centralized higher education system, where MoHE functions as the top decision maker institution for the entire public higher education system in the country, public institutions have no access to external financial resources. Public HEIs are not allowed to generate revenue and spend it. Any amount of income generated by the Public HEIs goes to the Ministry of Finance and there is no guarantee it will be given back to higher education. Lack of institutional
autonomy – financial, academic, and administrative – restricted the public HEIs to wait and see what they receive from the MoHE and what policies prescribed from the MoHE for quality improvement, among many other academic and administrative policies. Due to lack of income and revenue generation ability, public HEIs do not have the motive and potential to act independently for quality improvement at the institutional level. In addition to other factors, a major factor, luck of financial resources cannot be denied as the major contributing factor to for the improvement of quality practices in an institution.

Shaheed Rabbani Education University

Shaheed Rabbani Education University (SREU) is one of the four large public universities in the capital Kabul. SREU is also one of the first large teacher training institutions in the country. SREU was founded in 1964 as the teacher-training academy. It was upgraded to Teacher Training Center in the 1990s offering bachelor degrees. During the presidency of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani (1992 – 1995), it became a Pedagogical Institute. Finally, in 2003, it was upgraded to a university under the MoHE. (Wikipedia, 2017). According to a Facebook this institution was formerly named “Kabul Education University” but in 2012, former Afghan president Hamid Karzai renamed it the Shaheed Rabbani Education University. However, the new name raised controversies because of the history of Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani who belonged to a specific ethnic group.

SREU has 6 faculties and 33 departments. According to the respondents in the interviews, there are several quality-related committees in place that are headed by chancellor, vice chancellors, or heads of department (HoD). Institutional Quality Enhancement Unit (IQEU) is one of the major units, and SREU like other institutions has its quality enhancement committee under this unit chaired by the vice-chancellor for academic affairs. HoDs and several faculty
serve as members in this committee. HoDs have responsibility to attend IQEU committee meetings, implement decisions made about QA and report back about their progress to this unit.

**Methodology**

In addition to the literature review to understand the definition of the concepts such as quality and quality assurance globally and in the context of Afghanistan, I chose to conduct a small-scale case study. In the case study, I intended to explore how academic staff, in various roles and responsibilities, understand and perceive the concepts of quality, quality assurance (QA) processes and QA Standards at Shaheed Rabbani Education University (SREU). I specifically focused on three of the twelve standards to learn to what extent those three standards are applicable and how useful they are for SREU in the overall quality assurance processes in this institution.

I chose Shaheed Rabbani Education University (SREU) for this case study for several reasons. The major reason was that I could easily find contacts and respondents through my colleagues and networks. In addition, I visited and worked with faculty members and staff in this institution, so I was a bit familiar with the institution. My work with SREU was brief but I have met and talked to many faculty members and senior staff and found them very open and receptive. My selection of SREU was also influenced by many other relevant reasons, which is unique about this institution. First, it is one of the leading teacher training public institution in Afghanistan. Second, SREU is the only education university in the country that trains and produce graduates with a bachelor degree in education. Third, SREU is one of the most dynamic institutions in the capital that is host for three Master’s degree programs in the field of education (M.Ed, TESOL, MELM)\(^2\) and several bachelor programs in more than 10 concentrations (SREU, 2017). Fourth, it is a relevant public institution to my work experience and my field of study in

\(^2\) Master in Education, Teaching of English as a Second Language, Master of Education Leadership and Management
this Masters of Education program. Finally, because it is a specialized institution in the teacher training, it was easy to study the effect and application of those three QA standards. It is because the mission of the institution is very specific (teacher training) and academic staff only focus on the quality of education and teacher training, and not on multiple field of studies, which is common in other public higher institutions in the country.

Selection of Respondents

The study includes seven respondents with whom I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews. I originally intended to interview eight to ten respondents (two for each category – ordinary faculty members, students, QA members, a dean and a head of department) but only managed to talk with seven. The seven key respondents are current academic staff at SREU. I approached respondents through my former colleagues at the University Support and Workforce Development Program (USWDP), where I worked for more than two years.

The selection criteria of respondents in this case study was decided based on the level of respondents’ academic ranking, positions they currently hold, their expertise, knowledge, experience, and their exposure to the processes of quality assurance in the institution. Because my aim was to explore and understand how the concepts of quality, QA processes and QA standards are understood within SREU, I chose to interview this group of academic staff who are engaged and exposed to quality assurance processes at different levels and roles. Finally, I aimed to understand this concept from different lenses and experience of different actors in the institution and that to what extent they understand and implement the QA standards.

As outlined in Table 2.1, the respondents include two ordinary faculty members, two members of Institutional Quality Enhancement Unit (IQEU). These two also work as faculty members in the same institution. Other respondents include a Dean of a Faculty, a senior in-service student who also works as administrative manager in the Institutional Quality
Enhancement Unit (IQEU) and finally a third ordinary faculty member who is also member of National Quality Enhancement Board (NQEB). Two faculty members who also serve in the IQAU were selected because they are the ones who on daily-basis work with the QA implementation and processes at SREU. So, I expected they may be the ones who will know better about how they understand quality, QA and how SREU follows and implements the 12 standards, especially, the first 3 QA standards that were used in this study and whether these three standards are useful to measure quality from their perspectives. They are key academic personnel and are dealing with QA processes in the institution.

Two ordinary faculty members were chosen because I needed to understand what these faculty members know about the QA processes at their institution, how they perceive the concept of quality and QA process and how they apply QA process with or without considering the three standards. Finally, I chose to interview with a student, the dean of faculty and head of department to explore their perspectives on the similar topics. A more useful piece of information that added to my data collection process was the second interview with an ordinary faculty member who I then found that she also serves as a member of NQEB. Respondents do not work in the same department or faculty; therefore, there is no reporting hierarchy between them.
See Table 2.1 for the category of respondents where different colors stand for different categories of academic staff at SREU.

**Table 2.1 – Academic title and roles of respondents at SREU**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Academic Title and Current Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 1</td>
<td>Associate Professor, Ordinary Faculty Member, and MoHE’s NQEB member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 2</td>
<td>In-service student/Administrative Manager at SREU/IQEU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 3</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, Ordinary Faculty Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 4</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, Member of SREU/IQEU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 5</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, Ordinary Faculty Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 6</td>
<td>Professor, Member of SREU/IQEU, Head of Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 7</td>
<td>Professor, Dean of Faculty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview Protocol**

As the purpose of this paper was to understand the concept of quality and QA processes and QA standards through the eyes of academic staff and university professors in Afghanistan higher education system, I chose one main research question – *How are quality assurance standards understood and used in Afghan higher education?* Informed by the main research question, I developed an interview protocol that served as the main guiding instrument for the interviews.

The interview protocol, depending on the types of respondents, includes a series of 10 – 13 questions. The number of questions in the interview protocol varies because four categories of respondents were selected. See appendix II for a complete set of questions for four types of selected respondents.
I included a series of sub-questions in the interview protocol (see Table 2.2 for a sample of sub-questions). I selected these sub-questions to better cover the topic and to receive enough responses about the concepts of quality, quality assurance and QA standards in Afghan context.

Considering the four categories of respondents and their current roles and responsibilities at SREU, the type of sub-questions in the interview protocol are slightly different between these four categories. For example, the questions for a student respondent are a little different from those for IQAU member. Similarly, the questions for QA members are slightly different from those for the ordinary faculty members. The other major issue that I specifically selected focused on the first three out of twelve QA standards that have been adopted by the Afghanistan HE system. Some of the sub-questions, which are main part of the interview protocol, are specifically designed to ask about the understanding of the first three standards at SREU. Overall, the questions that specifically ask about the three standards are included for all respondents. The difference in types of questions between different respondents are very small.

The first 5 to 6 questions in the interview protocol are general questions. These questions seek to understand the definition of higher education quality in the Afghan context from the perception of the respondents. For example, the questions ask what they think about quality in HE, how quality should be defined, who should define quality and what their roles are in the quality and quality assurance processes. Then starting from question 6 or 7 (depending on the type of respondent), it includes a question on whether the respondents know about QA standards, process and how is it followed at SREU. Then before asking each standard, I had to read the title and short text of each standard to make sure the respondent understand what does the standard talk about.

The questions about the three standards ask the respondents what each standard means for them, what is their perception of SREU meeting each standard. On the other hand, if SREU
was not successful to meet a standard, what it can do to meet that standard. I asked the same set of questions for all three standards.

**Table 2.2. A Sample List of Sub Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does quality in Higher Education mean to you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who should define quality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think are the most important aspects of quality in higher education?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you assess the overall status of quality at SREU?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What standard first/second/third mean to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think first/second/third standard is a relevant for SREU?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What could SREU do to meet the first/second/third standard?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I selected the first three standards because it was more important and relevant to the core components of an institution (e.g. mission, purpose, academic programs and structure). They exist and describe the core functions and activities of an institution. For example, standard one is about the Mission and Purpose, Standard two is about the Governance and Administration and Standard three is about the Degree Programs in an institution.

The other reason behind the selection of these questions was to start a discussion to understand the meaning, status, and conceptualization of quality in the Afghan higher education context. Although these questions do not adequately respond to the main research questions, it serves just as a beginning to the understanding of the whole quality and quality assurance concepts in Afghanistan.

**Interview Process**

At the beginning of this study, I planned to interview 10 people from SREU; however, I succeeded to interview only seven of them, as they were the ones who responded to my phone
calls and emails. Two respondents did not respond to my emails and phone calls and one of them cancelled a scheduled interview and cited her busy schedule as the reason for not being ready to interview with me.

I conducted all interviewees via Viber audio calls. Viber is a social application similar to WhatsApp and other social apps that can be used in smartphones and works effectively with weaker internet connections. Before the actual interviews, I had to carry out at least one or two phone calls or texts to schedule interviews. With one respondents, it took three weeks and several attempts through phone calls, texts and emails to conduct the interview. While with others, it took me between one to three attempts to reach them and finalize the time of interview.

In my conversations and interviews with the respondents, I did not have perfect connectivity and the slow internet connection from respondents’ end often interrupted our conversation. However, I managed to get answers for almost all questions in several attempts in some cases. I did one interview with Facebook Messenger, which also has an option for audio conversation. Before starting each interview call, I turned on my personal computer’s voice recorder and recorded the interview from the start of call ringing until the end of the interview when we were saying goodbye to each other. The quality of voice recording was perfect.

In the end, I did six out of seven interviews through Viber audio call in local Dari language. However, I received written responses for the seventh interview who had typed on the interview protocol in local Dari language. After each interview, I transcribed the Dari audio file into a written transcript in English. The length of each interview varied between 32 to 48 minutes. Depending on internet connectivity interruptions, I had to call some of the respondents back and complete the unfinished parts of the questions or complement and clarify unclear responses. I did the first interview as a pilot but when I listened to it and transcribed it, I found that it was useful to count it as an actual interview and I only had to conduct a short-length
follow up interview to complete it. The conduct of all interviews and their transcriptions took five weeks started from late December 2016 to late January 2017.

Following the principle that a researcher should play the role of an instrument, especially, in qualitative research, I tried to the extent possible to follow this principle. I conducted this study in the most effective possible way in the virtual context. During the interviews, I kept a neutral position and interfered only when the respondents was going off-track. Although, stopping the respondents and interfering when they are speaking is not considered polite and Afghan respondents can feel it very rude, to the extent possible, I tried to interfere and first explain the reason of my interference and then repeated the question or asked follow up questions. For some respondents, I had to give a brief background and explanation on why I was asking the question and the importance of the kind of response that I was looking for.

Data Analysis

The transcripts of the seven interviews serve as the main body of the primary data for this study. Using the transcripts, I read and went through the response of each question for each respondent, highlighted or marked the similar ideas and themes and discussed them as part of my analysis in this paper. To help my analysis, I used an excel sheet where I put all questions in a column and responses of each respondent for each question in a row. It helped me to compare responses for each question, highlighting, and identifying similar themes and ideas. Further details about data analysis methodology is presented in the Data Analysis and Discussion section.

My position as a researcher

For me as a graduate student in the U.S., it was not easy to interview people who are thousands miles away and live in a conflict zone. I did not have any contact, personal or professional relationships with any of the respondents. I found the contacts for most of them
through friends and colleagues. During my visits to SREU in the past, I did not meet any of the respondents included in this study. Therefore, we did not meet or knew each other in the past. I did not disclose my earlier work experience with the MoHE either. I obtained all respondents’ phone and email contacts from my colleagues in USWDP and I reached the respondents after my colleagues’ brief contact with them to introduce me to them. Therefore, I had to tell them I am a colleague of Mr. A or Mr. B, and used to work in USWDP.

My work affiliation with USWDP would perhaps create mixed feelings for the respondents. Interviewing with me (as someone based in a foreign country) could motivate or discourage them to speak openly about their thoughts because in Afghan context politics, connections and affiliations to a specific circle of interests are very dominant. In other words, the way the academic staff or civil service employees communicate with those, who have affiliation with NGO and foreign institutions is much different than the way they communicate with local media and within their internal bureaucracy. Some young and very educated faculty members and students for example, spoke very openly and with a feeling, that such research (conducted by an Afghan receiving education in the U.S.) can benefit the country.

However, on the other hand some older respondents used caution and spoke less than I expected. Their reluctance could have many reasons. First, they do not want to jeopardize their roles and reputations for the fear that if the result of this research reflect negative outcomes at SREU, they will be disciplined by the MoHE and they may never want to take such a risk. Second, they are not willing to speak much because the type of questions that I asked and my research outcomes may undermine their performances. Third, my topic of research is not a very well developed concept so far in academic institutions in Afghanistan, therefore, their knowledge and information about quality and quality assurance is very limited. Finally, they do not have
much time and are not willing to give their time free to someone who is not meeting them in person. Virtual meeting versus meeting in person can be very different.

Such mixed impression of my role as a researcher for young and older faculty members can be a limitation but the major reason is perhaps that older faculty members have not had much exposure to new concepts such as quality and quality assurance and that they are not willing much to speak openly with foreign affiliated researchers and research institutions.

Limitations

I experienced several major challenges in this study.

First, whether senior or junior, young or old, educated or uneducated, Afghans do not like to talk about specific details for a given topic. Likewise, in this study, I faced the challenge of generalization while interviewing the respondents. The culture, the dominant values and traditions in the academic environment or any other environments make it difficult to ask for very specific details from the interviewees. This was perhaps the biggest challenge in this study. From my living and working experience in the Afghanistan context, I believe not speaking details and not speaking very specifically about a topic has several causes. First, people are not used to talking specifically and always tend to generalize everything during their conversations due to lack of richer information on topics. Second, the education system starting from kindergarten, pre-school, K12 to college does not include critical thinking and curiosity skills. Finally, people do not talk very specifically, especially in the government and other official environments to protect their job, their position and not to put their normal life at risk.

Second, conflict and unrest is still ongoing in Afghanistan and doing research in a conflict zone is not easy either for the researchers or for the respondents whether it is virtually or in person. Conflict and violence cause stress, abnormal living condition, scatter everyone’s mentality and thoughts, and force everyone to think and prioritize their survival and protection
instead of focusing on their civic and professional life. These can be major reasons why respondents in this study could not speak effectively and with details that are more specific about their perceptions, knowledge, and experience in the research interviews.

Third, the fact that, I was unable to go to the field due to the financial and logistical challenges and fear of not being reissued a U.S. visa, added to my challenge in data collection process, as it did not allow me to conduct observation along with qualitative interviews. In addition, because I had to contact the respondents through friends, colleagues and other networks, it took a lot of time and effort to reach each of them, and ask them for interviews. Moreover, finding their contact information, contacting them, explaining the topic and research purpose, convincing them that the study will not pose any challenge or threat for them was part of my efforts to make them understand the real purpose of my research. I would also add that interviewing people who are living in a conflict area and working in a highly politicized public institution and getting them to sign the Consent Forms for IRB purpose, was not an easy task for me.

Finally, lack of access to strong internet connection in Afghanistan, made everyone reluctant to do an interview via Viber or other social applications. In addition, because they do not have access to strong internet connection at their offices, they are not willing to spend personal internet data of their cell phones or home internet for research or interview purpose for someone else. The 9.5-hour time difference between U.S. (EST) and Kabul (+4:30 GMT) created an extra challenge to schedule the interviews. I had to stay up until midnight and in some cases until 3 to 4 in the morning to adjust the interview time with respondents’ office hours. Interviewing the respondents during their office hours and in their offices, was the best place for them because they had stronger internet connections there, or they were not willing to spend their
personal internet data at home. Most Afghans do not have strong internet connections at their homes anyway.

Any outcomes and analysis resulting from this study can be a start to understand and contribute to the conceptualization of quality and quality assurance in Afghanistan. Based on the available resources I possessed and the length of time that I had for this study, I feel that the amount of data which are collected can be just enough for the purpose of this study. However, further comprehensive studies are required. In Afghanistan, research and scholarship are very scarce to inform our initial understanding and provide a strong background for further research. We need to have more scholarship and research to find better sources, where to look, and what to explore for any given topic that we are interested in investigating.

Data Analysis

The data I collected for this case study includes several themes. My major emphasis was to explore how the respondents understand and define the concept of quality, quality assurance and how they understand and perceive three of the twelve standards in SREU context. Therefore, the analysis of responses focus on these concepts and the three standards. Before delving into the analysis, it is important to understand who the respondents are and what they do; especially, those who have direct involvement with quality assurance (QA) processes. This is important because their present roles and responsibilities can inform my analysis and discussions in which I aim to explore how the respondents perceive and understand the concepts of quality, QA and QA standards.

Respondents’ Roles and Responsibilities

Almost all of the seven respondents stated they have attended workshop(s) and other training programs about QA processes at SREU and at the MoHE. However, only three respondents (who are all faculty members too) said they have direct involvement in the quality
assurance process either at the SREU or at the MoHE level. One of these three, serves as the Quality Enhancement Board (QEB) member at the MoHE; the second, works for both the SREU QA unit and MoHE’s QA department; and the third one, now, works only for SREU QA unit. The duration of these three respondents’ involvement with QA process at the MoHE and SREU varies from few months to several years.

When asked about their roles and responsibilities as members of QA in these unit and department, it was obvious that their roles and responsibilities were slightly different. For example, one of them said:

*I help the Quality Enhancement Board (QEB) [at the MoHE] in reviewing bylaws and procedures developed by HEIs on QA processes. I am also engaged in the accreditation process for public and private institutions. In QEB, we work on bylaws and procedures and send them to the institutions where institutions are adjusting and planning their academic activities based on these bylaws and procedures.*

Roles and responsibilities of the other two respondents, who are directly involved in QA, are similar. They help SREU’s QA unit on part time basis as one of them said, “I do not have regular membership at SREU’s QA committee. However, I just sometime help with the [Self-Assessment] report writing”. The other’s roles and responsibilities as the manager and member of Institutional Quality Enhancement Unit (IQEU) at SREU is more about the collection of data, coordination and evaluation of the internal quality assurance processes. Furthermore, this respondent handles several other tasks and describes, “My job is to coordinate and work on academic programs…collect and summarize students’ feedback, evaluation results about teachers’ and departments’ performances and other academic activities.” Only one among the seven respondents was not well aware of the QA processes and standards and cited that the older and senior professors in their department had kept them busy mostly with the teaching activities and did not involve them much with administrative issues such quality assurance processes.
Methodology for Data Analysis

The analysis is presented for each question or a group of questions that were outlined in the interview protocol or a major theme. The analysis also follows a chronological order and sequence of the questions and major themes outlined in the interview protocol. Each section presents and discusses one important question, a group of question or a major theme.

In addition, each section starts with an introductory paragraph, and then followed by a set of excerpts that I retrieved from the responses for that relevant question or major theme.

Depending on the position and role of respondents, the length of their responses varies (contains more or less description). For each respondent, much of the response for each question, was either not relevant to the question or only part of the response addressed the topic. Therefore, I presented the most important part of a response for each question from each respondent, which I believe are more relevant to that question or a major theme, as an excerpt(s). Because there were seven respondents in this study, for most questions, a collection of seven excerpts is presented in each section. However, depending on the question and the role of the respondent, some answers were not relevant and therefore I did not included them. Some excerpts were too long, therefore I had to paraphrase or summarize them, and I put such summaries and paraphrases inside a bracket, e.g. [ABC…]. In addition, as a common principle in quoting, when others’ words needed little clarifications, I had to use my own words and I put my words inside the brackets.

The last part of each section includes my analysis and understanding from the excerpts and the overall study process where I compare, contrast, analyze, and link them to the main purpose of this paper, literature review and so on. My comments, analysis and understanding for each section are based on my study, work and personal life experience in the context. To facilitate the reading in this section, instead of using their names or the respondents’ position, or
their pronouns (he, she) for confidentiality purposes, I just refer to them as the first, second, third and so on excerpt. The number of excerpts do not necessarily represent the order of interviews and respondents.

I conducted all interviews in Dari language, and then translated and transcribed them into English. I did my best to translate respondents’ words as accurately into English as possible. I did not face much problem in finding the exact or most relevant vocabularies for their words in English; however, in some cases I used the closest English terms that made best sense according to the sentence and what respondents meant in local language.

Major Themes

Each section will start with the question asked in the interview.

What does quality in Higher Education mean to you?

In this study, respondents perceived the meaning of quality in higher education in a number of different ways. I sought to understand the meaning of quality through the lenses of different actors at SREU and I received the following responses:

*Before 2012, educators were thinking and imagining only about few concepts or ideas such as better teaching and better lecture notes….but in 2012, the MoHE set up “The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate” (QAAD). The QAAD then suggested a set of fundamental, effective, and systematic activities to the MoHE. It has developed a series of criteria, bylaws, and regulations…. Quality means students have access to standard books…. faculty members conduct standard research…when students, teachers, staff have access to a better quality services in the institution…. We can never compare Afghan universities with those in other countries. We can only compare the present status and condition of Afghan universities with their past status and condition.

When we talk about quality, these are competencies that we consider for a specific learning period where students need to acquire them. If these competencies are pre-determined and the study program are designed carefully, and a required set of criteria are considered, quality can enhance.

The discussion of quality concept reminds us to consider a series of national and international standards and [with the help of those standards we need] to move and to reach towards society development. We can consider quality as one of the criteria in Afghanistan’s societal development…. The curriculum, contents and
their sources used in education programs, and types of HE structure and the stakeholders in HE [can fall under the discussion of quality].

Quality is the enhancement of overall and foundational quality of every institution. Quality means institution strive to enhance itself in every way...to follow those 12 [QA] standards and assess campuses according to those standards.

Quality means [when] we offer higher education services to our society per accepted international, regional, and national standards in terms of both quality and quantity.

Quality means when students and employers are convinced with what students learn and what they offer in the job market. Our effort is student centered [and in order to improve quality] we need to support teachers, pay them better and give them enough time to better focus on their teaching...We also need to have better academic freedom and institutional autonomy.... especially financial autonomy.

Quality in Higher Education means to adjust all programs according to the needs of our current time and adopted standards for the higher education.

The meaning of quality from the perception of the study respondents suggests that different academic staff understand quality differently. Several noteworthy concepts are worth looking in these responses. The idea that comparing two or more institutions should not define quality for an institution and that only present and past situation of the same institution should be compared, can help us better define quality. The idea of comparing present and past situation of an institution, first suggested by the University Support and Workforce Development Program (USWDP) where I worked for few years. At USWDP, which is a five-year USAID funded project in Afghanistan, one of its technical program stream called Academic Quality and Planning (AQP) works with the MoHE’s QA directorate to improve quality assurance practices across Afghan higher education system. One of AQP’s recommendations is that the Afghan HEIs should not compare their institutions with other foreign or domestic institutions, but rather every institution should strive to achieve a set of pre-determined outcomes set by each institution for itself and focus more on how to apply good practices if they want to improve quality at the institutional level. This response comes from someone who has received QA training offered by
World Bank and USWDP. When an academic staff of SREU talks about QA standards and that it was introduced after 2012, it can infer that SREU and perhaps other public institutions have only been exposed to the concept of quality after 2010. It can also support our understanding that the idea “to compare an institution with its past” is relatively new and SREU’s academic staff have come to know about such ideas through QA training offered by donors. Note to mention that only one respondent pointed out to the idea of comparison while others did not mention or perhaps not well aware of it.

Most responses suggest that respondents connect the meaning of quality in HE to the inputs invested in an HEI. Respondents outlined inputs as the following: physical facilities (laboratories, classrooms, campus buildings, chairs in classrooms), human resources such as qualified faculty members with Master’s and PhDs, lessons’ quality, teaching plans, and the clarity of study programs for the faculties, departments, teachers and institution at large. In a developing context, where basic physical facilities and resources are much needed inputs are understandably a priority. Most responses suggest that inputs come as a prerequisite for talking about quality.

When an academic staff links the institution’s financial autonomy to the meaning of quality, it can support our understanding that due to lack of financial autonomy institutions are not able to find access to financial resource. Limited or lack of access to financial resources for an institution like SREU means that it depends heavily on a centralized system where it can only receive the amount of resources that are allocated by MoHE for them. Therefore, for a faculty member at SREU, financial autonomy is seen as a solution that increases their access to inputs, meaning improvement in quality.

Some responses fit under the first of five Green’s approaches, which I am suing as the theoretical framework for this study. For example, some respondents see quality as the
conformance to the national and international standards. Other respondents suggested general improvements in many academic and administrative components such as improvement in curriculum and better teaching.

Few respondents had different views about the meaning of quality. Pre-determined set of competencies for a learning period, for example, can be a different concept, which touches upon the learning process. Finally, the idea of student-centered approaches, students’ and employers’ satisfaction and better payment for teachers link the concept of quality both to the output and input respectively. The most important factors such as better payment for teachers can hugely affect the outputs of higher education institution.

I am concluding with an understanding that for SREU academic staff, who is experiencing the pressure of scarce resources, access to increased inputs such as physical facilities and an increase in intellectual resources (e.g. more PhD and Master’s faculty members), and better payment for teachers could be the most important issues when we talk about the meaning of quality. One way of access to increased inputs was seen as having a status of financial autonomy for their institution. Finally, they believe that quality means if SREU could adjust its activities with the national, regional and international standards.

Who should define quality in Higher Education?

Responses for this question were also varied but not as different as in the previous question. While most respondents stated a generic response and suggested a top-down approach, meaning that the MoHE should define quality for its HE institutions and then HEIs for its departments, a few suggested the bottom up approach. Below excerpts are the most important parts of these suggestions.

We need to define quality in a bottom-up fashion. A faculty member who teach a course should define quality... We do not have to wait for a top-down definition
for quality because if higher levels define quality [for a topic or course], it will not be easy for lower levels to understand that definition.

The definition [of quality] is the job of the educational institutions... It is MoHE’s responsibility to define quality by considering the national and international standards, through building [a] group of qualified and experienced experts. They should use the experience of developed and developing countries and in alignment of identified needs at the national level.... We can define the quality as a concept, but we need to define it per our societal needs, [and] our position in the regional and international community.

It is more belong to the Quality Assurance Commission, which is inside MoHE.

I think those who are directly or indirectly involve in the teaching and learning process should define [the quality]. It should include a chain of actors or people such as university teachers, students and most importantly, policy makers.... [and finally] both national and institutional level laws and regulations should define quality.

I think teachers are in the first step and university authorities in the second and Ministry is the third step....Ministry of Higher Education should define quality. First, the chancellor should know and aware of everything... the chancellors should have a definition of quality. Then deans and heads of department should have better awareness and know the definition of quality...Key people in Internal Quality Enhancement Unit (IQEU) should help us define quality.

In the first excerpt, the respondent clearly suggests that we need to have a definition for quality using a bottom-up approach. In excerpt four, the respondent suggests the similar (bottom-up) approach, but this respondent also suggests that, a range of actors should decide about such a definition. This suggestion is important because it includes multiple levels and different stakeholders, including the laws, regulations, and policy makers who creates such laws and policies. In excerpt five, the respondent first emphasizes the order of “who should define” first, second and third, but later the respondent contradicts this statement. This respondent do not have a clear idea, and suggests both top-down and bottom up approaches. Other respondents simply support the top-down approach.

I believe a particular party or stakeholder should not define quality as a general concept. Rather, as suggested in excerpt four, it is the job of all relevant parties and stakeholders to
contribute to the definition or operationalization of this concept. By operationalization, I mean, stakeholders in a HE system (teachers, deans, chancellors and officials in the MoHE) at different levels need to contribute and build a common understanding about the concept of quality that addresses a set of good practices. They should perceive operationalization of quality as how to work effectively on every aspect of their routines and every piece of their daily activities. They need to define good practices for themselves rather than adopting standards from external institutions. Such applicable practices should be defined for activities at each level at any HEIs (e.g. learning outcomes, program objectives, institutional vision, mission, teachers’ qualifications, academic programs, accountability, curriculum and the employability rate of graduates). The 12 standards that are adopted by the Afghan HE reflect these levels, activities and criteria but still the standards promote a sense of generalization or a “one size fit all” concept for all institutions.

Excerpts one and four state some potential suggestions that those who are in the learning (e.g. students) and teaching (e.g. faculty members) level can well contribute to the definition. However, teachers and students as the main stakeholders in this level cannot judge and explain what the important factors are in the definition of quality for them. Moreover, the contribution of dean, chancellor, and policy makers at large, especially, those who work in the Ministry of Education, and in the workforce development institutions (e.g. Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Labor), are significant. The role of these actors are equally important because actors in the education and economic institutions have information about what skills and knowledge does the country’s economic development need from its HE graduates. Officials from the Ministry of Education can suggest what type of skills and knowledge they require for their teachers at schools and so on.
Another interesting idea comes from excerpt four, where the respondents raise the importance of the fact that quality in higher education should be defined according to Afghan societal needs and its position in the regional and international arena. It would not be realistic to define quality for Afghan HEIs per quality standards adopted for its neighboring and regional countries as well as similar countries in other parts of the globe. If a country in the South America or Africa for example, has a similar economic status to Afghanistan, it is still not realistic to define quality of HE based on the standards and criteria adopted for that country because cultural, socioeconomic, political and topographic characteristics of that country might be significantly different from Afghanistan.

The main problem that I see in this section can be the very general nature of the question that I asked in the interview, as well as the general responses that the respondents provided. Because SREU is one of the specialized institutions in teacher training, the respondents did not mention anything about the involvement of other actors at the national level such as the Ministry of Education or current teachers’ from schools, school principals and others.

To conclude, first, it is important for SREU, the MoHE and other HEIs to think whether only defining quality can help, or it is also important to operationalize the concept of quality at each level for specific academic and administrative purposes. Second, before operationalizing the concept of quality, a chain of multiple actors needs to come together and define quality for one or several HEIs and they should not leave it only upon the students and teachers. In other words, the question that “who should define quality?” should not be left alone for one party – the educators or the students. However, it should be strategized with the involvement of the officials from the Ministry of Education, Economics and HR development policy makers, who better knows the country’s needs for highly educated human resource and the kind of skills the HE graduates should acquire.
What are the most important aspects of quality in higher education?

Respondents pointed out a range of aspects. It is not yet clear whether to call them aspect, factor or element but it is what the respondents think of. Almost each respondent outlines a different aspect of quality, except few of them who share a similar aspect – and that is teachers’ access to up-to-date knowledge and information. However, several respondents prioritize inputs over outputs as aspect(s) for quality improvement (at SREU and other HEIs). Structural issues, teachers’ continued professional development and less teaching burdens for example pointed out as other factors that can affect quality enhancement.

*Better research, better teaching, and better services [are the most important aspects for quality]. Therefore, whenever an institution work to improve these areas, it can have progress towards better quality.*

*We need to consider theoretical aspect of a course, a department or overall the institution, as well as, we need to consider its applicability and implementation aspects …My point is to consider both theoretical and practical aspects when we define and measure quality.*

*The most important aspect that affects the education quality in Afghanistan is its education structures. Quality is linked to the structure in an education system. Our academic structures, as well as administration structures, for example, at MoHE is not as per international structures and standards. Other common problems are with the people…Relations still outplays qualifications and we do not have right people for the right jobs…We have less qualified people who do not have enough academic and administrative capacity, but they control the system.*

*Many aspects have its own effect on the quality such as having good classrooms, equipment, etc….quality enhancement process should focus on how to keep the teachers’ knowledge and brain up to date….How they can use the teachers as the main medium for change in quality….[less burden on teachers to focus on quality and research]. We need to revise or upgrade the system in a way to offer opportunities for such teachers [older teachers and those who carry heavy teaching loads] to update their knowledge and information.*

*Teacher’s professional development, students’ feedback about their classes, academic freedom, financial autonomy and [financial resources] are important aspects of quality…. [Better payment for quality assurance members, teachers’ interest, motivation, and willingness with their jobs]. Some aspects that do not need financial resources…. [are]…. if a teacher better plan for teaching, go to the class on time, grade students’ homework, work with the students and do other*
better arrangements for the class. [Information and awareness for both the teachers and the students about the concept of quality and QA committee].

To have enough faculty members who have up-to-date knowledge and skill according to our current needs; to have appropriate infrastructures, equipment, and tools according to our current needs, to have enough budget to implement all program.

These excerpts suggest that respondents see better research, teaching and services, better education structure, theoretical and practical aspects, teachers’ professional development and financial autonomy and the availability of financial resources as the most important aspects of quality.

Responses also suggest that almost all respondents refer to inputs as the important aspects of quality. Overall, respondents emphasize significant increase for these inputs. A few important emerging patterns are noteworthy to discuss here.

In the first excerpt, the respondent states that better research, service and teaching can be aspects of quality, but can reaching to a better status or improvement in these aspects ensure better quality? On the other hand, what does the word “better” imply when it is used before the concepts such as services, research and teaching? Does the respondent mean better than the past or better than the present or what specific time and in what way? Improvement as a common practice can be one aspect of quality that every institution should strive to achieve on a daily basis. However, an institution may better first to define and explain to every member of the institution what improvement means, and what type of improvements are desired for our institution. The answers to these questions can be way out of the scope of this study because the generalization and other challenges that I talked about in the limitation part of the methodology section, limits researchers’ ability to elicit specific answers to such questions.

In excerpts four and six, the respondents again refer to the physical inputs such as classrooms and equipment, and financial resources. My experience from this study always
reminds me that a big idea that most of the academic staff have in their minds about quality at SREU is they mostly referred to physical inputs as the main component of quality improvement. This is what researchers in the future may need to consider when conducting research in Afghan institutions about any topics.

In excerpts five, six and again in four, the respondents raise teachers’ professional development and their access to up-to-date knowledge and information as the important aspects of quality. This can also fall under input because investment on teachers’ professional development requires financial resources. Other ideas, such as using the teachers as a medium of change and raising teachers’ salary are also considered as the important aspects of quality and can fall under input. However, this also requires further clarifications in how to use teachers as medium of change, and how to make sure that a raise in teachers’ payment can keep their motivation, interest and commitment to their jobs consistent. Medium of change is a strong idea and might be more affordable than other inputs to support the improvement of teaching quality. However, it needs to be well defined and integrated in teachers’ professional development programs and it should be considered as a tool for quality improvement.

The interesting ideas that raised in excerpt five such as “plan for teaching, go to the class on time, grade students’ homework” where the respondents said it doesn’t need much resources, can be worth to consider as an aspect of quality improvement. This can be true because such good teaching practices depend on teachers’ commitment and hard work and competencies, and not much depend on financial resources.

In excerpt three, the respondent referred to the education structure as a barrier, and linked quality to the structure such as academic and administrative structures. Other aspects such as the recruitment of less qualified people, academic freedom and lack of financial autonomy also pointed out as part of the structure, which are still part of the problem in the structure and were
linked to the aspect of quality. Nepotism or the hiring of friends, relatives, and people from one’s own ethnic group, village and province is a very dominant norm not only in HEIs but also in many Afghan public and private institutions. It is not easy to change this norm. To have a better understanding about these barriers and aspects, more targeted study is required. This study could only help to start an understanding about these aspects.

How do you assess the overall status of quality at SREU?

When the respondents were asked about how they assess the overall status of quality in terms of access to resources and general operational activities at SREU, most of them talked about the challenges and limited resources the institution faces. They also expressed their opinions about the improvements, and subjected them mainly to the availability of financial and physical resources (inputs). Most of them cited the lack of or limited amount of the physical resources and facilities as the main barriers for maintaining and improving the quality in teaching, learning and outcomes. Still few of them did talk about improvements in the quality of facilities and the services that SREU offers. To better understand and distinguish their positive views and the problems and challenges they outlined, I will first present excerpts of their positive statements followed by analysis for this part, and I will only present a summary of the most significant challenges they stated in the interviews at the end.

*If we compare the past and present situation at SREU, it had significant progress compare to the past.*

*When we teach a course or subject to students, it needs to be practical, applicable and students could use it in their life. It means when knowledge is changed or converted into skill, then quality can emerge there.*

*Better national and international standards can include better classrooms, new or updated contents, and a new system for the institutions.*

*I can say SREU is almost getting better in terms of access to classrooms, which means its problem is solved up to 70% in terms of its need for the classrooms....In terms of teaching and studying materials, it is somehow better than the past because some teachers published books.... In recent years, teaching has been*
improved much at SREU because several of our faculty members got their Master’s degrees.... The lessons that our faculty members deliver are better now in terms of both quality and content. Their teaching methods have been improved.... Master’s degree, plus better opportunity for teaching and learning plus better teaching and studying materials is all important factors in quality improvement.

In terms of teaching and teaching methodologies, I can somehow judge that SREU can be one of the best institution at the national level.... This young generation of teachers have brought some changes in their teaching styles and methodologies.

In terms of teaching methods, we are in good shape because most of the teachers at SREU took methodology courses and they mostly apply student’s center methods, they learn and deliver teaching through recent methods... Teaching materials are a bit better but not richer.

The most amount of positive comments appear in the excerpt four where the respondent talks about the several positive things that the SREU currently does. In addition to other good things, this respondent like others’ responses in the earlier section again refers to inputs such as more access to classrooms, the availability of better teaching and study materials such as textbooks, and finally an improvement in teaching and learning due to increased number of faculty members with Master’s degrees.

In excerpts five and six, the respondents suggest a similar pattern for the improvement of quality, in the form of improved teaching methodology. One of them refers to the application of new teaching methodology by young teachers, which can be an important implication for quality improvement in teaching for SREU or any other institutions due to two reasons. First, young teachers can have access and use technology where they can conduct better research, find and apply new teaching methods from the resources that are available online from institutions around the world. Second, as stated by respondent in excerpt 4, some young faculty members received their Master’s degree both in and out of Afghanistan, therefore, their teaching style and methodology are better because they try to follow modern teaching methodologies.
The present and past comparison of SREU, which raised once again in the first excerpt, can be important because institutions’ mission, goals, context and academic programs that they offer for their target society can be greatly different from one context to another. Therefore, it cannot much help to compare two institutions that are different in terms of factors that I just mentioned. Nevertheless, if an institution’s present and past performances and outcomes are measured, then it may give a better picture about the overall improvement in a specific aspect of that institution during a specific time.

Finally, a respondent in excerpt two raises another interesting fact in this discussion. Unless a student can convert the knowledge he/she learns throughout their academic experience into skill and practically utilize it in the workplace, quality cannot be important part of higher education. Learning is not only about completing a degree requirement but it is also, about how a student and employer can benefit from students’ knowledge and skill. This discussion has important implications for SREU or any institutions and their teachers to focus on learning quality rather than focusing a lot on inputs. It is important to have better classes, enough time for teachers, library with hundreds of books and access to technology, but also it is important for SREU to focus how they can effectively utilize the current available resources to provide the best learning experience for their students if they have concern about quality.

**Key challenges and barriers at SREU that hinder quality improvement**

All respondents believe that there are significant barriers and challenges that hinder the improvement of quality at SREU in many ways. Most of these challenges are related to inputs such as lack of proper classrooms and other physical resources. Next, structural issues such as problems in bylaws that give more power to full professors and the exercise of old management practices by these professors, and finally the centralized system where most decisions are made at the MoHE are highlighted as key challenges. To save time and space, I paraphrased and
presented a summary of these challenges, however, these are all respondents’ words and ideas.

Many respondents repeated several challenges (e.g. lack of classrooms); therefore, I did not include them in each excerpt.

The MoHE is not paying enough attention to SREU compare to other public universities and SREU is seen as the sixth finger. SREU is way under-resourced and poor in terms of physical facilities (e.g. labs, library). For 33 departments, we have only three labs, which is significantly few, and are in poor condition. SREU’s library can be only enough for a department not for the entire institution.

We do not have better classrooms, chairs and desks. Our students still study in the hallways; we do not have projectors, LCDs for our classrooms that affects teaching and learning. Sometimes SREU’s management is a barrier (e.g., they create barrier when a young faculty members would like to publish). Our study materials are limited and our academic sources are not rich and authentic. Teaching and learning methods are not well aligned. QA development process moves slowly.

We do not have much space for students’ study area. Students’ access to internet is very limited or not exist at all. Our faculty members do not have the opportunity to do their PhDs and our departments perform less research than other public institutions. Faculty members need continued capacity building to improve their teaching skills. They need to get training to use lab equipment because some lab equipment comes new, get out of use, and disposed in a new condition because teachers and lab staff do not have the proper skill to utilize them.

SREU has poor status in terms of physical resources like classrooms. The fundamental problem is that the core political power at our institution is with older generation who think and treat others in a traditional way and follow old ideas.

We have problems with teaching materials. MoHE send us low graded students from entrance examinations (Kankor) and they think Education University [Education as a field of study] is not that important. Student-Teacher ratio is a big problem at SREU. Due to overwhelming number of students, teachers cannot properly grade students’ homework or give feedback to students’ projects.

The QA standards set by the MoHE cannot be met not only by SREU but also by all other public institutions. We cannot follow and apply those standards due to lack of resources such as classrooms, study materials, laboratories and lab equipment.

In above excerpts, in addition to inputs that most respondents repeatedly stated them as key challenges for SREU, several other challenges were also raised and are worth mentioning.
here. Bureaucracy and following old management approaches were raised as important challenges, especially, by younger respondents. The challenge of a centralized system still dominantes in Afghanistan where one person at the top maintains the power and subordinates have to follow as directed from the leader or they will not get promoted. In SREU case for example, a couple of young faculty members, stated that junior faculty members have to obey full professors and follow their management approaches because junior professors always need approval of full professors for academic promotions and publishing.

Two other important challenges can have important implications for quality at SREU – referral of low-quality students and that MoHE sends more students than SREU’s physical space can handle. These two challenges can directly affect the quality of teaching, learning and finally overall outcome of SREU as an HEI. It can be due to several reasons.

First, low-quality students who come through Kankor\(^3\) examination means they did not perform well at school and will therefore require more attention and work from the teachers at SREU. More work and attention with low graded students still does not guarantee that these students will perform well in university because they are not ready for academic work in a four-year degree program. This can also mean learning will not happen as would be expected from a traditional college student with high or average scores in their school years. Finally, this can also mean SREU does not produce better-prepared students who have learned enough to serve better in the workforce, e.g. as teachers in the primary and secondary schools.

Second, more students than SREU could absorb and have physical space for, or have enough teachers for can also affect teaching and learning quality. As one respondent argued, a higher student teacher ratio limits teachers’ time to give feedback for students’ projects and homework. The lack of space can reduce the motivation of teachers and students to come to class

\(^3\) National Entry Examinations into Public Higher Education Institutions
and that learning and teaching does not happen in an uncomfortable space. These factors can affect both teachers’ and students’ success.

The fact that most respondents refer to the lack of resources, or if we call resources as inputs, cannot always help SREU to cite it as a challenge. Yes, limited physical structures or other resources can be a challenge but such inputs were always seen as the responsibility of others to provide. It is important to point out that the culture of blaming others and putting the burden on others (e.g. institutional leadership, MoHE leadership and lack of resources) is easy but what can faculty members do to improve quality with the available resources as part of their responsibility, is often not highlighted. However, only few of them said that teachers should start quality improvement by improving their teaching plans, by being better prepared for the classes, giving timely feedback to the students, or by upgrading their knowledge and teaching methodology according to the current needs.

The Quality Assurance Standards

All except one respondent were aware of the 12 Quality Assurance Standards (QASs) that the MoHE developed and adopted them in a bid to improve quality assurance for all Afghan higher education system around 2012.

The 12 standards are divided into 52 criteria (See Appendix I). The number of criteria under each standard varies between three criteria (standards 10 &11) to seven criteria (standard 5). I chose to use only the first three of the 12 standards for this study. Each of the first two standards have four criteria while the third standard has five criteria. A small clarification needs to go here because the word “Standard”, “Criterion” and then the “Standards” and “Criteria” are used interchangeably in the MoHE’s documents and in the literature that I used for this thesis.

The main reasons for choosing the three standards were, first, my purpose for the study was to understand the concept of quality and how quality is understood at SREU and not the
meaning and application of all the 12 standards. The MoHE developed the 12 standards as a national framework for quality enhancement, so selection of standards other than the first three, could not make any difference because of all of them address aspects of quality and are meant to conform institutional activities to each of these standards. Second, the time constraint both for me and for the respondents was a factor. Third, it would take too long to ask about all 12 standards for a thesis project at this scale. Finally, I chose the first three standards out of 12, because the first three standards present a general picture of what an institution should do and that it covers the key areas that an institution should first address when trying to improve quality.

To understand better the status and application of the three standards by SREU, I asked the respondents three questions about each standard. For example, for the first standard – “Mission and Purpose” – I asked the following three questions:

What does Mission and Purpose mean to you?
Do you think Mission and Purpose is a relevant standard for SREU?
What could SREU do to meet the Mission and Purpose standard?

A similar set of questions was used for the second – “Governance and Administration” – and third standard – “Academic programs” – with by replacing the name of each.

Analysis for each standard will start with the actual text of the standard. Next, following the above sequence of questions, a summary of key ideas in response to each question is presented, followed by key excerpts from the responses for each question and then an analysis of those excerpts is presented.

**Standard 1: Mission and Purpose**

The text of the first standard is:

**Standard 1 - Mission and Purpose:** The Institution’s mission and purpose is appropriate to higher education, defines the distinctive character of the institution/faculty and its goals, addresses the needs of the society, gives directions to the activities of the institution/faculty, and provides direction for improving the institution’s effectiveness.
What does *Mission and Purpose* mean to you?

Before discussing responses to this question, it is worth mentioning that the MoHE translated the terms “Purpose” and “Goal” as the same term in Dari “*Hadaf*”; therefore, respondents do not distinguish between these two terms and they are used interchangeably. Another reason can be that the MoHE also used it as “Goal” to make it more common in the official documents it disseminates to the universities.

Almost all respondents have had a good understanding about the meaning of *Mission and Purpose* for an institution and in this case for SREU. Respondents referred to a number of useful and relevant characteristics that an institution should have and include in its mission and purpose. The most common characteristic that several respondents agree with is the societal needs that should be included in the mission and purpose of an institution. Two respondents emphasize that having *Mission and Purpose* for an institution are “must” and “fundamental”. One respondent has positive view but raises concern about the applicability or practicality of the standard for SREU. The following set of excerpts are highlights of respondents understanding about the meaning of this standard.

*Every institution must have a mission and purpose. The purpose should have approval [of all stakeholders] and be clear to the public. Institutional purpose is an introductory face of that institution and its distinctive characteristic that all activities can be directed towards that purpose.*

*Well, by having clear purpose and mission, an institution finds its position in the society, and second its work path and line of mission becomes clear.*

*Mission and purpose can be one of the fundamental standards for any institution This standard tells whether the institution’s mission is according to the needs of the society.*

*I guess these are good concepts and terms used in this standard [Mission and Purpose] but if we look at it in practice, they are not much practical.*

*This standard is mainly connects the university’s strategic plan with the quality assurance.*
I think SREU does well with this standard; however, we do have our problems. [Corruption and lack of coordination from MoE with SREU cited as the major ones].

It means whether the institution’s purpose is clear or not and that it meets the needs of our society or not. That whether the institution’s mission and purpose is according to the MoHE’s laws and regulations

Overall, respondents seem to have good understanding about this standard and they link the mission and purpose to important characteristics that an institution should have. The fact that every institution should have a mission statement and a purpose for its existence is obviously necessary but most important is its relevancy and clarity in the context where it operates and for the target audience that it serves. Several respondents referred to the importance of this standard for the societal needs, while others also pointed out the importance of this standard to guide program activities internally within the institution. The important point, which I believe was more useful and few respondents emphasized is that a mission and purpose should be very clear. Clarity is important because it can be understandable both for internal and external audience to an institution. Although, several respondents generically mentioned “societal needs”, it was not explicitly mentioned by anyone how the mission and purpose should consider societal needs in a concise, clear, relevant and comprehensive way.

A respondent raised concern about the applicability of this standard. This should remind the SREU leaders and perhaps the MoHE leaders to consider the reality of Afghan society and applicability of such standards before adopting them. It is important that the institution’s mission and purpose should be concise, clear, and most importantly relevant because it can facilitate its interpretation both inside and out of the institution for the relevant stakeholders and actors. Clear and concise mission statement can also help to be more applicable. Faculty members, departments, staff can plan, and implement their activities per a clear and relevant mission (as stated by several respondents). On the other hand, it can shape the expectations of external
stakeholders (e.g. students’ parents, MoE, and others) about SREU’s roles and position in the society, and most importantly how much and to what extent it can deliver to the students and society considering its limited resources.

Do you think Mission and Purpose is a relevant standard for SREU?

Almost all respondents agree about the relevancy of this standard for SREU. Most respondents, meanwhile, raised the importance of having goal(s) for an institution. Three respondents specifically pointed to the “training professional and expert teachers” as SREU’s goal and linked the importance of mission and purpose to this goal. Another respondent argued that having certain goals can help the institution measure its work. However, the other respondent see the relevancy of this standard to SREU as a big policy discussion. Below are highlights of respondents’ statements:

Yes, [it is relevant] because when we talk about SREU’s goal and mission, we should remind ourselves to consider the professional training of teachers [as our goals and mission] because it can help SREU to meet its goals.

Yes, of course it is applicable. One of the reason that can help an academic institution to measure its works is to have certain goals.

Yes, I guess it is usable because SREU’s mission is to train professional teachers

I think it is a general standard, and it can incite a bigger policy discussion.

It is good that all respondents understand the importance of this standard’s relevancy to SREU’s overall goal because most of them referred to the goal of “teacher training” as a relevant character for this standard. Faculty members and staff at any department of any institutions need to understand and remind themselves of the overall goal and mission of that institution.

Respondents firmly agreed on the relevance of this standard with the SREU’s goals and it was easy for them to connect this and consider it as a relevant standard for SREU. Since mission and purpose are usually broader statements for any institution, it can be easy to understand, but it is important that institutional members can have a very clear interpretation about their institutional
mission and purpose. It is the leaders’ job in an institution to comply with MoHE’s standards and develop further guidance and instruction to familiarize its staff and faculty members about relevancy of this and each standard according to their institutional context. More importantly, this and every other standards need to have clear reflection in institutional strategic plans and implementation plans at every level (e.g. departments and faculties). Only the idea of “teachers training” cannot be enough to have in mind as a purpose or goal.

What could SREU do to meet the Mission and Purpose standard?

Respondents offered mixed suggestions, which are both relevant and not. Few linked a better application of this standard to external factors such as MoHE’s regulations and the alignment of government plans for hiring graduates from an institution like SREU. I do not see them as suggestions to improve the implementation of SREU’s mission and purpose; however, these suggestions contribute to the improvement of ongoing activities and programs under the umbrella of SREU’s mission and purpose. For example, suggestions about the structural issues, curriculum revision, and review of programs were offered.

_SREU needs a careful and well-planned research and then we need to revise and upgrade our curriculums accordingly._

_Two issues: Structural issue by MoHE hinders the implementation of this standard (e.g., regulations allows under-qualified people to serve in leadership roles). SREU should create a functional quality assurance committee…and hire capable persons who could understand and develop overall goals and strategies for SREU and QA committee._

_It depends on government too...One of the most important thing is that government needs to pay more attention and do better planning [to hire graduates according to their field of study]._

_They should figure out the needs and clarify what the society, teachers and students want from SREU._

_We need to review our program and our institution strengthen its coordination with the MoHE and establish relations with MoE. We need to do curriculum review and other initiative. We plan to do these because they affect the quality._
A few of these suggestions, however, do offer meaningful ideas for SREU to improve not only the implementation of this standard but also other standards. For example, the creation of a functional quality assurance committee and a review in MoHE’s regulation to allow only the recruitment of highly qualified people seems more relevant. A mission and purpose may suggest not only review of programs but also review of structural issues and bylaws to allow adjustments of goals and objectives per the current needs.

A more important suggestion was perhaps to first clarify what are our societal needs and what SREU stakeholders (teachers, students) expect from SREU’s mission and purpose. If we look into the actual wording of standard one, it also include the relevancy of the institutional mission and purpose to the society’s needs. Reviewing and improving of programs, which are also included in the actual standard, were pointed out by some respondents.

This standard is clear but in order to provide better guidance for SREU or any other institutions, it should emphasize the fact that a mission and purpose for each institution should be developed according to the needs of its graduates. A standard for mission and purpose should encourage an institution to consistently review and adjust institutional goals per societal needs in a specific time say every five years or when needed.

Standard 2: Governance and Administration

Here is the actual text of the standard two.

Standard II - Governance and Administration: The governance and administrative system is designed in a way to facilitate achievement of the mission and goals, encourage teaching, research, and service, encourage participation in the appropriate levels of governance, define the authority of each clearly, promote accountability and transparency, and promote gender equity as well as ensure fairness. The institution has a full time chief executive officer whose primary or full-time responsibility is to the institution.
What does Governance and Administration mean to you?

In response to this question, several respondents linked the meaning of government and administration mainly to accountability, transparency, coordination, fairness and equality.

Respondents pointed out to the several aspects of leadership and institutional accountability.

The institutional leadership’s sole responsibility is to serve in the institution. It has to exercise transparency….[Like] it should keep everyone informed about institution’s budget and income, and equally distribute resources and opportunities.

Administration has the key role in achieving mission and goals for the institution. Meanwhile, it is responsible to coordinate activities within the institution.

An institution is successful when it has sound leadership that could treat all people equally, where necessary support the subordinates; and where not, they should prevent mistakes. [Good Leadership] considers competency and qualifications in hiring; set up better connection between the institution and people, between the institution and the ministry. It can support faculty development by providing opportunities for more trainings, workshops and overseas scholarships.

I think it is a comprehensive standard. For me it means that the institution’s leader distributes the services and resources equally, it should also fairly distribute the power and authorities.

I think this standard tells more about the structure and key successes of the university that it should be more transparent and have honest and accountable administrative staff.

It means do the institution work according to its mission and purpose…focus on quality research…consider transparency and accountability….[whether it has] organized staff and database…implement its activities per institutional strategies.

Respondents’ emphasis of leadership and institutional transparency and accountability reveals that poor governance and administrative practices still continue and are part of routine performances at the leadership level and overall at the institutional level.

Respondents’ responses can also imply they have concerns about the lack of fair and equal distribution of resources, unfairness in hiring, and poor coordination between SREU and other institutions, especially, with the MoHE.

Structural issues was also raised in these responses but as pointed earlier almost all respondents paid more attention to the accountability, transparency and fairness and they also
linked everything else like resource distribution, structural issues, staff promotions, power and authority distribution to the transparency and accountability issues. It is easy to consistently talk about lack of transparency, but it is also important that the respondents could point out the importance of faculty members and other actors’ responsibility within the institution that how they could contribute to promote transparency and help the leaders in keeping transparency, instead of put all responsibility on the leadership.

**Do you think Governance and Administration is a relevant standard for SREU?**

Most respondents agree this standard is relevant and can be applicable for SREU; however, they interpreted such relevancy to some activities like academic performances (e.g. better research and better teaching), resources and authority within SREU.

*Yes, once we could direct our activities towards achieving our goals, it can help us understand how better we tried, and how much misdirection we experienced.*

*This standard is not only much applicable and followed by SREU but it also followed by all other institution.*

*Yes, however, with the available resources and formal authority that SREU has for itself, I do not think that it will be able to meet and follow this standard in a complete manner. Its implementation depends on better teaching, better research, and services and better fairness and justice.*

*Yes, but it is applicable more for some and less for other departments. It is because faculty members serve in different roles and do multiple tasks at the same time.*

*SREU should find the most capable human resources and capacities within this institution and use each capacity per their capability and experience, not per their academic ranking. I believe SREU should seriously use the right capacity, knowledge, and resource in the right time and places. In the long-term, they must revise the bylaws and bring changes to the authority and responsibilities of teachers per their abilities.*

The important idea included in the last excerpt in this set of responses, which suggests a different approach for SREU than earlier responses. The identification of right human capacity for the right job is certainly important for better governance and administration everywhere. The idea once again raises the importance of merit recruitments. Nepotism, and hiring based on
relationships of any kind is a huge problem for Afghanistan. It is endemic and has always remain as a huge concern for Afghan citizens not only in an academic institution like SREU but for the whole country.

Resources, which again highlights the discussion over inputs, was connected to the better application of this standard in the third excerpt. Most respondents throughout this study linked the implementation of standards to the availability of resources. It again emphasis that implementation of all sorts depends on the availability of resources and their equal distribution. The connection between the availability of resources and the implementation of standards can be an important topic for further research.

Limited power at the institutional level was raised as another important concern. It again implies that a centralized higher education system affects the implementation and decision making potential at SREU and perhaps in other institutions too. It means SREU’s limited authority is a challenge for the institution to follow this standard.

Finally, the engagement of faculty members in multiple activities, was raised as another important concern that affects the implementation of this standard. It implies that the more involvement of faculty members in multiple tasks, the less will be the chance to improve governance and administration at SREU. Less extracurricular tasks (non-teaching tasks) and on the other hand, extra academic development for the faculty members was emphasized in multiple responses. It implies most faculty members at SREU do not have enough opportunity to engage in non-teaching activities across the institution because tasks, such as memberships in commissions, affect their primary roles as teachers and thus overall quality of teaching and learning at SREU. Finally, administrative tasks for teachers are not helpful because teachers are not administrators, nor do they receive any training in administration to effectively perform such tasks.
What could SREU do to meet the Governance and Administration standard?

Respondents once again highlighted the importance of recruiting qualified people for the leadership positions and they linked the successful implementation of this standard to the recruitment of qualified people. Faithfulness, qualified administrators, merit-based practices, competency, and professional development are among key concepts that the respondents referred to and linked them to a better governance and administration for SREU.

*If [this standard better] implemented, it means university leadership will be busy with activities within the university, the leadership will stay in university, and we can find them and discuss our problem.*

*One of the better way to apply and follow this standard is to give the right job to the right person at SREU. If we have to reach to good governance and administration standard, we need to have professional and expert administrators as well as these administrators must be faithful.*

*First, SREU is obliged to obtain proper learning and teaching resources in coordination with the MoHE. Second, SREU must strive to support research at campus level and faculty level. Third, SREU should support faculty development programs.*

*SREU should consider merit-based practices, consider fairness, be very careful in the choice and recruitment of people, and keep away from discrimination. They should offer more opportunities for faculty’s growth and professional development.*

*I think SREU should identify better and competent people who are qualified in every way, and assign them in the senior positions.*

These excerpts suggest clear evidences that if SREU has to meet this standard, it should have qualified leaders. Respondents’ perceptions about the governance and administration mostly reflect the qualification of people and the recruitment of the right people for the right positions, most importantly in the leadership positions. It can again infer that SREU, like any other academic and non-academic institutions in Afghanistan suffers from incompetent and under-qualified leaders who currently control important positions. This can be true to some extent, but traditionally in Afghanistan or maybe elsewhere, it is also part of the culture and
human nature that if someone does not have important role in an institution, it is likely she/he is unhappy with the existing leadership.

The first excerpt points an important aspect. It is a common practice in Afghanistan that leaders and key people who should be present in their offices, are often not there. This can imply that if key personnel always present in their offices, they can contribute to better governance or can improve administrative performances. This issue can be again related to the burden of tasks that each academic staff carry. Multiple tasks mean engagement in different roles and in different offices, which limit key personnel’s presence (e.g. chancellor, vice-chancellors) in their first office, and at the end affect the overall institutional performance, especially at leadership level.

Third excerpt outlines specific suggestions for better governance and administration, which again can fall under inputs. However, the promotion of research culture and a support for faculty development can be included in the long-term programs which sometimes may not require huge costs comparing to the construction of buildings. For example, buying books for the libraries and subscribing for permanent memberships in online-journals, which is a one-time investment, can support research and faculty development in the long term.

**Standard 3: Academic Programs**

Finally, I present below the text of standard three.

**Standard III - Academic Programs**: Academic programs are consistent with the institution’s mission. The institution works to assess student learning, regularly reviews programs, strives to develop partnerships with other institutions, and works systematically to improve academic programs. Undergraduate programs are at the appropriate level and graduate programs (where they exist) are appropriate and prepare graduates to operate in a competitive global environment.

What does Academic Programs mean to you?

The following excerpts suggest that most respondents have a good understanding about what academic programs means. However, except the first excerpt, all other responses suggest a
slightly different understanding about the types of academic programs that the respondents know of. In the second excerpt, a respondent emphasizes the consistency of academic programs at each level and the coordination between different levels in the institution.

*Like other HEIs, SREU’s focus and mission falls around four types of academic activities: research, teaching, service delivery and publishing.*

*This standard tells about coordination, cooperation, and regulation in academic activities. I mean coordination at all levels including departmental level, faculty level [and] institutional level. [It also tells] about degree, programs such as bachelors should have integration and coordination across the institution in terms of curriculum, goals, philosophy, and other characteristics. In addition, these programs should have consistency with the master programs. Overall, these programs and systems should match with the international standards and programs.*

*Academic programs can include faculty research, their publishing and authorship. However, academic programs are mainly about having bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Institution should graduate students according to the needs in the job market and schools are the job market for SREU’s graduates.*

*It means we need to ensure that whether all academic programs including the curriculum, study materials, academic and research articles, published books, academic conferences and seminars, are at an appropriate level.*

*All academic activities in institutions can fall under academic programs. Quality teaching, research, academic conference, and seminars at institutions, bachelor degree programs, and master degree programs can all fall under academic programs.*

The first excerpt, which classifies academic programs as “research, teaching, service delivery and publishing”, can give a simple list of academic programs. However, this list misses a giant part of the academic programs in the bigger picture, which was mentioned by other respondents, and we usually call them degree programs – Bachelors, Master’s, Associate Degree programs. Moreover, academic conferences and seminars can also fall under academic programs. What respondents do not mention are exchange programs, academic partnerships, and a range of other various programs that offer short-term and long-term training for both student and faculty development. For example, soft skill training for students (e.g. writing a resume). Lastly, review of the degree programs, curricula, course contents, and training materials for student and faculty
development, can also be considered as part of this standard, however, none of the respondents mentioned them.

The last excerpt suggests a general classification of academic programs where the respondent argues that all activities in an academic institution can fall under the academic programs. I believe this is true to some extent, because any academic institutions is mainly operating to deliver academic services for students, teachers and the society as a whole. Therefore, apart from the administrative and procurement activities of an institution, all other activities can fall under academic programs.

The fourth excerpt presents a direct response to the question for this section. In addition to mentioning several important items that should fall under the academic programs, this respondent also points to the level of appropriateness of these programs for SREU. The phrase “level of appropriateness” is important because it reminds us again that quality should be seen as the appropriateness of the academic programs to the institution, and NOT as the comparison of academic programs between institutions.

Finally, excerpt two presents a useful point, which emphasizes the importance of coordination and consistency among the academic programs in an institution. The relevance of degree programs with the job market should not only be an essential goal for SREU but for all other Afghan HEIs if Afghanistan has to build its economy through college-educated workforce. The above set of excerpts suggest that almost all respondents know what this standard states and the types of academic programs.

Do you think Academic Programs is a relevant standard for SREU?

Responses for this question suggest that some respondents agree with the relevancy of this standard for SREU and they support their comments with reasons. However, others present
their agreements in a different way and still point to the problems and challenges rather than the issue of relevancy.

In every university, standards and criteria are established and followed to meet certain goals. However, in Afghanistan none of these standards is rigorously implemented due to many problems. SREU does try to follow and meet those standards and it was useful.

Yes, it can be used because they work on this. Despite limited resources, limited infrastructures and all other limitations, faculty members, departments and Faculties across the campus trying hard and working hard to use their time effectively [to improve the quality of academic programs].

Every university should implement financial autonomy and function as a financially independent institution and start partnerships with well-known HEIs around the world.

Some faculty members, who got their master’s degrees from SREU, are familiar with the academic programs and these standards and consider them, but some do not. Yes, they use it but its usage is very low so if we score, it will get one and half out of five.

This can be a good standard but people who apply and then measure quality per the standard are not reliable for me. I do not trust because applying and measuring such standards needs a broader vision, a lot of study and research.

Yes, I think and we worked for this during the past 6 years.

Yes, like other standards, it is applicable and relevant for SREU.

Excerpt one, two and three present an agreement about the standard’s relevancy to SREU but they also highlight the poor implementation, limited access to resources and governance issue e.g. financial autonomy as a challenge to the relevancy of this standard. Financial autonomy is perhaps the major challenge not only for SREU but also for all other HEIs in Afghanistan. It means if SREU could have financial autonomy that could generate income. With enough resources, SREU, for example, could invest more in academic programs and strive more to improve their quality.

Respondents in excerpt three and four show their agreement about such relevancy; however, they talk about their doubts and subject the better implementation of this standard to the qualifications of the faculty members and transparency in this institution. This gives us a
different perception, means the relevancy and implementation of the academic programs not only depend on inputs but also depend on highly educated faculty members who can also exercise transparency. More qualified faculty members with PhD and Master’s degree can enhance the overall quality of their academic and non-academic activities in an institution, which at the end can result into improvements in academic programs and would meet the criteria stated in this standard.

What could SREU do to meet the Academic Programs standard?

To meet this standard, respondents pointed to a variety of issues and presented suggestions and solutions for them such as improvements in students’ assessment mechanisms, curriculum review, translation improvement of program materials, especially for master’s degree programs, implementation of financial autonomy, tightening control over the implementation of this and other standards and need assessment to name a few.

SREU has three master degree programs (Education, TESOL\(^4\) and Education Leadership) and their quality is quite higher compare to master programs in Kabul University. However, it still have problems like the translation quality of the resources and limited academic resources for each program. We have so much problems in undergraduate programs.

The assessment mechanisms at SREU need to be reviewed. SREU should design proper assessment and testing mechanisms to measure students’ learning outcome and progresses. It should set up a curriculum review committee to review all curriculum and studying materials every three years at least. It should set up learning outcomes and goals per the societal needs. Financial autonomy is very important for the universities.

Leaders at SREU should tight control over the application of these standards. They should conduct regular workshops and seminars to increase information of the ordinary faculty members about these standards.

It is the university’s leadership and senior staff job to present these problems to the MoHE and then together with the MoHE find solutions. All teachers especially the member of the QA committee and subcommittees should work together to apply all the criteria at university level.

The university should conduct needs assessment. Then it should adjust itself according to the needs and expectations of the current time and society.

\(^4\) Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
The second excerpt raises a very important issue, which is not discussed by other respondents in this study – assessment of students and learning outcomes. A major goal of any academic program is learning. Student learning should always be the core element of academic programs because all programs and activities aim to produce graduates at the end who learned per the requirement of a degree program. It is faculty members’ primary responsibility to assess students’ learning outcomes regularly. Learners’ assessment can well inform and can well contribute to the quality improvement of academic programs. Some respondents at the beginning of this study talked about the importance of teachers in defining quality. One way to improve quality in a bottom-up approach is to measure students’ learning outcome and it is a bigger responsibility of teachers to carry out transparent and professional outcome assessment in the classroom.

The second excerpt also emphasizes the importance of review, which is a valuable activity to improve quality at any level in an institution. Review for any academic activity can be essential because global knowledge as well economic demands for a country like Afghanistan are rapidly changing and progressing day after another. A review mechanism, which is also part of this standard, is a much-needed part of an institution to make sure that based on its available resources, the institution updates the contents of its academic programs (curriculum, course materials, etc.) to meet the current needs of society. Needs assessment, which was referred to in excerpt five can also be a function of a review system in an institution.

Tight control over the implementation of this and other standards also raised as an important issue. For tight control, both the contribution of the institutional leaders and faculty members are key. Standards can be meaningful when an institution could take positive advantage of them. Standards can be useful when an institution develop detailed and clear action steps for the implementation of such standards and more importantly if the leadership and senior staff
could show enough commitment and act decisively to implement those action steps. In a third-world country like Afghanistan, and in this case an academic institution like SREU where resources are very limited and government has many other priorities, institutional leaders would always cite the limited resources as their number one reason for their inability to implement these standards. Leaders need to keep their extended focus on how they can use the current resources instead of waiting to find access for enough resources. For the institutional leaders, faculty members and administrators, taking personal responsibility for doing something, commitment, and honesty together with other self-motivational factors such as love for serving the young generation of your country, are much needed ethical values that can contribute to the implementation of these standards.

**Conclusion for Standards**

In this study, I found that most respondents were aware of the 12 standards. While a few of them do not work with quality assurance committees or do not directly deal with the 12 standards, most of them do, especially, those who are members of institutional quality assurance (QA) unit and MoHE’s QA board. Although respondents show good awareness and understanding about the standards, for SREU or any other HEI’s academic staff, further understanding from the standards is as important as their implementation. Respondents’ understanding about the three standards suggest that both the MoHE and the SREU need to create further guidelines and interpret each standard more clearly to the universities. This is important because most respondents think when adapted these standards, the available resources and performance capacities at each university were not considered. Once again, respondents link the better implementation of these resource to more inputs. Clearer guidelines and interpretation are needed for the standards so that both MoHE and the HEIs fully understand what they mean.
The analysis of the three standards can also offer a big picture about the applicability and relevancy of these standards for SREU. To better test and understand such relevancy and applicability, a rigorous and detailed study can help. For in-depth understanding of these standards, regular annual review can also be a good option both for the SREU and for the Quality Enhancement Authorities in the Ministry of Higher Education. My understanding from the review of the applicability and relevancy of a standard is that before conducting such a research, one needs to learn first, how much resource was available for the implementation of those standards. We also need to know whether the standards were developed per realities and available resources in a system, or they are blindly adopted from foreign systems just to show to the stakeholders in a system and the society that here, we have standards and we are implementing them. If the later rhetoric is followed, it would be a major mistake and loss of time and resources for a higher education system.

**Discussion**

**Linking Findings to Existing Literature**

In this section, the main issue that I discuss is to understand how the findings from the study align with concepts presented in the literature.

To find a clear connection between the findings from the data analysis and the literature, I chose to follow the five approaches presented by Green (1994). Green’s five approaches can help structuring and connecting the findings from this study with the existing knowledge. If I consider the five approaches as benchmarks to understand respondents’ perception about the concept of quality and QA, it can help to see to what extent SREU understands and follows the meaning of quality, QA practices and the applicability of the three QA standards.
Quality as conformance to standards

Many respondents believe conformance to standards is very important, but they are not clear on how the standards are defined or implemented. Some respondents believe when the MoHE develops such standards for QA process, they should conform-to the available resources, the financial autonomy and the bureaucratic authority that SREU realistically has. The biggest issue that the respondents did not comment on was how SREU should conform its activities to a standard that is designed to fit all HEIs in Afghanistan. Instead, most of them linked the conformance issue with the inputs they would need to implement the standards. In the present higher education system in Afghanistan, a definition for quality mostly follows the notion of conformance to standards because quality is defined by those 12 standards that public and private HEIs are mandated by the MoHE to meet. This definition of quality is largely reflected in the responses because the 12 standards are set as the only policy framework for assuring quality in Afghan higher education system. In summary, when I asked the respondents about three of the 12 QA standards, their responses suggest that SREU like other Afghan institutions are trying to conform their institutional activities to the standards prescribed by the Ministry of Higher Education. This approach is a useful concept to analyze quality enhancement in the Afghan HEIs because the MoHE sets standards for quality improvement and HEIs are obligated to conform to those standards.

Quality as fitness for purpose

Respondents believe that SREU knows its purpose, which is Teacher Training (TT). However, they did not clearly understand how the standard about the “Mission and Purpose” can help SREU to improve quality in fulfilling its purpose of TT. Some respondents emphasized more on the clarity of the standard and clarity of SREU mission than standard’s fitness with SREU purpose. In addition to clarity, again, the two major reasons are inputs and contradiction
between the adoption of the standards and the degree of authority and available resources at SREU; in other words, respondents see a strong need for better inputs and authority to achieve the desired outputs for improved quality.

Finally, findings in the case study suggest that respondents placed less emphasis on the importance of learning outcomes for students, which is the most important purpose of education and higher education. Student learning as major purpose for SREU as a HEI was seldom highlighted in the answers, except in a few responses. MoHE perhaps needs to imbed language about the significance of the student learning in the 12 standards so that institutions better understand how to use their resources for student learning. The respondents of this study seldom referred to this definition (quality as fitness for purpose). Some respondents highlighted the purpose of SREU but did not discuss aligning the institutional purpose with this definition.

*Quality as effectiveness in achieving institutional goals*

A major goal for SREU is to train teachers for primary, secondary, and high schools. If the achievement of this goal is part of the quality improvement for SREU, then students learning to become qualified teachers after graduation should be a priority in SREU’s mission and purpose. A few respondents pointed out that to train qualified teachers, in addition to other efforts from the leadership and faculty members, student-centered approaches need to be a priority in SREU’s mission and purpose. However, other respondents did not mention this essential purpose. In other words, SREU’s leaders and faculty members should see student learning as a major objective for quality improvement. The fact that respondents highlight several challenges (e.g. very limited physical resource, limited opportunity for regular faculty development, and dominance of old-fashion management practices) are key barriers to achieving this objective. Only few respondents pointed that this is partly because Afghanistan’s public institutions are highly centralized and SREU has no institutional autonomy. They also mentioned
that it is hard to achieve institutional goals without autonomy and transparency in areas like hiring and promotion. Finally, young professors raised the concern that the dominance of full professors who want to preserve previous practices is a problem.

**Quality as meeting customers stated needs**

There seems to be a disconnection between what students want and what their options are. There is little linkage between student goals, institutional goals, and assessment practices. Respondents knew that SREU graduates should serve as teachers at schools, but it seems that not all students find opportunities to become teachers and some of them do not want to be teachers for a variety of reasons.

**The traditional concept of quality**

This approach reinforces the idea that better inputs (better classrooms and technology) and high standards are needed. Respondents’ view of better inputs clearly support the fact that they see quality from the traditional lens and link every aspect of quality improvement to access for better inputs at SREU like the other three prestigious public universities in Kabul. One respondent clearly stated that the MoHE does not provide enough resources to SREU compared to other major public institutions in the capital. Such a response implies that access to more financial resources, modern technology and sufficient number of classrooms, which are available in better-off institutions, can also help SREU to better teach, provide better services and increase better learning outcome for its students. One respondent’s claim that MoHE is sending students with lower grades on the Kankor examinations to SREU reinforces the idea that SREU is not a prestigious university with high admission standards. Therefore, a traditional view of quality is a common concept among the respondents.

To conclude, the first of Green’s five approaches that I followed as a theoretical framework for this study is the one where the most responses fit. As stated in the earlier sections
the notion of “conformance to standards” explicitly recommends that products and services should meet the standards. The MOHE set the 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. Respondents frequently stated the need that SREU has to conform to those standards. However, limited inputs was the main reason they cited that hindered the ability to meet those standards.

Responses in this study do not fit well into the second, third and fourth approaches suggested by Green. It is because respondents mostly talked about SREU’s challenges and that SREU should conform to the national, regional, and international standards. Few respondents talked about achieving institutional goal, which fits into the third approach, while no one talked about the concept of quality as if “quality to meet customers’ stated needs”. In addition, there were no strong emphasis about “quality as fitness for purpose”. However, I cannot explicitly disregard that. The data and analysis presented in this paper only partially helped to see where the respondents’ understanding of quality can fit. In order to present our understanding about the definition of quality through second, third and, fourth approaches, further data that explicitly present respondents’ opinion about those definitions is required.

The data in this study suggest that Green’s fifth approach, which is about the traditional concept of quality, is the second most relevant approach characterized by the responses. Respondents in many occasions link the quality to better inputs for SREU, which suggests the notion that those institutions that have better inputs and have wealth of resources are high quality institution.
Conclusion and Recommendations

Implications for Policy

Because MoHE is the only policy making institution for quality enhancement, it needs to regularly conduct consultative and technical workshops with the institutional leaders (e.g. vice chancellors for academic affairs) to revise policies for the conceptualization and understanding of quality phenomena. Current policy framework (e.g. the 12 standards and relevant guidelines for Self-Assessment and others) needs to be revisited regularly and most importantly should be tailored to the current needs, status, context and available resources of each public institution. However, introducing innovative changes to these policies and institutions like SREU, ultimately for the MoHE as the change agent, is not an easy task. Another key policy change might be to distinguish the type of standards and accommodate the standards to several categories to fit well and be realistic for each institution. Doing so requires hard work, commitment, and extra resources from both the government and foreign donors like USAID and World Bank to bring changes.

MoHE needs to imbed other approaches like the ones suggested by Green into the policy framework it has for quality assurance. In a context like Afghanistan where resources are very scarce, HEIs should not be limited to following the 12 standards. QA policies should also accommodate the local needs, realities, institutional capacity and resources at the regional levels.

Green’s second approach, “Fitness for the purpose”, and “Quality as effectiveness in achieving institutional goals” (Green’s third approach) can be more useful for some institutions in provincial settings and less for others. MoHE needs to introduce policies and guidelines to encourage ongoing quality enhancement at different levels – for institutional, faculty, departmental and for teaching and administrative levels. Clarity in policies and standards and QA
members’ knowledge and understanding about policies and standards so they can train other faculty members at each institution is a serious need.

**Implications for Practice at SREU**

The outcome of this study can help SREU academic staff to rethink their theoretical assumptions and practical approaches about quality and quality assurance for their institution. The major shift in their approach should be to focus on effectively using their currently available resources for improved learning for both student learning and faculty development purposes. In addition to identifying and pursuing their demands from the MoHE and foreign donors for increased physical and intellectual inputs, SREU academic staff also need to shift their perceptions from ‘blame game’ to acting as responsible academic staff who take responsibility for student learning and self-development. Finally, they need to change the perception of quality improvement from a one-time assessment to creating a culture of continual improvement in their day-to-day academic activities of teaching, research, and administrative planning.

For better operationalization of the concept of quality, institutions like SREU, with limited resources, need to develop internal mechanisms to monitor quality assurance practices. As stated earlier, quality enhancement is not a matter of one-time activity. It requires regular and consistent efforts that educators at different levels apply in their daily performance as regular good practices.

Regardless of following a specific standard and regardless of comparing their resources to those in other national and international HEIs, as pointed by a student respondent, academic staff at SREU need to compare their present performance with their own past performance. They need to put more efforts into improvement and learn from past lessons and experiences. Finally how they need to work to instill a culture of self-reliance in their minds and performance.
Finally, at SREU and at the MoHE, there are limitations due to under-qualified people with older mentality who hold some of the senior positions in a highly hierarchical structure and centralized system. Devoting serious attention to the recruitment of qualified and young professionals is a need for both SREU and MoHE.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study may serve as a good start for other researchers and interested parties to expand the study of quality and quality assurance standards in Afghan higher education sector. Further studies might focus on how quality is conceptualized at the MoHE’s QAED and other major public institutions such as Kabul University, Kabul Medical University, and public universities in large cities across Afghanistan. However, it is very important to first start from the MoHE because the QAED at the MoHE is the key standard and policy-making agency for public and private HEIs in Afghanistan.

A major challenge that researchers have to bear in mind in the Afghan context is that speaking in general terms is a usual practice in every aspect of life and it is not uncommon at HEIs. Academic staff also come from among ordinary public. Academic staff also experience the challenges mentioned earlier and they do not have higher socio-economic status that gives them the freedom to focus primarily on research and their professional development. Therefore, researchers need to be more patient, flexible, and respectful of respondents’ professional and personal life situations. Their respondents may or may not always provide interviewers with the more detailed information they are seeking.

The potential value of research is not yet well recognized by policy makers and practitioners in Afghanistan. Education leaders need to promote the value of research across academia and if possible across the entire public and private system. By developing a culture of
authentic research, educators can influence policy makers and practitioners to work towards enhancing the culture of quality improvement in HE.

Researchers may consider providing incentives to the respondents so that respondents do not bear any cost of transportation, phone charges or other logistical costs. It is usual in Afghanistan that respondents may expect significant amount of compensation for their time and the opinion they express in a study. Due to a unique political and cultural context of Afghanistan where people are struggling to survive from on-going unrest, deal with systematic corruption at the public and private institutions, and dozens of other political, social, cultural and economic challenges, conducting research is a challenging task with limited resources.

Due to these factors, people from every walk of life are not able to focus on research and knowledge advancement because it is not an economic priority for them. However, obviously, millions of people believe education is a great tool for better life. Furthermore, people still believe a better future and good economy can come through better education.

**Recommendations**

Since SREU like any other public and private institutions in Afghanistan is following the 12 standards prescribed the MoHE, it needs to strategically imbed specific learning objectives for students under its academic programs (as prescribed by Standard 3). Student learning objectives need to be prioritized and broadly communicated throughout SREU for the academic and non-academic staff. More generally, perhaps MoHE needs to imbed language about the significance of the student learning in the 12 standards so that institutions can better understand how to use their resources for learning rather other purposes.

SREU needs to communicate the concept of quality as an ongoing improvement in the day-to-day academic and administrative practices. To fulfill this, SREU leadership needs to interpret quality as better performance than in the past rather than comparing SREU with other
institutions. In addition, the leadership should make efforts to reduce the focus on the need for more inputs and focus on the mentality of its administrative and academic staff to do what they can to better utilize the current available resource and not to wait for years for more financial resources.

Like other public institutions, SREU needs to work on improving its administrative and financial practices to adjust, qualify for and finally achieve institutional autonomy. This can be achieved through hard work, capacity building, and careful planning at various level. If educators focus mostly on complaining about lack of resources and structural problems in the system, they will not achieve autonomy sooner and will lose valuable time.

A strong communication and coordination objective needs to be imbedded within SREU’s overall institutional goal of teacher training. Such an objective should help, 1) students to envision their professional life after SREU, 2) strengthen and align MoE’s goal to hire qualified teachers with SREU’s objective of producing qualified teachers, and 3) inform and enrich SREU’s revision of curriculum in all departments and disciplines according to MoE’s needs for new schoolteachers. Both students and MoE are potential customers for SREU, therefore, SREU needs to align the expectations of both the MoE and students with its institutional goals by putting student learning outcomes and producing qualified graduates to assume teaching roles at the center of its mission.
References


Ministry of Higher Education (2009b). The 12 Quality Assurance Standards (will be attached as appendix in the final project)


Appendices

I - The 12 standards

Source: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Higher Education

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Criteria for Review</th>
<th>Guidelines</th>
<th>Self-Review Rating</th>
<th>Importance to address at this time</th>
<th>Evidence: What is there? (Or needed?)</th>
<th>Who interprets it?</th>
<th>How is it used?</th>
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<td><strong>Institutional Purposes</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1.1 The institution has a formally approved statement of mission and purpose. Its operational practices are appropriate for an institution of higher education and clearly define its essential values and character.</td>
<td>The institution has a published mission statement that clearly describes its purposes. The institution’s purposes fall within recognized academic areas and are within the framework of generally recognized academic disciplines or areas of practice. Its mission is reviewed in recent years.</td>
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<td><strong>1.2</strong> The institution’s goals are clear, address the needs of society, and provide directions for improving the institution’s effectiveness.</td>
<td>The institution has clear published goals that give direction to the administration, faculty, staff, and students. The goal recognize the needs of society and the nation.</td>
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<td><strong>1.3</strong> Educational objectives are clearly recognized throughout the institution and are consistent with stated purposes.</td>
<td>The institution has developed guidelines for the achievement of its educational objectives. It has a system to assess student achievement including retention rates, graduation rates, and student learning. It goals for faculty and staff are clear and their performance is evaluated on a regular basis.</td>
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<td><strong>1.4</strong> The mission and purpose provides direction for improving the institution’s effectiveness.</td>
<td>The institution periodically reviews its effectiveness in terms of its mission and purpose. Efforts to improve its effectiveness are demonstrated.</td>
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**Criterion 2. Governance and Administration:**
The governance and administrative system is designed in a way to facilitate achievement of the mission and goals, encourage teaching, research, and service, encourage participation in the appropriate levels of governance, define the authority of each clearly, promote accountability and transparency, and promote gender equity as well as ensure fairness. The institution has a full time chief executive officer whose primary or full-time responsibility is to the institution.

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<td>Governance and Administration</td>
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<td>2.1 The institution’s governance and administration is appropriate to its mission and purpose, encourages participation at appropriate levels of governance, with the authority of each clearly defined.</td>
<td>The administration and governance of the institution functions in accordance with its mission and purpose. There is active participation of faculty at appropriate levels of governance. Authority is appropriately defined for each level.</td>
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<td>2.2 The governance and administration encourage teaching, research, and service.</td>
<td>There is evidence that the administration and governing bodies promoted teaching, research and service.</td>
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<td>2.3 The governance structures and administration promote accountability and transparency, encourage gender equity and ensure fairness in the operation of the institution.</td>
<td>The institution has mechanisms to insure accountability and transparency of its activities and operations. The governance structures and administration demonstrate a commitment to gender equity and fairness</td>
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<td>2.4</td>
<td>The institution has a full time chief executive officer whose primary or full-time responsibility is to the institution.</td>
<td>The chief executive officer is full time. His/her major responsibility is the institution.</td>
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**Criterion 3. Academic Programs**

Academic programs are consistent with the institution’s mission. The institution works to assess student learning, regularly reviews programs, strives to develop partnerships with other institutions, and works systematically to improve academic programs. Undergraduate programs are at the appropriate level and graduate programs (where they exist) are appropriate and prepare graduates to operate in a competitive global environment.

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<tr>
<td>3.1 The institution’s educational programs are consistent with its mission and appropriate in content, standards, and nomenclature for the degree level awarded.</td>
<td>Academic programs are appropriate to the mission and purpose of the institution. The content, length, and standards of the institution’s academic programs conform to recognized disciplinary or professional standards.</td>
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<td>3.2 All degrees awarded by the institution are clearly defined in terms of entry-level requirements and in terms of levels of student achievement necessary for graduation that represent more than simply an accumulation of courses or credits.</td>
<td>Competencies required for graduation are clear and reflected in course syllabi and the institution’s catalogue or other publications.</td>
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<td>3.3 Academic programs are reviewed periodically and efforts made to improve their quality on an ongoing basis. The institution has mechanisms to measure student</td>
<td>Mechanisms are in place to periodically review academic programs. There is evidence of quality improvement efforts on an ongoing basis. Student outcomes</td>
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<td>3.4 Graduate Programs (where they exist) are at the appropriate level and prepare students for professional employment and competition in an increasingly globally competitive environment.</td>
<td>Graduate programs are of high quality and meet professional expectations. Graduates are appropriately trained and prepared to compete in a context which increasingly demands international standards.</td>
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<td>3.5 The institution strives to partner with other institutions at home and abroad.</td>
<td>There is evidence of academic partnerships at home and abroad.</td>
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**Criterion 4. Faculty Members and Staff**

Faculty and staff qualifications, numbers, and performance are sufficient to achieve the mission of the institution or the faculty. The institution has an open, transparent, and merit based process of recruitment, appointment, and promotion. Recruitment and promotion of women is encouraged with a goal of gender equity among faculty members. The institution avoids dependence on part time faculty, fosters and protects academic freedom, assists faculty members in finding research support and opportunities and promotes quality teaching. Faculty workloads are reasonable and fairly distributed. Faculty member’s teaching is evaluated regularly.

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<tr>
<td>Faculty and Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.1 The institution employs personnel sufficient in number and professional qualifications to maintain its operations and to support its academic programs, consistent with its institutional and educational objectives.</td>
<td>Faculty and staff numbers are sufficient to meet the mission and goals of the institution. Their professional qualifications are appropriate to their duties as well as teaching, research, and service objectives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.2. The institutional faculty members and staff are at a quality and level of training to insure the integrity and continuity of its academic programs. Opportunities for faculty development are made available to those in need of additional training.</td>
<td>The institution has instructional staffing that includes a sufficient number of full-time faculty members with appropriate backgrounds, by discipline and degree levels. There is evidence of opportunities for faculty and staff development. Staff avail themselves of those opportunities.</td>
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<td>4.3. Faculty and staff recruitment, orientation, workload, incentives, and evaluation practices are open and fair and</td>
<td>Faculty and staff hiring and promotions are carried out in an open and transparent way following MoHE guidelines. Workloads are fair and</td>
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aligned with institutional purposes and educational objectives. Faculty promotions are merit-based and include peer review. Recruitment and promotion of women is encouraged with a goal of gender equity.

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<th>4.4. The institution encourages quality research and service by its faculty members. High quality teaching and learning are encouraged and fostered by the institution and the faculty.</th>
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<tr>
<td>There is evidence of institutional support for faculty research and service. The institution has in place mechanisms to foster quality teaching and learning. Incentives are in place for good teaching and quality research.</td>
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<th>4.5 Academic freedom is fostered and protected.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Academic freedom of faculty members and staff is enshrined in institutional policy which is available to faculty members and the public. There is evidence that it is protected and enhanced where necessary.</td>
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<th>4.6 Faculty teaching is evaluated on a regular basis by peers, students, or through other mechanisms.</th>
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<tr>
<td>There is evidence that faculty teaching is reviewed periodically. Mechanisms are in place to help faculty members improve the quality of their teaching.</td>
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</table>
**Criterion 5. Students & Learning**

Standards for admission are clear, administered fairly and appropriate to its mission. Academic standing is based on clearly specified standards and goals. Student learning outcomes are evaluated periodically. Students have access to advising, health facilities, academic, and recreational services. Students have the opportunity to become computer literate and have opportunities to learn a foreign language. Students are treated in a fair and ethical manner, gender equity is promoted, as is equal opportunities for all segments of the university community. Students follow academic rules and procedures. Deviations are punished. Students make a full commitment to their studies.

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<td>Students and Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.1 Standards for admission are clear and administered fairly and are appropriate to its mission. Academic standing is based on clearly specified standards.</td>
<td>Admission standards are published and readily available to students and the public. Procedures for determining academic standing are clearly specified.</td>
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<td>5.2 Student outcomes are evaluated periodically and students made aware of their standing at regular intervals.</td>
<td>Students are evaluated at intervals. Students are told their standing at clearly specified intervals.</td>
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<td>5.3 The institution’s expectations for learning and student attainment are developed and widely shared among faculty, students, staff, and where appropriate, the public.</td>
<td>Academic expectations are clearly spelled out. They are available to students, faculty, and, where appropriate, the public.</td>
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<td>5.4 The institution provides adequate student services for advising, health (including mental health), placement, and other academic</td>
<td>Student services are in place for advising, health, placement, and other needs. Staffing is adequate for student needs. Recreational facilities</td>
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<td>5.5 Students have access to computer facilities, computer literacy programs, and foreign language training.</td>
<td>Adequate computing facilities are available for all students. Most students are computer literate on graduation. A majority are proficient in a major foreign language.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.6 Students are treated in a fair and equitable manner; gender equity is promoted, and equal opportunities are fostered for all segments of society including poor, rural students, physically challenged, and other disadvantaged groups.</td>
<td>Policies are in place to insure fair and equitable treatment of all students including gender equity and equal opportunities for all segments of society.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.7 Students have an obligation to follow academic rules and procedures and make a full commitment to their studies.</td>
<td>Students demonstrate a commitment to academic rules and procedures and to their studies. Deviations from academic rules and procedures are punished.</td>
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</table>
**Criterion 6. Library and Other Information Resources**

The institution assures appropriate access to library and information technology and has sufficient information resources to meet its mission. Students and faculty have adequate access to appropriate information technology, such as the Internet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.1</strong> The institution provides appropriate access to library and information technology and has sufficient information resources to meet its mission.</td>
<td>The institution has adequate library and information technology resources for its teaching, research, and service missions. They accessible on a daily basis. The library has a documents specialist.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6.2</strong> Students and faculty have adequate access to appropriate information technology such as the Internet. Information resources adequately support the institutions research and teaching programs.</td>
<td>The library(s) and computer laboratories are open and available to students and faculty a reasonable number of hours each day including weekends. Students are able to use these facilities for their classwork and research papers. Faculty members have access to professional journals and other information either in the library, through access to a digital library, or on the Internet.</td>
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<td><strong>6.3</strong> Students and faculty have access to programs that teach computer literacy.</td>
<td>The institution makes available classes or programs to allow faculty, staff, and students to gain computer literacy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.4 The institution’s information technology resources are coordinated and supported in a way that facilitates key academic and administrative functions.</td>
<td>Information technology resources are coordinated. Key academic and administrative functions are being computerized.</td>
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</table>
### Criterion 7. Physical and Technological Resources

The institution’s physical and technical resources, including classrooms, laboratories, infrastructure, buildings, and grounds are adequate for its mission. There are effective plans to maintain and improve these resources. The safety of students, staff, and faculty are protected and assured.

<table>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Physical and Technological Resources</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7.1</strong> The institution’s physical and technical resources, including classrooms, laboratories, infrastructure, buildings and grounds are adequate for its mission</td>
<td>Classrooms are appropriate to the institution’s size, academic programs, and other academic needs. They are kept up in reasonable fashion with appropriate teaching tools, adequate lighting, and other needs. Laboratories are adequately equipped and large enough for the student numbers enrolled. Other teaching facilities (e.g. farms, teaching labs) are adequate to its mission.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7.2</strong> The institution’s facilities are adequate to support faculty research and service needs in keeping with the mission of the institution.</td>
<td>The institution is committed to supporting faculty research and provides a supportive research environment.</td>
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<td><strong>7.3</strong> The institution has an effective plan to maintain and improve its physical and technological resources.</td>
<td>There is a maintenance plan to insure that buildings and grounds are kept up in a</td>
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<td>reasonable manner and evidence that this takes place. A plan is in place to insure regular maintenance of all institutional equipment and evidence that it is in effect.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.4 The campus environment is safe for students and staff and special provisions are made to insure the safety of women. Safety standards are in place for all laboratories, shops, and other equipment. Chemicals and other dangerous material are stored in safe and secure facilities.</td>
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<td>Safety standards are in place. Staff and students find the campus a safe environment. The institution has a plan for emergencies such as fire, earthquake, and accidents with a designated response team or teams.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.5 The institution provides recreation facilities for its students.</td>
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<td>Recreational facilities are available for both male and female students.</td>
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</table>
### Criterion 8. Financial Resources

The institution is financially stable, with a guarantee of financial resources to sustain its educational mission into the foreseeable future (at least two years). The institution’s resources are devoted primarily to teaching, research, and service. The institution has a multi-year financial plan that includes recurrent and development budgets and reasonable estimates of income and expenses. Appropriate budget and financial controls are in place. Income and expenses are audited on an annual basis.

<table>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Financial Resources</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>8.1 The institution has a history of financial stability. Resources are aligned with educational purposes and objectives. Almost all its resources are devoted to teaching, research, and service</td>
<td>Institutional records demonstrate a history of financial stability. The resource allocation is appropriate to the mission, purpose, and objectives of the institution. If the institution is a for-profit institution, financial records indicate that all or almost all of its resources are devoted to educational purposes.</td>
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<td>8.2 Resource planning and development include realistic budgeting, enrollment management, and plans for the future. Multi-year budget planning is in place.</td>
<td>A multi-year financial plan is in place and being followed by the institution. A review of plans for previous years indicate that budget planning has been realistic and appropriate to its enrollment and mission.</td>
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<td>8.3 The institution has in place reasonable and effective financial management and accounting systems.</td>
<td>There is evidence of an effective financial management system. Books are up to date and balanced.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>8.4</strong> The institution’s income and expenditures are audited on an annual basis.</td>
<td>Audit reports exist for the previous three years.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>8.5</strong> The institution is able to earn financial resources through providing services, research, and other entrepreneurial activities (waived pending approval of revised Higher Education Law).</td>
<td>There is evidence that funds have been raised through these activities (waived temporarily).</td>
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</table>
**Criterion 9. Strategic Planning and Evaluation**  
The institution has a current strategic plan that covers at least a five year period. The institution engages in ongoing strategic and financial planning and has an ongoing process that allows it to evaluate its programs and take remedial action if deficiencies are found.

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Strategic Planning and Evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.1 The institution periodically engages its administration, faculty, staff, and to the extent appropriate students, in an institutional reflection and planning processes which assesses its strategic position, articulates priorities, examines its current state in terms of its mission and goals, and defines the future direction of the institution.</td>
<td>The institution has a multi-year strategic plan that covers at least a five year period. There is evidence that the planning process included administrators, faculty members, staff, and to some extent students. The plan is serving as a guide to current activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.2 The institution engages in an ongoing process of evaluation of its activities in relation to the strategic plan and makes adjustments where problems occur.</td>
<td>There is evidence that the institution is engaging in continuous evaluation of its activities in terms of the strategic plan and makes corrections if problems are found.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.3 The strategic plan includes reasonable goals for the future including realistic assessments of future enrollments, income, and expenses.</td>
<td>Goals and projections for the future seem reasonable and are in accord with the MoHE’s <em>National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2010-2014</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.4 The institution collects appropriate data and other information to guide its strategic planning process.</td>
<td>There are records of student enrollments, pass and graduation rates, faculty recruitment, promotion, and retirement, course offerings and other data needed for effective planning.</td>
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</table>
Criterion 10. Quality Assurance and Improvement

The institution has an ongoing process to review its quality and take remedial action when necessary. The institution strives to create an atmosphere of quality on campus. Quality improvement initiatives have taken place over the previous two years.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Quality Assurance and Improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.1 The institution has an ongoing process of quality assurance and takes remedial action when deficiencies are found.</td>
<td>A quality assurance and improvement process is in place. There is evidence that remedial action has been taken where deficiencies have been identified.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.2 Quality improvement initiatives have taken place over the last two years.</td>
<td>There is evidence that the institution has embarked on significant quality improvement activities over the last two years.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.3 The institution strives to create an atmosphere of quality on campus.</td>
<td>There is evidence of programs in place to create high quality programs at the institution and an atmosphere of creativity and intellectual excitement on campus.</td>
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</table>

Criterion 11. Contribution to Society and Development
The institution provides a contribution to society, regional, local, and national development. Its mission and goals include its obligation to make a contribution to society and national development. Faculty members are involved in research and service that makes a contribution to society and development.

**Criterion 12. Integrity, Disclosure, and Transparency**
The institution demonstrates high ethical standards and truthfully and clearly represents its goals, programs, and services to students, faculty, and the public.

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Contribution to Society and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.1 The institutional mission and goals include recognition of the institution’s obligation to make a contribution to society and to national, regional, and local development.</td>
<td>The mission and goals of the institution include a commitment to making a contribution to society and to local and national development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.2 Faculty members are involved in research and service that makes a contribution to society and to national and local development.</td>
<td>There is evidence of recent research and service by faculty members that makes a contribution to society and to development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.3 The institution strives in its goals, activities, and public statements to emphasize its involvement in the betterment of the community in which it operates and to development.</td>
<td>There is written and other evidence of the commitment of the administration, faculty, and staff to making a contribution to the community in which it operates and to the nation as a whole. Those goals are shared with students in ways that enhance their commitments to society.</td>
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</table>
faculty, and the public. It works actively to prevent corruption, favoritism, or nepotism in grading, employment, or other decision making. The institution has effective mechanisms by which grievances and complaints can be heard and resolved for faculty members, staff, students and the public. The faculty and staff work to insure academic honesty and integrity. The institution publishes its mission, goals, and objectives and makes them available on its website. Its course offerings, requirements, and expectations of students are published and available on its website.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integrity, Public Disclosure, and Transparency</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.1 The institute demonstrates high ethical standards and truthfully. It clearly represents its goals, programs, and services to students, faculty, and the public.</td>
<td>The institution has a reputation for high ethical standards. Its statements and publications about its goals, programs, requirements, and services are in accord with what is offered, required, or promised.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.2 The institution works actively to prevent corruption, favoritism, plagiarism, or nepotism in its course work, grading, employment or other decision-making.</td>
<td>The institution has clear policies about conflict of interest, nepotism, and corruption, as well as plagiarism, which are publically available and enforced.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.3 The institution has effective mechanisms by which grievances and complaints can be heard and resolved for faculty members, staff, students, and the public.</td>
<td>Grievance procedures are published and available to students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Mechanisms for resolving complaints and conflicts are in place and utilized.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.4 Faculty members, administrators, and staff work to insure academic honesty and integrity.</td>
<td>Policies are in place about plagiarism and other academic dishonesty. Students, faculty, staff and administrators are made aware of these policies. Violations are punished.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.5 The institution publishes its mission, goals, and objectives as well as its course offerings making them available in print and on the web.</td>
<td>The institutional mission, goals, and objectives are readily available in print and on the Internet. A list of course offerings, requirements, and degrees are available in print and on the web for students, faculty, staff, and the general public.</td>
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II - Complete list of questions for four types of respondents

Section I

a. **Project Title:** An Analysis of Higher Education Quality in Afghanistan: A Case Study of Selected Quality Assurance Standards at Shaheed Rabbani Education University.

b. **Research Question:** How are quality assurance standards understood in Afghan higher education?

c. **Purpose:** This questionnaire is designed to understand the perception and knowledge of key educators responsible for implementing and overseeing quality assurance processes at SREU. Responses provided to below questions will be completely kept confidential and will be ONLY used for this thesis project in the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Section II

Below questions asked from four category of respondents in this study.

1. How much have you been involved in the QA process?
2. What do you do as the member of QA board at the MoHE? Or Institutional committee member?
3. What does quality in Higher Education mean to you?
4. As a student, what do you think that what a quality education will look like?
5. Who should define it?
6. What do you think are the most important aspects of quality in higher education?
7. How do you assess the overall status of quality at SREU? For example, in terms of teaching, study materials, facilities, classrooms, labs and labs equipment, and other supporting materials for learning.
8. What do you know about the QA standards in Afghanistan’s Higher Education?
9. Do you know about or aware of the 12 standards?
10. What do you know about the first standard? *(Mission and Purpose)*
    a. What does Mission and Purpose mean to you?
    b. Do you think Mission and Purpose is a useful standard to measure quality?
    c. Do you think Mission and Purpose is a relevant standard for SREU?
    d. What could SREU do to meet the Mission and Purpose standard?
11. What do you know about the second standard? *(Governance and Administration)*
    a. What does Governance and Administration mean to you?
    b. Do you think Governance and Administration is a useful standard to measure quality?
    c. Do you think Governance and Administration is a relevant standard for SREU?
    d. What could SREU do to meet Governance and Administration standard?
12. What do you know about the third standard? *(Academic Programs)*
    a. What does Academic Programs mean to you?
    b. Do you think Academic Programs is a useful standard to measure quality?
    c. Do you think Academic Programs is a relevant standard for SREU?
    d. What could SREU do to meet Academic Programs standard?
13. Do you want to add any standard that you think is not among the 12 standards?
    a. What could SREU do to meet this standard?
14. What standards do you think are better aligned with SREU’s strategic plan, mission and vision?
15. Do you want to add any final comments about the overall QA process in your campus?
### III - Summary of responses for the three standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard’s name and short description</th>
<th>A set of three questions asked about each standard</th>
<th>All data in this column are respondents’ words in response to each question. The most positive views and important responses are extracted.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Standard 1 - **Mission and Purpose**: The Institution’s mission and purpose is appropriate to higher education, defines the distinctive character of the institution/faculty and its goals, addresses the needs of the society, gives directions to the activities of the institution/faculty, and provides direction for improving the institution’s effectiveness. | What does *Mission and Purpose* mean to you? | - Every institution must have a mission and purpose. Institution’s activities should be specified based on its specific purpose. The purpose should have approval and be clear to the public. Institutional purpose is an introductory face of that institution and its distinctive characteristic that all activities can be directed towards that purpose.  
- This standard sets up institutional mission. It is always comprehensive and covers up all institution. Well, by having clear purpose and mission, an institution finds its position in the society, and second its work path and line of mission becomes clear. [This standard] helps and informs each step that an institution takes to reach its goal.  
- Mission and purpose can be one of the fundamental standards for any institution. If an institution’s goal is not clear and per the societal needs, and if the institutional leadership do not well understand those goals, education activities cannot meet societal needs.  
- This standard tells whether the institution’s mission is according to the needs of the society;  
- I guess these are good concepts and terms used in this standard [Mission and Purpose] but if we look at it in practice, they are not much practical.  
- This standard is mainly connects the university’s strategic plan with the quality assurance. When the institution formulates its strategic plan, it reflects the societal needs and university’s goals and objectives. I think SREU does well with this standard; however, we do have our problems (corruption and lack of coordination with MoE).  
- It means whether the institution’s purpose is clear or not and that it meets the... |
needs of our society or not. That whether the institution’s mission and purpose is according to the MoHE’s laws and regulations? Do the programs and activities are implemented according to the goals? Moreover, that whether all staff and employees understand and know about institution’s mission and purpose.

| Do you think Mission and Purpose is a relevant standard for SREU? | - Yes and no. No, because better awareness and better information is not given to the students. And yes, because if we look in to the curriculums making process and topics covered under that, goals and goals are set and they [teachers and management] try to reach to those goals
- Yes, it is applicable for SREU because SREU’s goal is to train professional and expert teachers. Therefore, when we talk about SREU’s goal and mission, we should remind ourselves to consider the professional training of teachers [as our goals and mission] because it can help SREU to meet its goals.
- Yes, of course it is applicable. One of the reason that can help an academic institution to measure its works is to have certain goals.
- Yes, I guess it is usable because SREU’s mission is to train professional teachers and with increased number of professional teachers, it can better meet the need for the availability of professional teachers for the Ministry of Education.
- I think it is a general standard, and it can incite a bigger policy discussion, and as I pointed earlier, if we have a comprehensive strategy at the institutional level, it can be a good standard. This institution train teachers at bachelor level … [and]… it has a broader vision and goal and when talk about how to measure quality of such standard; it can be a broader discussion. |

| What could SREU do to meet the Mission and Purpose standard? | - If SREU have to better follow its mission and purpose and meets its goals, it needs a careful and well-planned research and then we need to revise and upgrade our curriculums accordingly.
- Two reasons might cause that this standard is not well implemented and followed by SREU. The first issue can be related to the MoHE, because unfortunately, the bylaws and regulations by the MoHE has problems. It means some bylaws and regulations have authorized non-qualified people who do not |
have better academic potential, no up-to-date knowledge to serve in the leadership roles, which is a structural issue in HE. The other aspect is connected to the SREU administration. SREU should create a functional quality assurance committee…and hire capable persons who could understand and develop overall goals and strategies for SREU and this committee.

- One of the most important thing is that government needs to pay more attention and do better planning. Most of our graduates do not have job opportunities. If our students do not have brighter direction, they do not pay serious attention to their post-college life and they only think how to complete the program and earn their degree.

- SREU needs to create a larger competent and powerful committee with enough budget and resources that could implement the quality assurance practices. Such a committee should assign experienced and expert members from within SREU as well as local or foreign education experts with short and long-term tenures. They should figure out the needs and clarify what does the society, teachers and students want from SREU? One of the biggest problem that why higher institutions in Afghanistan could not reach to better quality status is that the institutional leadership were not successful to create committed and coordinated teams.

- We have something called program review. We need to review our program and our institution strengthen its coordination with the MoHE and establish relations with MoE. We need to do curriculum review and other initiative. We plan to do these because they affect the quality.

- I think SREU needs to adjust its all programs according to this standard.

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<tr>
<td>Standard 2 - <strong>Governance and Administration</strong>: The governance and administrative system is designed in a way to facilitate achievement of the mission and goals, encourage teaching, research, and service, encourage participation in the appropriate levels of governance, define the authority of each clearly, promote accountability and transparency, and promote gender equity as well as ensure fairness. The institution has a full time chief executive officer whose primary or full-time responsibility is to the institution.</td>
<td>What does <strong>Governance and Administration</strong> mean to you?</td>
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| **- The institutional leadership’s main responsibility is to serve in the institution. It has to exercise transparency and do not hide anything from anyone. It should update and keep everyone informed about anything, which is going on in the institution. It should keep everyone inform about institution’s budget and income, and equally distribute resources and opportunities.**  
  - Administration has the key role in achieving aims and goals for the institution. Meanwhile, it is responsible to coordinate and manage activities within the institution.  
  - An institution is successful when it has sound leadership that could treat all people equally, where necessary support the subordinates; and where not, they should prevent mistakes. [Good Leadership] considers competency and qualifications in hiring; establish better connection between the institution and people, between the institution and the ministry. It can help the institution, for example, to find more scholarships for its faculty member, organize and conduct trainings, workshops and other learning opportunities for its students and faculty members, for their knowledge and skills development.  
  - I think it is a comprehensive standard. For me it means that the institution’s leader distributes the services and resources equally, it should also fairly distribute the power and authorities. *(Add challenges from this response)*  
  - I think this standard tells more about the structure and key successes of the university that it should be more transparent and have honest and accountable administrative staff.  
  - It means do the institution work according to its mission and purpose. Do the institution focus on quality research? Do the institution consider transparency and accountability in its daily performances? Is the institution own an organized staff and student database? How much the institution has implemented its planned activities according to its institutional strategies?  
  - Yes, once we could direct our activities towards achieving our goals, it can help us understand how better we tried, and how much misdirection we experienced. This |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Administration is a relevant standard for SREU?</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Look into the responses in this section, many problems and challenges presented in response to this question.</em></td>
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<td>standard can be a better tool for quality measurement and finding values.</td>
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<td>- This standard is not only much applicable and followed by SREU but to some extent, it did and so do by all other institution.</td>
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<td>- This standard is usable for SREU. However, with the available resources and formal authority that SREU has for itself, I do not think that it will be able to meet and follow this standard in a complete manner. Its implementation depends on better teaching, better research, and services and better fairness and justice. This standard cannot be achieved without research. <em>(Add challenges from this response)</em></td>
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<td>- Yes, this standard is applicable for SREU but it is more applicable for some departments and less applicable for other departments. Why? It is because there are examples that due to some reasons, faculty members serve in different roles and do multiple tasks. For example, they serve in committees, serve as faculty member in the department, get busy with the tasks across the campus and then serve in MoHE commissions, or for example, in the Kankor directorate. These all causing them get busy and do not spend much time to prepare for better teaching and with students. However, overall, it is good.</td>
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<td>- SREU should find the most capable human resources and capacities within this institution and use each capacity per their capability and experience, not per their academic ranking. I believe SREU should seriously use the right capacity, knowledge, and resource in the right time and places. In the long-term, they must revise the bylaws and bring changes to the power and responsibilities of teachers per their abilities. <em>(Add recommendations from this response)</em></td>
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<th>What could SREU do to meet the Governance and Administration standard?</th>
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<td>- Yes, once this standard is applied and implemented, this means university leadership will be busy with activities within the university and the leadership will stay in university and we can find them and discuss our problem if have any.</td>
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<td>- One of the better way to apply and follow this standard is to give the right job to the right person at SREU. I believe when we have faithful people in leadership positions, SREU can better work for quality enhancement. If we have to reach to good governance and administration standards, we need to have professional and expert administrators as well as these administrators must be faithful.</td>
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<td>- 1. SREU is obliged to obtain proper learning and teaching resources in coordination with the MoHE. 2. SREU must strive to support research at campus level and faculty level. 3. SREU should ease and support faculty development programs. Faculty may not have problem in terms of knowledge and ability but they do have problem with not having the right professional skills. <em>(Use problems from this piece)</em> <em>(Add recommendations from this response)</em></td>
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<td>- If SREU would like to enhance quality, it should consider and follow merit-based practices, consider fairness, be very careful in the choice and recruitment of people, keep away from discrimination. They should offer more opportunities for faculty’s growth and professional development.</td>
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<td>- I think SREU should identify better and competent people who are qualified in every way, and assign them in the senior positions.</td>
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<td>Standard’s name and short description</td>
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| **Standard 3 – Academic Programs**: Academic programs are consistent with the institution’s mission. The institution works to assess student learning, regularly reviews programs, strives to develop partnerships with other institutions, and works systematically to improve academic programs. Undergraduate programs are at the appropriate level and graduate programs (where they exist) are appropriate and prepare graduates to operate in a competitive global environment. | **What does Academic Programs mean to you?** | - Like other HIEs, SREU’s focus and mission falls around four types of academic activities: research, teaching, service delivery and publishing.  
- SREU tries to improve its academic programs to most extent possible and it does not compete with other public institutions because its programs are different from other public institutions in Kabul such as KMU, KPU and Kabul University. SREU’s programs are better and its graduates are more competitive than KU. When I say we are more competitive, it is does not mean that we are ideal. We are not ideal institution because our curriculum, teaching materials, laboratories, libraries and other resources are still way behind and not to an ideal level that we desire for it.  
- Any standards that can be a reason to enhance the capacity and quality in a higher education institution can also help the institution to measure, review, and ensure communication with other institutions. More important thing is that it helps the institution to link graduates with the job market. All issues or all academic activities in institutions can fall under academic programs. Quality teaching, research, academic conference, and seminars at institutions, bachelor degree programs, and master degree programs can all fall under academic programs.  
- Master’s degree programs are per the needs and requirements of SREU. It has brought changes to the SREU’s academic merit and contributed in the quality enhancement of its academic programs and teaching.  
- I think this standard tells about coordination, cooperation, and regulation in academic activities. Teachers should have coordination at department level, then departments should have |
coordination at faculty level, next faculties should have coordination at the institutional level, and then degree programs such as bachelors should have integration and coordination across the institution in terms of curriculum, goals, philosophy, and other characteristics. In addition, these programs should have consistency with the master programs. Overall, these programs and systems should match with the international standards and programs.

- Academic programs can also include faculty research, their publishing and authorship. However, academic programs are mainly about having bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Institution should graduate students according to the needs in the job market and schools are the job market for SREU’s graduates.

It means we need to ensure that whether all academic programs including the curriculum, study materials, academic and research articles, published books, academic conferences and seminars, are at an appropriate level. Graduates who are entering the job market have enough academic ability and the credits and courses they have studied are according to societal needs.

Do you think *Academic Programs* is a relevant standard for SREU?

- In every university, standards and criteria are established and followed to meet certain goals. However, in Afghanistan none of these standards are rigorously followed or implemented due to many problems. SREU does try to follow and meet those standards and it was useful because if we compare SREU with its past years of activities, we will find that it was useful in improving quality, especially, in the areas of academic articles, publishing, and research works.

- I think yes. It can be used because they work on this. Despite limited resources, limited infrastructures and all other limitations, faculty members, departments and Faculties across the campus trying hard and working hard to use their time effectively. The new vice chancellor for academic programs strive to mobilize...
resources, even though, it is limited. He tries to encourage faculty members to improve the quality of degree programs by assigning them in different committees without any discrimination.

- Every university should implement financial autonomy and function as a financially independent institution and start partnerships with well-known higher educations around the world.

- Some faculty members, who got their master’s degrees from SREU, are familiar with the academic programs and these standards and consider them, but some do not. Yes, they use it but its usage is very low so if we score, it will get one and half out of five.

- This can be a good standard but people who apply and then measure quality per the standard are not reliable for me. I do not trust because applying and measuring such standards needs a broader vision, a lot of study and research.

- Yes, I think and we worked for this during the past 6 years.

- Yes, likewise other standards. It is applicable and relevant for SREU.

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<th>What could SREU do to meet the Academic Programs standard?</th>
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<td>- SREU has three master degree programs (Masters of Education, Masters of TESOL and Master of Education Leadership) and their quality is quite higher compare to Master’s Programs, which are offered in Kabul University. Their quality is higher because their curriculum is well designed and the programs are going well. The only problem I in these programs is about the quality of translation of materials. Other problem was with the resources. We have so much problems in undergraduate programs. We had problems with faculty members’ capacity, but most of them attended the capacity building programs offered by PDC, which was supported by HEP for five years.</td>
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- I believe the assessment mechanisms at SREU needs to be reviewed. SREU should design proper and focused assessment and testing mechanisms to measure students’ learning activities and progresses. It should set up a curriculum review committee to review all curriculum and studying materials every three years at least. It should set up learning outcomes and goals per the societal needs. Financial autonomy is very important for the universities.

- They need to tight control and those who are leading should do it. People who are chairing departments or deans, for example, should, first learn more about these standards and then increase control on its application. They should conduct regular workshops and seminars to increase awareness and information of the ordinary faculty members. They should let them exactly know about the role and importance of this standard for the quality enhancement of an institution.

- It is the university chancellors, heads of departments and heads of various committees’ responsibility to outline these problems transfer it to the MoHE and then to together with the MoHE find solutions for them. All teacher teachers especially the member of the QA committee and subcommittee should work together to apply all the criteria at university level.

- The university should conduct needs assessment. Then it should adjust itself according to the needs and expectations of the current time and society.