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Accreditation of Teaching and Research Universities in Afghanistan: A Policy Implementation Analysis

Sayed Javid Mussawy
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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ACCREDITATION OF TEACHING AND RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES IN AFGHANISTAN: A POLICY IMPLEMENTATION ANALYSIS

A Dissertation Presented

by

SAYED AHMAD JAVID MUSSAWY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2023

College of Education
ACCREDITATION OF TEACHING AND RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES IN AFGHANISTAN: A POLICY IMPLEMENTATION ANALYSIS

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College of Education
DEDICATION

To my caring parents, wife, and children.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very grateful for Almighty Allah’s blessing and love that gave me the strength and passion to complete this dissertation.

I would like to thank my advisor, Professor David Evans, for his dedicated time and support throughout my doctoral journey, particularly, in crafting and completing this dissertation. Professor Evans made himself always available to review the draft chapters, provide useful feedback, and discuss issues and processes to help me move forward with this project.

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I wish to express my appreciation to all the research participants who shared their valuable stories and experiences. A special thanks go to the former leaders of the
Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan that allowed me to conduct the research at public universities.

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I am very grateful for having a lovely family who supported me endlessly. My dear parents empowered me with love and care to engage in this academic journey and constantly supported me from the beginning to the end. Thank you for believing in me and helping me achieve my aspirations. A special thanks to my dear brothers who accompanied me during data collection and were present to help whenever I needed them. Thank you all very much.

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ABSTRACT

ACCREDITATION OF TEACHING AND RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES IN AFGHANISTAN: A POLICY IMPLEMENTATION ANALYSIS

FEBRUARY 2023

SAYED AHMAD JAVID MUSSAWY, B.A., KABUL EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

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The quest for quality has encouraged many countries to establish quality assurance and accreditation models to sustain and improve quality. While some established their own procedures, a great majority of the countries including those in the developing world have adopted quality assurance policies developed in the Global North to respond to internationalization and to participate in the knowledge economy. However, most universities in developing countries lack adequate infrastructure to implement accreditation standards. Thus, investigating the implementation of accreditation policies in developing nations provides new insight into the opportunities and challenges posed by internationalization of quality assurance and accreditation.

This study used a multi-case study design to describe and analyze the implementation of institutional accreditation at public teaching and research universities in Afghanistan. The investigator used sensemaking and sensegiving as a theoretical lens to collect data through 35 semi-structured individual interviews and two focus group discussions, archival analyses, and site observations.

The findings revealed that research universities utilize both horizontal and vertical sensemaking/sensegiving approaches to make sense of accreditation. However, teaching
universities primarily relied on top-down sensemaking/sensegiving approaches leading to only partial stakeholder engagement in accreditation process.

The study also highlighted the role of peer reviewers as boundary spanners – shaping the meaning of accreditation between and within institutions. While some university leaders were successful influencing the sensemaking of stakeholders utilizing both structured and informal mechanisms, the research found that sensemaking and sensegiving of accreditation did not reach the entire community. The evidence shows that primary stakeholders such as faculty members continue to perceive accreditation as a foreign process, which affects their participation in the implementation process.

Additionally, the findings unearthed the limitations of a one-size-fits-all accreditation strategy and concludes that the internationalization of quality assurance and accreditation produces the optimum results when adapting policies and practices fit the local context. Another outcome shows that a lack of autonomy, scarce resources, lack of funding, and limited awareness are major challenges in implementing accreditation in under-resourced contexts. Based on research findings, the study offers several recommendations for policy, practice, and future research at the national and institutional levels.

**Keywords**: institutional accreditation, higher education, internationalization, policy analysis, quality assurance and accreditation, developing nations
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<tr>
<td>AfriQAN</td>
<td>Quality Assurance Network for Africa</td>
</tr>
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<td>ANGQHE</td>
<td>Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APQN</td>
<td>Asia Pacific Quality Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHEA</td>
<td>Council for Higher Education Accreditation</td>
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<td>DAAD</td>
<td>German Academic Exchange Service</td>
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<td>ENQA</td>
<td>European Network for Quality Assurance</td>
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<tr>
<td>HEDP</td>
<td>Higher Education Development Program</td>
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<td>HEI</td>
<td>Higher Education Institution</td>
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<td>HEP</td>
<td>Higher Education Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>IHE</td>
<td>Institutes of Higher Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>INQAAHIE</td>
<td>International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IQAU</td>
<td>Institutional Quality Assurance Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JICA</td>
<td>The Japan International Cooperation Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoHE</td>
<td>Ministry of Higher Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>NHESP</td>
<td>National Higher Education Strategic Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAL</td>
<td>Partners for Academic Learning</td>
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<td>QAA</td>
<td>Quality Assurance and Accreditation</td>
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<td>QAAC</td>
<td>Quality Assurance and Accreditation Commission</td>
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<td>QFD</td>
<td>Quality Function Deployment</td>
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<td>QMM</td>
<td>Quality Management Model</td>
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<td>RU</td>
<td>Research University</td>
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<td>SAR</td>
<td>Self-Assessment Report</td>
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<td>SHEP</td>
<td>Strengthening Higher Education Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>TQC</td>
<td>Total Quality Care</td>
</tr>
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<td>TQM</td>
<td>Total Quality Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TU</td>
<td>Teaching University</td>
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<tr>
<td>TVET</td>
<td>Technical and Vocational Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>USWDP</td>
<td>University Support and Workforce Development Program</td>
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The quality of higher education institutions is regarded as an important issue in both the local and global spheres (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Harvey & Newton, 2004). Current research suggests that globalization, internationalization, and massification are the main drivers of the quality discourse in higher education (Altbach & Hazelkorn, 2018; Blanco & Metcalfe, 2020; Williams & de Rassenfosse, 2016). Other factors, such as economic development through innovation and skilled human capital, participation in knowledge economies, diversification, expansion of higher education systems, and, not surprisingly, poor quality and inadequate funding for higher education are also important in understanding why many countries around the world embrace higher education quality as a national priority (Salmi, 2015; Van Damme, 2002; World Bank, 2018). Thus, in attempts to develop and sustain this important goal, quality assurance mechanisms have been widely adopted by the countries in both the Global North and the Global South (Blanco Ramirez, 2013; Harvey & Williams, 2010b).

Many countries have adopted accreditation as a prominent mechanism to develop and sustain higher education quality (Harvey, 2007; Hayward, 2017). While adopting accreditation models has become a common trend, I argue that implementing an accreditation system developed in other country contexts should be treated with caution and not seen as a quick fix for the national higher education systems. This is an emerging problem particularly in the Global South’s mainly developing nations where models from the US accreditation system have been widely borrowed as standard practice to improve quality. These universities frequently lack adequate infrastructure and resources to
respond to such accreditation requirements (Altbach, 2013; Lim, 1999). Thus, my study concurs with current research (see, for example, Suresh & Kumaravelu, 2017; World Bank, 2018) that demonstrates how access to resources serves as a significant factor in improving higher education quality. In sum, I argue that borrowed international models for quality assurance and accreditation produce the optimum results when those policies and practices are modified to fit the local contexts of developing countries.

Following the global trend pursuing quality assurance and accreditation (QAA), in 2012, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in Afghanistan bought into accreditation as a set of policies and procedures to nurture and improve quality and to establish a national system to evaluate and hold public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) accountable (Babury & Hayward, 2014). At the time, the concern for poor quality was understandable due to the rapid quantitative expansion of the higher education system and the ongoing war and uncertainties affecting universities. While adopting the U.S. institutional accreditation models was a desirable policy for system development and was supported by the government and international donors such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank, its implementation on the ground has yet to be closely scrutinized. This research describes and analyzes the implementation of accreditation in Afghanistan higher education through the organizational lens of sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia & Chipetteidi, 1991; Weick, 1995). By examining participants’ lived experiences at public teaching and research universities, the study sheds light on how universities sought to internalize an international model, and what opportunities and challenges emerged.
In this chapter, I first discuss the problem, or curiosity, that this research was designed to address. I then present the purpose of the study. This is followed by a brief narrative on the conceptual framework of sensemaking and sensegiving which is elaborated in Chapter Four. Next the research questions are presented. Given the conceptual framework and the research questions, I then describe the design and methods used to implement the study. This is followed by a discussion of the potential significance of the study, linking this to the study’s purpose. Finally, the chapter ends with an overview of the remaining chapters.

**Statement of the Problem**

The quality of higher education has been a national and international priority since the 1990s (Harvey, 2006). Quality is viewed as necessary for empowering and educating human capital with relevant knowledge and skills to participate in local and global economies (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007). Despite ongoing debates on defining quality, many arguments suggest that higher education quality is no longer taken for granted. In fact, universities are under pressure to provide evidence of excellence and value at a time when funding for higher education has decreased and competition for scarce resources has forced universities to act as business enterprises (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2014; Harvey & Green 1993).

Inspired by the contribution of universities to scientific and technological advancement in the Global North, many countries in the Global South have expanded their higher education systems with the hope of participating in the knowledge economy and address increasing local demand. However, universities in developing nations face a significant challenge in creating sustaining quality due to poor economies and lack of
infrastructure (Altbach 2013, Lim, 1999). With an increase in access to higher education and the emergence of new providers, such as for-profit higher education institutions, government leaders and communities of practice have been encouraged to develop rigorous mechanisms of quality assurance to assess and sustain quality.

In light of the international discourse on quality, many countries have bought into accreditation as the primary quality assurance mechanism to ensure and sustain quality in the current higher education landscape (Cheng, 2016; Hayward, 2017; Stensaker et al., 2011; Williams, 2016). Historically, the trend to institutionalize quality assurance and accreditation began with high-income countries such as those belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the 1990s; this was closely followed by developing nations (Salmi, 2015). A small number of countries, mostly in the Global North, contributed to developing quality assurance mechanisms and procedures (Blanco-Remirez, 2013), and a majority of other countries simply adopted these quality assurance policies and frameworks developed elsewhere with slight or no modification (Kells, 1999; Lim, 1999). In brief, nearly all countries in both the Global North and Global South have developed some forms of quality assurance and accreditation systems as local and global strategies to ensure quality and participate in the knowledge economy (Williams & de Rassenfosse, 2016). However, many universities in developing nations underperform against the quality assurance benchmarks due to incongruity to their contexts (Lim, 1999).

Like many other countries, the 21st century has been a blooming era for the higher education sector in Afghanistan. Escalating demand for higher education and skilled labor pushed the government to change higher education law to allow the provision of
higher education by the private sector and to dramatically expand the public sector (Babury & Hayward, 2014). Aside from system expansion, the Ministry of Higher Education adopted a modern course offering system, the credit system, to replace the conventional one as a way to make higher education more compatible with international standards (Roof, 2014; Welch & Wahidyar, 2019). Thus, increasing demand and system expansion contributed to the twenty-fold quantitative growth in the number of universities and four-year higher education institutions from 2002 to 2016 (MoHE, 2016).

While this rapid expansion of the system substantially helped Afghanistan in providing access to higher education, developing, ensuring, and sustaining quality emerged as a prominent challenge (Ibrahimi, 2014; Mussawy & Rossman, 2018). Lacking a formal evaluation system at the national and institutional levels (Hayward, 2017), MoHE adopted an accreditation model, which originated in the United States, as a national mechanism to improve and sustain higher education quality (Babury & Hayward, 2013; Niroo & Glass, 2021). The establishment of the accreditation system was a bold move in the history of higher education in Afghanistan that corresponded to the international trend in quality assurance and accreditation and led to the establishment of quality assurance and accreditation policies, processes, and structures at the national and institutional levels (Couch, 2018; Taheryar, 2017). Although this achievement was a joint effort between international experts and faculty members from Afghanistan, implementing a decentralized quality assurance and accreditation system in a highly centralized higher education structure, including both public teaching and research universities, resulted in mixed outcomes. Specifically, given the dramatically different
infrastructure and resources at the teaching and research universities in Afghanistan, this study was grounded in the supposition that this variability within the system was well worth examining in some depth.

While in theory accreditation is used as a mechanism to improve and sustain the quality of university education, the practice in Afghanistan suggests that accreditation emphasizes administrative bureaucracies, information management, and an evaluation of “have’s and have not’s” (Niroo & Glass, 2021). The literature on quality assurance and accreditation confirms the instrumentality of accreditation as a symbolic effort to protect institutional identity (Skolnik, 2010), and to ensure that institutions of higher learning meet minimum standards to recognize degrees and credits internationally (Stansaker, 2007). Research also informs that quality assurance is more than checking the box, focusing on report production, and striving for accreditation (Harvey & Stansaker, 2011). In fact, quality enhancement should be an institutional effort coupled with accreditation to improve status quo, not a bureaucratic process to only serve administrative purposes (Chen, 2015).

Adopting Western developed models of accreditation has become a trend in developing nations including Afghanistan (Hayward, 2017). However, implementing it in economically disadvantaged countries has been a challenge. Lim (1999) argues that a majority of universities in developing nations fall short of satisfying externally developed accreditation standards. According to him, with the exception of “elite” universities, which correspond to research universities in Afghanistan, implementing accreditation is less effective in “urban-based and rural-based universities” in developing countries (Lim, 1999, p.381). Since nearly all teaching universities in Afghanistan are rural-based
universities, their challenges seem inevitable. However, the questions are: How well does accreditation serve both teaching and research universities? And does using a “one-size-fits-all” approach satisfy the needs of different types of universities?

In sum, from a theoretical lens, the institutionalization of accreditation does not seem to produce desirable outcomes unless institutions adopt complex communication channels to interpret the purposes and meanings of accreditation at various levels. Assuming that implementing accreditation disrupts routine practices at public research and teaching universities, using the constructs of “sensemaking and sensegiving” (Weick, 1995) may well be relevant in making sense of participants’ lived experiences. These constructs are briefly elaborated below in the section on the Conceptual Framework.

**Purposes of the Study**

The broad purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the implementation of an externally developed accreditation model at public teaching and research universities in Afghanistan. Especially important was to capture the different experiences of research universities (highly resourced, high status) with those of teaching universities (low resourced, more rural). This comparison was deemed necessary to reveal and analyze how different types of universities are able to, and willing to, implement national policies.

The institutional accreditation model adopted in Afghanistan included some modifications, such as a phased approach to granting national accreditation to universities (Mussawy & Rossman, 2021). Understanding this phased approach was another purpose of the study, as this approach was adopted specifically for the Afghanistan context. Thus, as might be expected, recent developments in the country suggest that research
universities have preceded teaching ones in satisfying accreditation expectations (QAAD, 2021). In sum, the study analyzed the challenges in implementing a borrowed accreditation model with a focus on institutional readiness and capacity, and explored the implications of a phased accreditation approach in practice. Drawing on the lived experiences of key informants, the study examined assumptions about quality assurance and accreditation at both national and institutional levels, and whether best practices were transferrable from one type of university to another.

Given that peer reviewers, boundary spanners, carry out institutional accreditation, another purpose of the study was to examine how interactions between internal and external stakeholders affected the meaning-making around accreditation and the ways that public teaching and research universities translated those experiences to increase awareness. In other words, the study analyzed how internal processes and engagement with external stakeholders, such as peer reviewers and QAAD officials, shaped sensemaking and sensegiving about quality assurance and accreditation at the individual and organizational levels.

**Conceptual Framework**

For the conceptual framework, I relied on the organization theories of sensemaking and sensegiving (Weick, 1995) to describe and analyze the meaning-making around accreditation and the nature of stakeholders’ engagement with the policy at both personal and organizational levels. This analytic lens was deemed generative to capture the complex channels of information gathering, learning, and interpreting about accreditation. This encouraged a close analysis of the existing structures and protocols used by the teaching and research universities to manage quality assurance and
accreditation. It also fostered analyses of the relationships between external actors (peer reviewers) and university actors.

I argue that implementing institutional accreditation involved both explicit and implicit streams of decisions and actions that occurred through various channels. I used an integrated model that aimed at describing the sensemaking and sensegiving experience of key informant from three dimensions. The first dimension focuses on sensemaking and sensegiving properties which analyzes the nature of meaning construction. I relied on Weick’s (1995) seven characteristics: “identity, retrospect, enactment, social, ongoing, extracted cues and plausibility” to understand participants’ engagement with accreditation (p. 62). The second dimension focuses on phases that describes the sequences of stakeholder engagement with accreditation. Building on the work of Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), the sensemaking and sensegiving phases allowed me to understand the policy implementation processes. For example, I was able to understand the reciprocity of gathering information, making decisions, and disseminating outcomes and processes at both top-down and bottom-up levels. The last dimension, based on Maitlis’s (2005) work focuses on sensemaking and sensegiving forms. This approach allowed me to analyze sensemaking and sensegiving scope of accreditation at the micro-level at public teaching and research universities. For instance, this lens allowed me to describe the level and type of stakeholders’ involvement and implications on their sensemaking and sensegiving.

Given the background (problem), purposes, and conceptual framework for this study, I next discuss the research questions used to guide data collection.
Research Questions

One assumption guiding this study was that implementing accreditation entails a series of strategic decisions and processes that disrupt routines at public teaching and research universities. Given this, the research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the experiences of stakeholders at teaching and research universities in relation to quality assurance and accreditation?
   - What do participants know about accreditation processes?
   - How do they perceive the importance of accreditation in practice?
   - How do they perceive the role of accreditation in encouraging internal attention to quality?
   - Has it made any difference?

2. How does sensemaking/sensegiving occur as teaching and research universities implement quality assurance and accreditation?
   - What structures and systems do the teaching and research universities have in place to communicate about the goals and processes of accreditation?
   - In what ways do their strategies and efforts correspond to accreditation expectations?

3. What are the challenges affecting the implementation of quality assurance and accreditation at teaching and research universities?

Significance of the Study

The recent trend in internationalizing quality assurance has encouraged most countries in developing nations to borrow accreditation policies as a means to improve
the higher education quality and accountability (Harvey & Williams, 2010a). However, even though most of these countries have adopted Western developed models, for instance, some variation of the U.S. accreditation model as the “state of the art” (Hayward, 2017), little is known about the promise and challenges of implementing such a system in low resource contexts. This study bridges the existing gap in the literature by examining the implementation of a U.S. institutional accreditation policy in the fragile and under-resourced context of Afghanistan. By looking into the experiences of key informants at public teaching and research universities, the study provides a description of how implementing accreditation influenced different types of universities, how key stakeholders made sense of the policy in practice, and what challenges the universities faced in the process.

Exploring the experience of implementing institutional accreditation at teaching and research universities in Afghanistan unearths some important challenges of adopting international models of quality assurance in developing nations. With 50 percent of the country’s economy depending on foreign aid, international donors had high stakes in creating and driving national policies, including those shaping quality assurance and accreditation in Afghanistan. The study’s findings illustrate the role of international donors in institutionalizing quality assurance framework/s, their stakes, and the challenges that national institutions such as MoHE in the case of Afghanistan have faced in managing those interests. Thus, one of the study’s contributions is examining how donors’ involvement affected the experience of implementing accreditation at public teaching and research universities. The results also contribute by exploring how institutional leaders and key stakeholders made sense of a foreign-born decentralized
accreditation policy and offer sense of this to others as they navigated the complexities of implementation in a highly centralized higher education context where resources are scarce, the context itself is unique, and under-studied.

Since accreditation has been a new experience in Afghanistan, learning whether engagement with internal and external stakeholders informed and/or contradicted participants’ current assumptions helps raise understanding of factors affecting organizational sensemaking. In other words, examining the roles that university leaders, internal quality assurance units, and external (peer) reviewers play in the sensemaking and sensegiving of accreditation at the personal and community levels has generated recommendations for policy and practice.

The study also adds new insights into the policy implementation analysis literature. Reflecting on the importance of contextual factors in policy formulation and implementation, the research challenges a standard, “one-size-fits-all” approach to implementing higher education policies. The study concurs with previous research (Lim, 1999) that institutional readiness to implement a U.S.-based model of institutional accreditation varies among different types of universities in developing nations. In fact, the study argues that only a handful of universities have the adequate resources to satisfy accreditation requirements.

While internationalizing quality assurance and accreditation, borrowing accreditation policies from Global North, has become a fad in most the countries despite significant differences in higher education systems among the nations (Marginson, 2004; Stensaker, 2007), this research illustrates the nuances of institutionalizing an international policy in a local context. More precisely, the study examined the complexities of
meaning-making and the challenges that universities faced in implementing a decentralized accreditation policy in a highly centralized higher education context (Aslami, 2021; Berger & Thoma, 2015). The study discusses trends and drivers that are motivating higher education systems in developing nations to adopt best practices from developed nations. Briefly, the research describes how national institutions respond to international trends, and what roles international donors have in the choices made by national institutions.

The research also contributes to organizational studies by looking into organizational sensemaking and sensegiving at public teaching and research universities and ways that top-down policies have been integrated into organizational routines. An important aspect of this study has been exploring how customizing an international experience, and adopting a phased institutional accreditation approach, were translated into practice. The study sheds light on managing quality assurance and accreditation in a context where public universities lack autonomy and are solely dependent on government funding (Aslami, 2021). In brief, unpacking how teaching and research universities have accommodated accreditation expectations despite poor capacity and financial autonomy, provides new insights into the literature on internationalizing quality assurance in developing countries.

In addition, the results of the study are important for informing the accreditation policy and practice at the national and institutional levels in Afghanistan. Based on the findings, the study provides specific recommendations to national institutions such as MoHE, and QAAD in particular, to revisit the accreditation policy to take the differing institutional contexts of teaching and research universities into account. The results will
also inform stakeholder engagement with accreditation at the institutional level by focusing on quality assurance management and awareness programs. Lastly, the results will be helpful for international donors interested in supporting higher education development in Afghanistan.

**Overview of the Methods**

I used a qualitative multi-case study design to carry out this study (Rossman & Rallis, 2016; Yin, 2018). Given the conceptual framework and research questions, the study falls within the scope of the interpretive paradigm (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Therefore, the multi-case study design suited well in exploring current issues such as sensemaking and sensegiving of the accreditation policy and process in a specific context (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018), with a focus on describing participants’ lived experiences and assumptions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Two research and three teaching universities were used as the unit of analysis to provide an in-depth understanding of what is happening concerning the implementation of accreditation in practice.

Using this design, the study examined participants’ lived experiences to analyze institutional compatibility with accreditation standards; more specifically, to learn whether a difference existed between research and teaching universities in implementing accreditation. With a focus on the experiences of key informants such as university leaders, internal quality assurance units, and external (peer) reviewers, the study also examined the organizational culture and ways that the institution leaders managed accreditation expectations, and perhaps more importantly, identified some significant challenges the universities encountered while implementing the policy.
This multi-case study design was useful in analyzing how institutions approached accreditation, how they got faculty buy-in, what were some commonalities and differences among the teaching and research universities, and how they perceived the impact of accreditation on the ground. This design may well deepen current understandings of accreditation at public teaching and research universities by looking into the policy and practices focusing on engagement at the individual and organizational levels.

I used three distinct data collection strategies: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participant observations following the qualitative research design to triangulate the data and ensure credibility and trustworthiness (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The data analysis examined patterns across responses, the relationship between the conceptual framework and participants’ responses, and the setting with the intention to organize and interpret the findings in a coherent way to inform the research questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I used NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software, to code the data, run queries within and across cases, and generate themes and categories that correspond to the conceptual framework (Creswell, 2014; Miles et al., 2014).

Finally, the issues of power and politics are inevitable in examining policy implementation. That said, exploring sensemaking and sensegiving of accreditation at public teaching and research universities involved various ethical considerations that began with the formulation of research questions, methodological choices, engagement with participants and archival data, and presentation of the findings. Throughout the study, I observed the ethical obligations (Rossman et al., 2010) to not only protect the identities of the research participants and institutions but also to pay attention to
interpersonal interactions during data collection and presentation of the data in a way that both institutional and national interests were taken into consideration. For instance, I removed any identifiable characters to mask the identities of individuals and institutions and shared the findings with a critical friend to attend to research rigor.

**Overview of the Chapters**

This dissertation is organized into 10 chapters. Chapter One begins with the main arguments of the study, followed by the problem statement, intended purpose, research questions, significance of the research, and ends with the definitions of key concepts and the organization of subsequent chapters. Chapter Two elaborates on the context of higher education in Afghanistan. This chapter begins with a historical overview of higher education leading to the development of quality assurance and accreditation. The chapter lays out important challenges facing higher education institutions in the current era.

Chapter Three discusses the current literature on quality assurance and accreditation. The literature draws on current trends in internationalizing quality assurance and accreditation as the prominent quality assurance mechanism widely used by many countries. The chapter also provides a summarized overview of quality assurance development in the region by examining the literature on quality assurance in Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan which have close cultural and geographical ties to Afghanistan. Finally, the chapter narrows down to examine the literature on quality assurance development in Afghanistan by highlighting challenges and strengths.

Chapter Four presents three sensemaking and sensegiving frameworks used to examine the implementation of accreditation at public teaching and research universities. The first one relies on Karl Weick’s (1995) seven sensemaking characteristics analyzing
the institutional accreditation as a sensemaking and sensegiving process involving “identity” development, retrospection, enactment, social nature, continuity, “extracted cues,” and “plausibility” (Weick, 1995, p. 17). The second framework focuses on sensemaking/sensegiving phases and discusses the rationale for its relevance in examining policy implementation. The third framework differentiates the sensemaking/sensegiving forms based on the context and provides a lens to examine how individuals and communities buy into accreditation as an institutional policy. Lastly, the chapter ends with an integrative theoretical model which served as the conceptual framework and informed methodological choices.

Chapter Five focuses on the research design and methods, providing specific details about the research settings, data collection and analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and the researcher’s positionality. Chapters Six, Seven and Eight present the research findings. Chapter Six provides a concise description of stakeholder engagement with accreditation focusing on sensemaking and sensegiving. Chapter Seven goes a step further and analyzes the role of key informants in shaping the meaning construction of accreditation. However, Chapter eight analyzes key challenges the universities face while implementing the policy.

Chapter Nine discusses the findings in the light of conceptual framework and the literature. Lastly, Chapter Ten presents the key conclusions drawing on implications for policy and practices, and makes specific recommendations for the policy and practice, and future research.
Definitions

The literature review chapter provides an elaborated explanation and definition of key concepts used in the study. Below is a summarized version of frequently used concepts in the study.

**Quality:** Quality in higher education is defined as an abstract, multidimensional, subjective construct with multiple interpretations (Harvey & Green, 1993). Quality is also understood as a “set of elements in the input, process, and output” that satisfy stakeholders’ expectations (Cheng & Tam, 1997, p. 23).

**Quality Assurance:** “Assurance of quality in higher education is the collection of policies, procedures, systems, and practices internal or external to the organization designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality” (Harvey, 2004-20, para.1). In other words, quality assurance refers to “an all-embracing term covering all the policies, processes, and actions through which the quality of higher education is maintained and developed (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002, p. 32).

**Accreditation:** Accreditation also known as a prominent quality assurance mechanism denotes “a process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement” (Eaton, 2006, p. 1). Accreditation is also defined as “the establishment of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, program or module of study” (Harvey, 2004-20, p.1).

**Institutional Accreditation:** Institutional accreditation focuses on the extent to which an institution of higher education meets thresholds, for instance, faculty qualifications, student retention and graduation rates, updated curricula and research
outputs, educational and physical resources, and finance and technology (CHEA, 2021; Harvey, 2004-20; Nguyen et al., 2021).

*Program Accreditation:* Program accreditation also known as professional accreditation focuses on the assessment of specific programs or disciplines internally and externally to ensure “the academic standing of the program or the ability of the program to produce graduates with professional competence” (Harvey, 2004-20, p.1).

*Quality Management Models:* Quality management models, rooted in the corporate domain, are referred to as quality assessment frameworks and tools intended to improve effectiveness, efficiency, cohesiveness, flexibility, and competitiveness (Mishra, 2007; Nabaho et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2009; Sunder, 2016).

*Sensemaking:* Sensemaking refers to the “placement of items into frameworks, comprehending, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning” (Weik, 1995, p. 6).

*Sensegiving:* Sensemaking denotes a process to shape the meaning-making of other people toward the desired meaning (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kraft et al., 2015).

*Research Universities:* Research universities in Afghanistan refer to historically old universities, established between the 1930s through 1980s, enrolling around 40 percent of the student population at public universities.

*Teaching Universities:* Teaching universities in Afghanistan refer to newer more rural universities established between the 1990s and 2010 that have achieved the status of a university. These universities predominantly offer undergraduate degree programs.
CHAPTER 2
THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Overview

The evolution of higher education in Afghanistan can be divided into three historical periods. The first one, the conservative stage, lasted around five decades (1933-1979). During this period, the growth of higher education was gradual but aligned with quality standards that attracted foreign students and were recognized internationally (Hayward, 2017). However, since the higher education system was small with a few universities, it only served political elites with socio-economic privileges. More precisely, access to military and some civil higher education programs was restricted to the dominant groups.

The second stage, post-conservatism, was a turbulent period for the higher education system due to changes in political regimes and the Soviet invasion of the country. Mainly, Afghanistan endured four different political regimes beginning with the Soviet invasion and establishment of a communist regime (1979-1991), the post-Soviet anarchy and civil war led by Mujahedeen (1991-1996), followed by the Taliban era which abandoned education for women (1996-2001), and ended with transition period leading to a semi-democratic government in 2004 (Couch, 2018). While the Soviets expanded the higher education system by establishing universities and two-year technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, the quality of higher education significantly declined as the faculty members fled the country or were prosecuted by the political regimes (Hayward, 2017; Samady, 2001). With the collapse of the Soviet legacy in 1991, the higher education sector was damaged even further due to civil war during the Mujahedeen fractions and more seriously during the dark ruling of the Taliban resulting
in infrastructure damage, loss of faculty and students, and education ban for women (Samady, 2001). In other words, higher education suffered a decade-long period of obsolescence.

The last stage was a progressive one and coincided with the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States, its allies, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the establishment of a semi-democratic government. This stage began with a system-wide rehabilitation of higher education, followed by the provision of private higher education into law, and a rapid expansion of both public and private higher education sectors. During the two decades (2002-2021) progressive stage, student enrollment increased from around 7,000 in 2001 to nearly 400,000 in 2021 (MoHE, 2020).

Higher education in Afghanistan refers to post-secondary four-year and above degree programs (MoHE, 2016). Unlike many other countries, two-year colleges including teacher training programs and technical and vocational education training (TVET) are considered post-secondary mid-level education, and not included under the umbrella term “higher education”. In other words, higher education institutions serve undergraduate and graduate students. For the sake of this study, I use HEIs to refer to both universities and smaller HEIs. Although recent efforts were made to institutionalize market-driven associate degree programs by introducing a few pilot programs in selected universities, to this date, associate degree programs have not been officially recognized (Azimi & Balakarzai, 2020).

In addition, according to the higher education law in Afghanistan, depending on the size, an institution is either considered a higher education institution (HEI) or a
university (MoHE, 2016). While the label university is used to refer to a large campus with multiple colleges, programs, and a minimum of 100 full-time faculty members, HEI denotes a smaller higher education institute with one to three colleges, and a small size faculty body. Given a few exceptions where university status was granted by presidential decree, for an HEI to become a university, it must have at least four-degree offering colleges and a minimum of 100 faculty members (MoHE, 2016). While possessing a permanent site is highly recommended for HEIs, not having one does not prevent HEIs from gaining university status (MoHE, 2016).

There are three tiers of universities in Afghanistan. Although the terms Research and Teaching Universities are not used in Afghanistan, I use the labels Research and Teaching Universities to distinguish between the first two tiers of universities. I use the term Research Universities to refer to historically old and prestigious universities that were established between the 1930s and the 1980s. Public research universities enroll around 49 percent of the student population at public universities (See appendix C for three categories of universities with enrollment number). Research universities in Afghanistan fall in M1, Master’s Colleges and Universities, category (See the Carnegie Classifications). Research universities are considered prestigious and selective based on their capacity and infrastructure, and because they are situated in economic centers that attract the attention of both domestic and international stakeholders.

The label Teaching University in this study refers to liberal arts colleges that were established between the 1990s and 2010 in Afghanistan and awarded university status from the government. According to the Carnegie Institute, these universities can be characterized as Baccalaureate Colleges offering diverse fields of study. Most of these
universities are at the developmental stage during which they are investing in building faculty capacity, physical infrastructure, facilities, and equipment. Unlike research universities, teaching universities are located in suburban and rural neighborhoods with no direct ties to political and economic institutions. Despite currently enrolling 42% percent of the student population in public institutions (MoHE, 2018), teaching universities are often under pressure by the local and national governments to expand and create new programs, which forces them to redistribute their limited resources.

The last category is called Institutes of Higher Education (IHEs). These institutions have fewer programs with a maximum of three schools/colleges and primarily offer undergraduate degree programs. Since most of these institutions were newly established, they were not included in the accreditation process. Therefore, IHEs are not included in this research study.

**Historical Development**

Higher Education in Afghanistan was born with the establishment of the Faculty of Medicine in 1932, followed by faculties of law, science, and letters between 1938 and 1942 (Samady, 2001). These faculties (colleges) were the seeds of the first university, named Kabul University in 1946 (MoHE, 2016). Subsequently, Nangarhar University was established in 1964 followed by Polytechnique University in 1969 (MoHE, 2016). Given the gradual expansion of HEIs, in 1977, the government of Afghanistan established the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) as a governing body to regulate and oversee four-year HEIs and two-year TVET programs across the country (MoHE, 2020). With a change in the political regime in 1973, overthrowing of the monarchy, and the establishment of the first republic government system, more attention was paid to
higher education which had a high-quality reputation in the region. Given the history, higher education development was gradual through 1960 as only “1,700 students” were enrolled in that year (Samady, 2001, p. 59).

However, with the invasion of the country by the Soviet regime in 1979, the higher education landscape shifted dramatically. While higher education experienced some growth after the Soviet Union’s invasion in 1979, its quality was greatly damaged as the new environment was hostile to targeted groups including intellectuals and scholars and resulted in the loss of faculty members and lax implementation of curriculum (Babury & Hayward, 2014; Hayward, 2015). Unfortunately, the environment set the stage for poor quality that has not been recovered to this date. Student enrollment, on the contrary, increased with the establishment of new universities, pedagogical institutes, and two-year teacher training and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges in major provinces such as Kabul, Balkh, and Herat (Shakir, 2012). However, in 1994, the government issued a reform that shifted all four-year teacher training colleges (called pedagogical institutes) from the Ministry of Education (MoE) to the MoHE, and in exchange, all two-year TVET institutions were shifted to MoE (MoHE, 2020). In other words, MoE was put in charge of all teacher training and TVET colleges along with elementary and secondary education.

Despite quantitative gains, enrolling “24,333” students in both universities and two-year colleges (Samady, 2001, p. 64), the growth of higher education was greatly curtailed due to internal conflicts involving the Mujahedeen in 1992, and later the Taliban in 1996 (Babury & Hayward, 2014). The Taliban era was particularly devastating as they banned half of the population, females, from getting any form of education including
higher education (Hayward 2015; Samady, 2001). However, transitioning to a new political regime with the direct intervention of the United States and its allies in 2002, liberated access to education and higher education which was historically enjoyed by the political elites and dominant groups (Hayward, 2015; Shakir, 2012). In other words, during the two decades of semi-democratic government (2002-2021), unlike in the past, access to education including higher education was made available to all populations irrespective of their backgrounds and socioeconomic class.

While acknowledging the impressive growth of higher education in the first two decades of the 21st century, the study argues that the system faces numerous challenges in the area of quality, curriculum relevance, and resources (Berger & Thoma, 2015; Hayward, 2015; Roof, 2014). Some of these challenges are caused by for-profit private HEIs, as “economic gains” and “political” influence become their priority, while “quality remains a secondary” concern (Ibrahimi, 2014, p. 2). Other challenges relate to public HEIs’ faculty competency, as nearly 50 percent of them lack graduate degrees (masters and PhDs) to teach in undergraduate programs (Hayward, 2017). In addition, political pressure to expand the system, and poor governance within HEIs, have forced MoHE to authorize identical degree programs in both the public and private sectors (Ibrahimi, 2014). Although no empirical study has been conducted to examine whether an alignment exists between higher education supply and workforce demand, recent motivations to start degree programs in humanities and social science, and limited investment in physical science may cause knowledge and skill gaps in the future.

To respond to concurrent changes in the higher education system, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in an effort with the international donors, mainly USAID,
World Bank, and a few others, strived to make some strategic decisions and established a series of strategic plans (2004-2009, 2010-2014, and 2015-2019) that capture the priorities of higher education in the country (Azimi & Balakarzai, 2020; Babury & Hayward, 2014; Hayward, 2015; Mussawy & Rossman, 2018). They highlighted a number of issues such as “access, quality, equity, integrity, transparency, and institutional autonomy” in these strategic plans (MoHE, 2016, p. 4). Among these, quality improvement is a major priority, thus MoHE has taken the following practical steps: “the establishment of accreditation, an emphasis on faculty development, a focus on curriculum development and upgrading, and a commitment to merit recruitment and promotion” to change the status quo (Babury & Hayward, 2014, p. 30).

The Current Landscape

System Expansion

When the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001, HEIs were severely damaged, and only six universities in urban areas such as Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Kandahar, and Nangarhar were partially functional. In 2006, the number of HEIs increased to 19 and enrolled a sum of 54,000 students (MoHE, 2020). While the demand for higher education was staggering due to a tremendous increase in secondary school graduates, universities had limited capacity and could only admit 20 percent of applicants, another 20 - 30 percent of applicants were introduced to two-year teacher training and TVET colleges (MoHE, 2020).

From a policy standpoint, MoHE’s response to the current demand for higher education was effective. While the first higher education strategic plan (HESP) (2005-2009) sat the stage for an evolving higher education system, and the second HESP (2010-
2014) embraced some practical measures that resulted in the establishment of over 100 new public and private universities (See Figure 1). The system expansion included creating new colleges and programs in the existing universities, widening admission to accommodate around 50 percent of university applicants, and developing of a robust quality assurance and accreditation system (MoHE, 2020).

Figure 1 Growth of public and private higher education institutions over two decades (adapted from MoHE, 2020).

**Private Higher Education.** There is no doubt that the emergence of a strong private sector makes higher education more accessible to applicants. Private higher education was initially proposed as an important component of NHESP I, and the legislation was passed in 2006. To increase access through the private higher education sector, NHESP I (2005) states:

Encouragement of private education: (i) to implement a legal framework promoting the establishment of high-quality private Higher education institutions with proper incentives and quality control mechanisms, (ii) to pilot scholarships in
selected fields for meritorious students admitted to private institutions in which the educational outcome is of special value to the nation, (p. 8).

The growth of private higher education was gradual until 2010 since only 30 private HEIs were established then (MoHE, 2016). However, private HEIs had a tremendous increase from 2011 – 2015 due to a leadership change at MoHE (See Figure 2). Unlike the public universities, in the past private universities had complete autonomy over student admission and appointment of staff. However, in 2020, MoHE in coordination with the Examinations Independent Authority passed a policy that required private HEIs to follow a centralized admission system (MoHE, 2020). Since private HEIs mushroomed so rapidly, MoHE lacked adequate capacity to manage them properly. While private institutions have a major role in providing access to higher education, with a few exceptions, the quality of education suffers at these institutions. Furthermore, there are no established policies or regulations to ensure job security and promotion of faculty and staff at private HEIs. The majority of these institutions rely on part-time faculty members, around 50 percent of whom come from public universities. In other words, public universities indirectly subsidize the private which affects quality as well. An important reason why faculty moonlight at private universities is because they are poorly paid, and the government lacks any incentive mechanism to keep them away from private universities (Hayward, 2017).

**Access to Higher Education**

Despite increased demand, less than 1/3 of high school graduates took the national university entrance exam, Kankor, were enrolled in higher education institutions in 2008 (Aslami, 2021). However, with a change in the leadership of MoHE and political
pressures from the government and the parliament, the number of public and private HEIs increased. For instance, in just a decade, the system experienced a seven-fold growth in student enrollment increasing from 58,769 in 2008 to 365,982 students in 2019 (See Figure 2). As the expansion occurred so rapidly, managing higher education and sustaining quality overwhelmed the capacity of the existing structure of the MoHE.

Figure 2 Progression of student enrollment in public and private HEIs (Adapted from MoHE, 2020).

The recent development in student enrollment is encouraging in terms of providing access to higher education (Ibrahimi, 2014). However, the universities continue to face numerous challenges, for example, lack of access to resources and qualifications of faculty members (Hayward, 2015). Although investments were made to increase the qualifications of faculty members, there is still more room for improvement. Figure 3 shows the educational credentials of faculty members at public teaching and research
Based on Figure 3, the number of faculty members with master’s degrees is rising; however, only five percent hold PhDs.

Figure 3 Educational credentials of faculty members at public HEIs over 10 years
(Adapted from MoHE, 2020).

Although the educational credentials of faculty members seem quite low when compared to universities in the neighboring countries, given the rapid growth of the system, investment in the education of faculty members seems a huge success for Afghanistan. In fact, faculty members have benefitted from the government’s strategic partnerships with other countries and international organizations that have assisted the country by providing thousands of scholarships each year (Aslami, 2021). The major countries and donors, and projects that contributed to faculty members’ capacity building include the World Bank (SHEP and HEDP projects), USAID (HEP and USWDP projects), India, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Central Asia, Russia, Germany (DAAD project), Japan (JICA’s PEACE project), and a few others. Among these, the government of India
had a substantial role as it provided around 1,000 graduate and undergraduate scholarships to Afghanistan each year (MoHE, 2020).

Another major challenge is offering identical degree programs across public and private HEIs without any attention to labor demand and the socio-economic needs of the country. The study realizes that the problem was caused by political pressure, poor governance, and corruption in the case of private universities (Ibrahimi, 2014). Although no empirical study has been conducted to examine the curriculum alignment between higher education supply and workforce demand, recent incentives to start degree programs in humanities and social science, and limited investment in physical science may cause knowledge and skill gaps in the future.

**Gender Equity**

Although increasing access to higher education was desirable, women’s access to higher education continues to be a major gap. Previous research contends the relationship between access and quality, and the current study argues that gender equity is equally important in conceptualizing quality in a context like Afghanistan. I acknowledge that the cultural profile and political context of Afghanistan, for example, the patriarchal culture (Hayward & Karim, 2019) in rural neighborhoods influence the participation of women in higher education. Another factor contributing to the problem is the ongoing conflict. Despite some strategic decisions such as implementing flexible standards to increase women’s access to higher education, gender disparity continues to remain a huge challenge (Hayward & Karim, 2019; See *Figure 4*).
Lack of capacity has been a huge problem for public universities in Afghanistan. The problem is more tangible in rural universities where resources are scarce. However, political pressure at the local level and admission of students twice the capacity of these universities exacerbates the problem further at these universities. These decisions, in fact, make it hard for public universities to ensure quality with large classes and lack of resources. Depending on the institutions and their capacities, some institutions must divide students into two or three shifts: morning and afternoon, while others place 50 – 60 students in a classroom that is supposed to serve 30 students. The problem is more tangible in newly established universities, mainly teaching universities that lack adequate capacity while their admissions are staggering each year. Admitting more students to public HEIs has become a common trend in Afghanistan as MoHE tries to conform to political pressures. Figure 5 portrays the student-faculty ratio at public and private universities. As one can see, private universities have a much lower student-faculty ratio.
than the public ones, hence they potentially offer better quality. However, analyzing private HEIs is beyond the scope of the current research.

![Student-faculty ratio at public and private universities](image)

**Figure 5** Student-faculty ratio at public and private universities (adapted from MoHE, 2020).

**Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Afghanistan**

Prior to the establishment of the accreditation framework, Afghanistan lacked a systematic process to oversee the quality of educational programs and institutions (Hayward, 2015). Instead, this responsibility was delegated to HEIs, while MoHE supervised the implementation of regulations and bylaws remotely (Babury & Hayward, 2014). This suggests that QAA was a new concept to HEIs (Hayward, 2015). Since the establishment of the accreditation framework and a mechanism to implement it, much progress has occurred over the past few years (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018). To better understand the processes involved and their outcome, in the following paragraphs, I provide a brief historical development of QAA in Afghanistan.
**Historical Trend**

In 2009, MoHE recognized accreditation as a mechanism to improve quality, therefore MoHE adopted a U.S.-based institutional accreditation system (Hayward, 2015; MoHE, 2016). With the assistance of international donor-funded projects, MoHE developed policies and procedures to implement institutional accreditation across all universities (Couch, 2019). The framework was initially pilot-tested in four Kabul-based public universities (Babury & Hayward, 2014). After adjusting the framework, in 2011, the QAA framework with 12 standards was implemented in all qualified public universities (Welch & Wahidyar, 2019). The institutional accreditation intends to provide national accreditation status for five years and universities need to reapply for accreditation once the timeline is complete (Hayward, 2015).

However, since QAA was a new experience in the country (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018), the implementation of institutional accreditation led to diverse responses among universities as the process took multiple years to accredit one university and research universities made more progress towards achieving accreditation compared to the teaching ones. MoHE adopted a phased accreditation approach, prescribing the universities to complete two candidacy phases before they can be accredited (Azimi & Balakarzai, 2020). To assess the progress of HEIs at each phase of accreditation, QAAD developed a numeric system. For instance, a university has to achieve a score of 51-70 to qualify for phase one accreditation candidacy, a score of 71-84 to qualify for phase two accreditation candidacy, and a score of 85 and above to complete phase three or complete accreditation (QAAD, 2019).
The establishment of the QAA policy gave birth to two strategic decisions: (1) the development of the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate (QAAD) in 2012, and (2) a simultaneous introduction of a semi-voluntary accreditation process for public and private HEIs (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018; Taheryar, 2017). Since QAA was a new concept, primary steps included an array of decision-making processes to gain the support of key stakeholders at major universities. Following the policy formulation process, the MoHE facilitated a number of workshops and seminars for university representatives in order to introduce the accreditation framework, and articulate MoHE’s expectations for HEIs (Hayward, 2015). Thus, over eight years almost all research universities achieved national accreditation status while most teaching universities are still in the candidacy phases (MoHE, 2020).

In addition, the establishment of QAA included two independent steps (MoHE, 2016). First, at the national level, MoHE established a new structure that is responsible for technical and administrative responsibilities (Ibrahimi, 2014). The technical activities are handled by the QAA commission – staffed with 9 senior faculty members from public universities and 35 national peer-reviewers who are appointed on a need basis (MoHE, 2016). The national Commission primarily reviews self-assessment reports (SARs) and peer-review reports (PRRs), makes accreditation recommendations, clarifies technical issues, and has planned visits to increase awareness (QAAD, 2019; Hayward, 2015). Similarly, peer-reviewers conduct organized evaluations of institutions based on a pre-determined checklist and report to the QAA Commission (Hayward, 2017). However, administrative responsibilities are carried out by QAAD’s full-time staff (MoHE, 2016). They are responsible to identify peer-reviewers, facilitating training and workshops,
coordinating site visits, disseminating assessment results, and handling routine operations (MoHE, 2016).

Second, at the institution level, universities are required to establish internal quality assurance units (IQAUs), and sub-units at the college and program levels (QAAD, 2019). Similar to arrangements at the national level, universities are responsible to allocate staff, space, and resources for QAA activities (MoHE, 2016). According to MoHE bylaws, IQAUs are expected to operate independently, and their members should be selected among experienced faculty members to assess the quality of education services and facilities regularly and to prepare assessment reports as needed (MoHE, 2016). However, IQAUs are not immune from political interference, as university leaders often censor their findings (See the findings chapter).

Implementing institutional accreditation in Afghanistan is a lengthy process that involves various steps. The process begins with the registration to undergo accreditation, followed by the completion of a self-assessment report (SAR) by the university, and a desk review of SAR by the QAA Commission (MoHE, 2016). The Commission either approves the SAR and/or requests further details and documentation. Once the SAR is satisfactory, QAAD schedules a peer review visit to verify information in SAR and evaluate the university. Peer reviewers are expected to provide a report to QAA Commission based on their visit. The QAA Commission reviews the peer review report and either approves them or requests clarifications. The same process repeats at each phase of accreditation until a university satisfies all accreditation requirements. Once completed all requirements, a university will receive the national accreditation status for
a period of five years. *Figure 6* captures the accreditation cycle in Afghanistan.

![Figure 6 Accreditation process/cycles in Afghanistan (adapted from QAAD, 2019).](image)

Despite critiques for being centered on economic prosperity and less on social cohesion (Couch, 2019), as discussed in the findings, the implementation of accreditation has been successful in Afghanistan. This success is due to the resilience of faculty and staff at HEIs (Mussawy, 2020) in the event of limited resources and a lack of expertise (Welch & Wahidyar, 2019). For example, in 2020, nearly all public teaching and research universities were in phases 1-3 of the accreditation cycle (MoHE, 2020). Furthermore, the QAA of Afghanistan has joined Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) to integrate the international experience. The accreditation framework was revised in 2016 in order to reflect major components of APQN (Mussawy & Rossman, 2021).
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality assurance is a significant activity in modern higher education systems (Altbach & Hazelkorn, 2018; Blanco & Metcalfe, 2020; Harvey & Williams, 2010a; Hayward, 2017). Building on its long history in Japan, the US, and UK, quality assurance has been widely adopted by high-income countries with advanced higher education systems (e.g., Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries), middle income and developing nations since the 1990s (Cheng, 2016; Harvey, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2021; Salmi, 2015; Williams, 2016). These quality assurance systems have expanded through quality assurance networks and international conventions (Beerkens, 2015; Salmi, 2015). In Europe, for example, the Bologna Process paved the way for European countries and some countries in Asia, such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and others, to establish quality assurance systems that comply with European quality standards (Amaral & Rosa, 2010; Huisman, 2019; Stensaker et al., 2011). Compliance with the Bologna Process allows higher education institutions to recognize credits and degree programs from other member countries (Van der Wende, 2000). Similarly, the interest in quality assurance in developing nations began in the 1990s with “Mexico in 1991, Colombia in 1993, India and Indonesia in 1994”, and the rest in the 2000s (Nguyen et al., 2021; Salmi, 2015, p.5). More specifically, despite a slow start, nearly all countries (in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East) have established QAA in the past two decades (Hanh et al., 2020; Hayward, 2017; Mussawy & Rossman, 2021; Welch & Wahidyar, 2019).
Acknowledging contested views in defining quality in higher education, Harvey (2007) argues that quality assurance processes and the “concept of quality” are two distinct issues as the latter describes “the nature of learning” while the former assures the public “about the adequacy of that processes of learning” (p. 5). However, internationalization, mass higher education, and contextual circumstances function as the key drivers of the spread of quality assurance in higher education (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Lomas, 2002; Van der Wende, 2000). Other tangible drivers, according to the literature, are poor quality, growth of private higher education, disconnection between education degrees and employment, limited funding, competition for bright students, and public pressure for accountability (Ali et al., 2018; Blanco-Ramirez & Berger, 2014; Harvey & Williams, 2010b; Hayward, 2017; Van Damme, 2002; Williams & de Rassenfosse, 2016; Woodhouse, 1999).

Many international development organizations, such as the British Council, DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), the World Bank, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), have contributed to the establishment of quality assurance systems in middle and low-income countries (Hayward, 2017; Salmi, 2015). These organizations provided funding and shared their technical expertise with the national governments to develop quality assurance systems in these countries (Salmi, 2015). The accreditation status, a measure of quality assurance, grants legitimacy to HEIs and allows students to transfer credits from one HEI to another at the local and international levels (Hayward, 2017; Salmi, 2015). The World Bank, in particular, has provided funding to establish the “International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), which only had eight members in 1991 and has grown
to over 300 members in 2021 (Salmi, 2015). These developments paved the way for the establishment of 17 regional and national quality assurance networks such as AfriQAN (Quality Assurance Network for Africa), ANGQHE (Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), APQN (Asia-Pacific Quality Network), and others (INQAAHE, 2021; Salmi, 2015).

There are two perspectives about the origin of quality assurance in higher education. The first one suggests that quality assurance, accreditation, in particular, was established in the United States in the 1880s to ensure “public health and safety and to protect the public interest” (Eaton, 2015, p.1). Other countries also developed internal and external quality evaluation systems to reassure the public about the quality of higher education services, to account for public and private funding, to ensure the relevance of education curriculum and graduates’ skills, and to shield HEIs against the external environment (Lombardi, 2013; Rosa & Amaral, 2007; Van Damme, 2002). Given this development, accreditation and total quality management (TQM) models have been adopted as mechanisms to revolutionize higher education, improve quality, and equip universities with adequate tools to survive in a dynamic environment (Birnbaum, 2000; Harvey & Williams, 2010a; Houston, 2007). The quality assurance and accreditation processes require HEIs to operate like business enterprises with specific missions, goals, and outcomes and be accountable to customers (Nair et al., 2010).

The second perspective suggests that quality assurance emerged in response to rapid expansion and concern over the quality of higher education (Ghaffar & Abrizah, 2017). The increased demand coupled with diverse providers encouraged the governments and academic communities to establish quality assurance systems to protect
higher education, maintain and improve quality, and increase transparency and accountability (Harvey, 2006; Rosa & Amaral, 2007). While many refer to accreditation as the dominant approach to enhance quality and increase accountability (Cheng, 2016; Ryan, 2016), a recent study by Davis (2017) shows that procedural principles have undermined the meaningfulness of quality assurance and accreditation. Nonetheless, quality assurance has been transformed into a compliance protocol in many contexts (Lomas, 2004; Mussawy & Rossman, 2018; Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016).

Tracing the historical origin of quality assurance movements in higher education, some studies underscore two essential interventions (Cooper, 2003; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). Initially, quality was conceptualized from an academic standpoint, emphasizing student learning mediated through curriculum content and pedagogy (Cooper, 2003; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). However, from the mid-90s onward, with the emergence of the private sector and reduced public funding for higher education, the role of students, parents, and other stakeholders became instrumental in defining quality outcomes and processes (Cooper, 2003; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). Other studies also support that the 1990s was a historic period for a rapid transition to institutionalize higher education and enforce quality assurance measures, resulting in worldwide adoption of accreditation and quality management models (Cheng, 2016; Harvey, 2006; Schindler et al., 2015).

In Afghanistan, institutional accreditation was adopted as the primary mechanism to ensure the quality of higher education beginning in 2009 (MoHE, 2016; QAAD, 2020). Influenced by models in the U.S. and UK, quality assurance in Afghanistan aims at improving quality amid a rapid system expansion, addressing concerns about a decline in
quality, and managing the emergence of a large private higher education sector (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018). Along with implementing accreditation, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) invested in improving the quality of teaching and learning experiences, building the capacity of faculty members, and revising curricula (Babury & Hayward, 2014; Mussawy & Rossman, 2021, QAAD, 2020; Shakir, 2012).

To oversee the accreditation process at the national level, MoHE established the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate (QAAD) in 2012 (QAAD, 2020). However, HEIs were responsible for maintaining and improving quality at the institutional and program levels (Couch, 2019; MoHE, 2016). As a new experience, institutional accreditation started on a voluntary basis in 2012 (Hayward, 2015), followed by the introduction of programmatic accreditation in 2020 (Mussawy & Rossman, 2021). Given that accreditation requires HEIs to comply with pre-determined quality standards, the quality assurance experience in Afghanistan emphasizes inputs, processes, and outputs (Mussawy & Rossman, 2021). Contextual factors, nevertheless, influence accreditation outcomes, which translate into the accreditation status for HEIs and employment opportunities for graduates (Mussawy, 2020).

Given that defining quality in higher education is central in quality assurance discourse, the next section discusses definitions of quality in the literature. It also synthesizes the literature on defining the quality of higher education in Afghanistan.

**Definitions of Quality**

The term quality in higher education refers to an abstract, multidimensional, subjective construct, which has attracted diverse interpretations (Green, 1994; Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993; Lomas, 2004). While there is no agreement on a standard
definition to satisfy all stakeholders, many scholars have attempted to make sense of it by proposing definitions. Cheng and Tam (1997) define quality in higher education as a “set of elements in the input, process, and output” that satisfy stakeholders’ expectations (p. 23). However, Harvey (2004-20) believes that people use quality as “a generic term to describe various characteristics and functions of higher education” (p.1). The literature suggests that given the complexity of defining quality, quality assurance agencies and governments develop standards, benchmarks, criteria, and threshold to assess and measure quality at the institutional and program levels (CHEA, 2021; Dlacic et al., 2014; Schindler et al., 2015).

Failing to provide a single definition that satisfies all stakeholders, the academic community, including scholars and practitioners, suggests concepts and phrases that describe various aspects of quality in higher education. In the following section, I discuss some prominent definitions of quality using Harvey and Green’s (1993) seminal framework to conceptualize quality in higher education.

**Quality as Exceptional or Excellence**

Conceptualizing quality as *exceptional* or *excellence* indicates a conventional view that higher education functions and services are of superb quality, free of errors (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Harvey & Green, 1993). Other terms that are used parallel to the definition of quality as excellence, and exceptional are perfect, best, special, zero error, high standards, and flawless (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993). Although desirable, only a limited number of people, for instance, elites, can achieve excellence (Harvey, 2006). In other words, quality is “operationalized as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement,” which translates into exceeding
the standards (Harvey, 2007; p.6). Understanding quality as excellence distinguishes HEIs based on their reputation, selectivity, qualification, and recognition of their academics and the complexities of their system and resources viewed through public and academic lenses (Harvey, 2006).

Although the terms *excellence* and *exceptional* receive significant attention in quality literature, recent studies debate its relevance in academic settings. For instance, Cheng (2016) and Elassy (2014) critique quality as excellence and exceptional for its limited scope that only serves elite universities, primarily based on their reputations and normative standards, rather than a university’s actual service/outcomes. Defining quality as excellence and “professionalism” lacks any identifiable criteria to assess objectively (Cheng, 2016, p. 7). Nevertheless, it benefits universities with high reputations, such as Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, to name a few, that primarily serve an elite group of students (Elassy, 2014; Harvey, 2006). More specifically, universities that serve students with diverse backgrounds – not just elite students – are excluded from the notion of quality as excellence (Blanco-Ramirez & Berger, 2014; Elassy, 2014).

**Quality as Purposeful – Fitness for Purpose**

Defining quality as purposeful/fitness for purpose suggests ways that university activities correspond to its intended mission and goals, customer satisfaction, and externally accepted standards (Bower et al., 2018; Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Green, 1994; Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993; Kundu, 2017; Lagrosen et al., 2004). Quality as fitness for purpose has two connotations: one refers to internal purposes such as the institutional mission, goals, and expectations, and the other connotation serves external stakeholders such as students, parents, employers, and accreditation standards
Harvey, 2007; Matorera, 2015; Schindler et al., 2015). Cheng (2016) and Matorera (2015) studied the roots of conceptualizing quality as “fitness for purpose.” They learned that this definition was derived from corporate Total Quality Management (TQM) models, emphasizing assessment-based standards. Therefore, the internal quality evaluation focuses on self-assessment and internal audits (Cheng, 2016; Matorera, 2015). In contrast, external evaluation refers to an assessment carried out by professional communities such as accreditation agencies using pre-defined standards, or institutions’ intended missions, program specifications/qualifications, or “state of the art” – commonly agreed standards (Harvey, 2007; Hayward, 2017, p. 21).

While in theory, “fitness for purpose” highlights a mission-driven definition of quality, in practice, institutions and programs need to satisfy expectations of governments, professional communities, and international standards (Harvey, 2007; Hayward, 2017; Salmi, 2015). Quality as fitness for purpose also equates with the corporate notion of compliance with prescribed standards and benchmarks (Green, 1994; Hayward, 2015). Many countries and institutions have adapted “fitness for purpose” as the core definition of quality in their higher education system (Harvey & Williams, 2010a). However, critics contest a corporate-driven definition of quality, arguing that quality in higher education is too complex to be defined and understood only from the corporate frame of reference (Cheng, 2016; Skolnik, 2010).

**Quality as Accountability – Value for Money**

The notion of quality as value for money focuses on economic outcomes, or results-driven which centers on accountability – whether HEIs and academic programs prepare graduates with adequate knowledge and skills to be employed (Harvey & Green,
1993). The notion of accountability also underscores efficiency in using resources (financial, physical, and human) to sustain and improve the quality of education services (Harvey, 2006). Furthermore, quality as a means of accountability examines whether university outputs and outcomes conform to “performance indicators on issues such as retention and completion, graduate employment statistics and research assessment exercise” (Harvey, 2007, p. 12). For example, in the United States, accreditors also evaluate institutions and programs to ensure they have “reliable information about academic quality and student achievement to foster continuing public confidence and investment” (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; CHEA, 2006, p. 8; Harvey, 2007).

Defining quality as value for money emphasizes institution/program accountability for public investment and how the quality of products/services satisfy funders and customers/users (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2013; Harvey & Green, 1993; Schindler et al., 2015). While funders, in most cases governments, are often concerned with efficiency in using resources, for university stakeholders and academics, any reductions in funding affect the quality of higher education negatively (Harvey, 2007; Lagrosen et al., 2004; Matorera, 2015). Acknowledging that customer satisfaction has become a prominent feature of modern higher education, Houston (2006) argues for a balanced approach that appreciates academic values and customer satisfaction to protect the value of professionalism in higher education. Nevertheless, for some scholars, over-emphasizing accountability as the indicator of quality undermines academic freedom and institutional autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Kundu, 2017).
**Quality as Transformation**

Quality as transformation is concerned with student learning and competency development (Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993). The notion of transformation suggests that the teaching and learning experiences empower learners with new knowledge and skills – “a change from one state to another” (Harvey, 2004-2021, p.5). In other words, educational interventions equip learners with new knowledge, skill sets, and emotional readiness (Cheng, 2016; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Schindler et al., 2015). Similarly, Cheng (2016) adds that transformation involves “intellectual, critical, personal, emotional and physical” development in students/learners (p. 11).

While some use transformation in parallel with enhancement, improvement, and value-added (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Houston, 2008), others argue that transformation refers to deep learning and fundamental change, rooted in transformative learning literature (Harvey, 2006; Samples, 1999). More specifically, Harvey (2006) argues that defining transformation as enhancement or “added value” (p. 14) falls short of addressing the dynamic process involved in learning. According to him:

Transformation requires, *inter alia*, shifting from teaching to learning; encouraging critical reflection; developing explicit skills, attitudes, and abilities as well as knowledge; developing appropriate assessment procedures; rewarding transformative teaching; encouraging discussion of pedagogy; and linking quality improvement to learning. (Harvey, 2006, p. 14).

This elaboration suggests that defining quality as transformation goes beyond individual students and involves transformation at the institutional and program levels (Harvey, 2006).
Harvey and Green (1993) initially suggested a transformative lens to quality, and other scholars like Harvey and Knight (1996) and Van Kemende et al. (2008) corroborated this definition for focusing on learning experience. However, Cheng (2016) highlights a gap in defining quality as transformation and how accreditation agencies intend to measure quality. Cheng (2016) critiques quality assurance agencies for using simplified measures such as graduate employment as indicators of quality. According to him, using employment as an indicator of quality is too simplified and unrealistic because employment is often beyond the control of academic institutions (Cheng, 2016).

**Comparing Alternative Conceptions of Quality**

Quality as “perfection” (Harvey & Green, 1993) and “zero errors” (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002) is derived from corporations that emphasize conformity of higher education products and services to established standards without any flaws. However, the notions of perfection and zero errors have been excluded as an indicator of quality (Lomas, 2002; Watty, 2006), given the argument that higher education institutions educate learners/graduates who, unlike business products and services, possess heterogeneous characteristics/personalities. Therefore, Harvey’s (2007) recent work equates perfection with “consistency” that defines quality “as conformance to specification, which requires outcomes to be delivered consistently,” and this characterization is only attainable in a “quality culture” (p.8). Nevertheless, Harvey (2007) acknowledges that quality consistency/reliability is more attuned to administrative processes such as record keeping, timely processing of students’ grades, course schedules, and others.
Quality as a benchmark, threshold, standard, and state of the art describes higher education inputs, outcomes, services, and processes in reference to (pre)determined or established criteria, indicators, and strategies (Campbell & Rozsnyai; Harvey, 2004-2020; Hayward, 2017). Informed by quality assurance, measurement and evaluation are central in determining whether HEIs or programs satisfy the threshold or minimum standards (Harvey, 2004-2020). The process involves making comparisons to evaluate the extent to which institutions and programs conform to established benchmarks/standards (Harvey, 2007). In practical forms, evaluation of quality often involves comparing one educational institution or program to another (Lombardi, 2018).

Lastly, describing quality as a “relative” vs. an “absolute” concept (Harvey & Green, 1993) fits nicely in Blanco-Ramírez and Berger’s (2013) conceptual framework, which defines quality as a value in international contexts. For Blanco-Ramírez and Berger (2013), making sense of quality concerning “access, relevance and investment” captures both social and economic aspects of defining modern higher education through an international lens (p. 97). While the concepts of relevance and investment emphasize higher education outcomes and “value for money” (Harvey & Green, 1993), “access” adds a social justice lens, illustrating who can benefit and who can attend a university education (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2013). In other words, the latter definition emphasizes access and relevance, which are significantly critical in developing nations.

**Definition of Quality in Afghanistan**

As it is in other contexts, higher education quality is vaguely defined in Afghanistan (Abdulbaqi, 2009; Mussawy & Rossman, 2018; Roof, 2015). While the policy documents emphasize processes and economic drivers (Babury & Hayward, 2014;
Couch, 2019; Mussawy & Rossman, 2018), the existing literature on higher education in Afghanistan underscores improvements of the status quo (Aturupane et al., 2013; Babury & Hayward, 2013; Hayward, 2015). For instance, the literature discusses the improvement in curriculum relevance, the qualifications of faculty members, physical infrastructure, learning facilities, increased funding, and strategic management as indicators of quality (Ibrahimi, 2014; Mussawy & Rossman, 2018; Romanowski et al., 2007; Roof, 2015). These definitions underscore an assumption of a causal – quality inputs and processes result in quality outcomes (Harvey, 2007). Nevertheless, Taheryar’s (2017) case study on perceptions of quality at a public university in Afghanistan also reveals that quality means conformance to accreditation standards for some stakeholders. Since the terms quality as a concept and quality assurance as a process are interconnected, the following section discusses definitions of quality assurance in higher education.

**Definition of Quality Assurance**

Despite debates over the definition of quality assurance in higher education, Harvey (2004-20) offers a core definition stating, “Assurance of quality in higher education is the collection of policies, procedures, systems, and practices internal or external to the organization designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality” (para.1). Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) also refer to quality assurance as “an all-embracing term covering all the policies, processes, and actions through which the quality of higher education is maintained and developed (p. 32.) Harvey (2004-20) adds that quality assurance is used “as a shorthand for all forms of external quality monitoring, evaluation or review” (para.2).
The current definitions emphasize establishing institutions and mechanisms to convince stakeholders of the quality of higher education services and outcomes (Harvey, 2006). Similarly, UNESCO provides an expanded definition and describes quality assurance as a “continuous process of evaluation (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programs” (Vlasceanu et al., 2007, p. 74). Further, Vlasceanu et al. (2007) add that as a policy, quality assurance underscores “accountability and improvement” (p.74). Other studies elaborate that quality assurance serves as a label to refer to many functions and processes varying in focus on consistency, improvement, accountability to public confirmation that higher education institutions or programs satisfy the established standards, thresholds, or benchmarks (CHEA, 2021; ENQA, 2003; Williams; 2011; Woodhouse, 1999).

For scholars like De-Graft (2019), quality assurance “provides the direction” to universities to ensure the internal quality of education service and learning outcomes to fit “into the knowledge economy” (p. 31). Ali et al. (2018) consolidate the literature on quality assurance stating that conceptions describing it emphasize “a culture of continuous institutional and professional development” that nurtures stakeholder accountability and satisfies learning communities and communities of practice (p.319). Harvey (2004-20) explains that the literature uses various terms such as “audit, evaluation, accreditation, benchmarking, measurement, and peer review,” to name a few, while referencing quality assurance (para. 8). Similarly, others argue that the internationalization of higher education serves as the main driver for quality assurance, which encourages establishing quality assurance networks and conventions such as the
Bologna Process in Europe to establish comparable quality assurance programs and higher education systems (Ali et al., 2018). Lastly, quality standards in higher education take the form of “benchmarking and guidance” of quality assurance activities but not as “rigid compliance instruments” (Ali et al., 2018, p. 320).

**Quality Assurance Mechanisms**

While Harvey identifies four mechanisms: “accreditation, audit, assessment and standards” (2007, p. 5), quality management models and accreditation have been widely used as the primary quality assurance mechanisms (Chen, 2011; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Rosa & Amaral, 2007). Below, I discuss each of them briefly.

**Quality Management Models (QMMs)**

Derived from corporate organizations, QMMs emphasize ongoing process and outcome improvement, customer satisfaction, collaboration and teamwork, engagement, and leadership (Mishra, 2007; Nabaho et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2009; Sunder, 2016). However, academics have resisted implementing QMMs in higher education (Akinyemi & Abiddin, 2013; Ansary et al., 2014; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002). QMMs emphasize collaboration among technical and operational units at higher education institutions by enforcing strict regulations, which would undermine academic freedom and faculty autonomy (Elhoseny et al., 2016; Rosa & Amaral, 2007). Acknowledging that QMMs increase the efficiency of operations, critics argue that the teaching and learning processes are too subtle to assess using QMMs (Quinn et al., 2009). Scholars also doubt universities’ ability to handle fixed restrictions (Birnbaum, 2000; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002).
Table 1 provides a brief overview, and key features of prominent QMMs adapted in higher education. As highlighted in Table 1, a common pattern is present in all models that emphasize a combination of processes and outcomes such as consistency, efficiency, ongoing improvement, and customer satisfaction. For instance, Total Quality Care (TQC) is more attuned to the higher education context (Barnett, 1992). According to Elhoseny et al. (2017), TQC divides university functions into two categories: (a) “protective belt and auxiliary belt,” the first focusing on student learning experience and curriculum relevance, the latter emphasizing institutional linkages and capacity (p. 198).
Table 1 Comparative Analysis of Implementing Quality Management Models in Higher Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Total Quality Management (TQM)</th>
<th>Six Sigma</th>
<th>ISO 9000-2000</th>
<th>Quality Function Deployment (QFD)</th>
<th>Malcolm Baldridge Quality Award</th>
<th>Total Quality Care (TQC)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>TQM is a holistic model to improve effectiveness, efficiency, cohesiveness, flexibility, and competitiveness.</td>
<td>Six Sigma is a systematic methodology for process improvement.</td>
<td>ISO is a European model that stands for International Organization for Standardization. It is concerned with process improvement.</td>
<td>QFD is a customer-driven quality expectation of products and services.</td>
<td>A model by the National Institute of Standards and Technology It focuses on process &amp; outcome improvement</td>
<td>TQC emphasizes institutional culture and frames quality as critical dialogue among academics with an emphasis on student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Features</td>
<td>• Change in attitude, • Autonomy • Leadership • Commitment • Customer-satisfaction • Ongoing improvement • Total involvement • Training and education • Reward &amp; recognition • Teamwork • Process structure and alignment</td>
<td>• Define process; Reduces variation; • Measure quality by customers; • Set improvement goals; • Analyze problem causes; • Improve process; and • Control – monitor over time.</td>
<td>• Customer expectations; • Ongoing improvement; • Regulations-driven; Leadership-oriented; Process effective &amp; efficiency; • Process and systems approach; • People involvement; and Fact-based decisions.</td>
<td>• Prioritize customer satisfaction through product &amp; services; • Align products &amp; services with a plan; and • Develop processes to satisfy the plan</td>
<td>• Leadership; • Strategic planning; • Customer and market focus; • Measurement, analysis, knowledge development; • Human resource mobilization and capacity building; • Process management; and • Business results.</td>
<td>• Protective belt • Teaching and learning; • Student assessment; • Staff development; • Curriculum • Auxiliary belt • Research &amp; publication; • Institutional academic development; • Access &amp; recruitment; and • Links with industry.</td>
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**Accreditation**

Accreditation is referred to as the dominant quality assurance approach that governments and quality assurance agencies use to assess quality (Harvey & Williams, 2010a; Hayward, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2021). The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in the United States defines accreditation as “a process of external quality review created and used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement” (Eaton, 2006, p. 1). Similarly, Harvey (2004-20) states, “Accreditation is the establishment of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, program or module of study” (p.1). Other authors, like Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002), assert that accreditation refers to “a formal recognition of the fulfillment of minimum, publicly stated standards” (p.165). Lastly, Vlasceanu et al. (2007) describe accreditation as an external evaluation carried out by [public] and private institution/s to determine whether universities or programs satisfy the minimum quality standards. Since accreditation has become a standard mechanism for accreditation agencies and government institutions (INQAAHE, 2021), describing its scope: institutional and programmatic is important.

**Institutional Accreditation.** Institutional accreditation focuses on the extent to which an institution of higher education meets thresholds, for instance for faculty qualifications, student retention and graduation rates, curricula relevance, research outputs, educational and physical resources, and finance and technology (CHEA, 2021; Harvey, 2004-20; Nguyen et al., 2021). Institutional accreditation also grants institutions legitimacy and a “license to operate” (Harvey, 2004, p.2). In the United States and Europe, independent organizations are in charge of institutional accreditation (CHEA,
developing nations, both public and private institutions carry out accreditation (Brunner & Tillett, 2007; Harvey, 2004-20; Huisman, 2019).

**Program Accreditation.** According to Harvey (2004), programmatic accreditation refers to “professional accreditation,” which focuses on specific programs or disciplines (p. 2). The rationale for implementing accreditation at the program level is to ensure “the academic standing of the program or the ability of the program to produce graduates with professional competence” (Harvey, 2004-20, p.1). For example, in the United States, “67 programmatic and 18 institutional accrediting organizations” operate to ensure quality assurance and improvement (CHEA, 2006; Eaton, 2013, p. 4). The goal of programmatic accreditation is to evaluate “whether the study programs appropriately prepare graduates to enter a profession” (Harvey, 2004, p. 2). In some countries, such as those in Western Europe, accreditors evaluate an institution and program against their missions and stated goals (CHEA, 2021; Frank et al., 2012; Harvey, 2004; Hayward, 2017). Overall, INQAAHE (2021) describes accreditation as a formal quality assurance process that certifies whether higher education institutions or programs meet minimum requirements. Since Afghanistan adopted accreditation as a mechanism to improve quality, MoHE defines it as follows:

Accreditation is a process of external quality review of higher education institutions and programs for quality assurance and quality improvement purposes to ensure that they meet existing standards. These standards focus on faculty members, teaching, research, service, infrastructure, financial viability, sustainability, outcomes, and compliance with existing laws (MoHE, 2016, p. 1).
Similar to the definitions presented in the literature, this definition emphasizes the external evaluation of institutions and programs against pre-determined standards. The definition also draws on contextual circumstances of higher education in the country by highlighting the effectiveness of human and material resources.

**The Purpose of Quality Assurance and Accreditation**

Accountability and improvement are the primary purposes of quality assurance and accreditation (CHEA, 2021; Harvey, 2007; Harvey & Newton, 2007; Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2007). The accreditation status ensures the public that higher education institutions or programs meet the standards, for example, in teaching and learning, faculty member qualifications, and physical and educational resources (CHEA, 2006). The accountability purpose of QAA focuses on three components: (a) transparency regarding the use of financial and material resources, (b) institution/program’s ability to provide a learning experience for students that match the established benchmarks, and (c) the capacity to produce academic and financial records that are useful to public and private funders (CHEA, 2006; Harvey 2007). The improvement component focuses on institutional plans and processes for continuous improvement of the learning experience and educational outcomes (Harvey & Newton, 2007).

In addition to accountability and improvement, Harvey (2007) argues that quality assurance and accreditation function as a control and compliance protocol. This suggests assuring the “integrity of the higher education sector”, which also coincides with the challenges of managing the rapid growth of for-profit private higher education institutions and a decline in the quality of education services (Harvey, 2007, p. 4; Hayward, 2017). For instance, accreditation in developing nations helped the accrediting
organizations to identify poor quality HEIs and resulted in the closure of “18 universities in Albania, ten universities in Romania, five universities in Ethiopia, 100 HEIs in Kenya, nine HEIs in Nigeria, and an international business school in the Philippines” (Salmi, 2015, p. 9). Blanco-Ramírez and Luu (2018) also found that faculty members at three Canadian universities perceived accreditation as a non-beneficial process. According to them, "accreditation is a multi-year process rather than a single episode," which contributes to the resistance of faculty and staff members (Blanco- Ramírez & Luu, 2018, p. 995).

Other purposes of quality assurance and accreditation vary depending on the context. Transferring credits and courses at the national and international levels seems to be an important reason for enforcing accreditation (Hayward, 2017; Rosa et al., 2012; Stensaker, 2007). In addition to granting students’ the ability to transfer credits or benefits and funding from federal and state, in the United States for example, accreditation status ensures employers of the quality of the graduates of institutions (Blanco, 2021; Eaton, 2015). Further, aside from generic assumptions of accountability and compliance (Rowlands, 2012), quality assurance nurtures other purposes such as “communication, motivation, control, improvement and innovation” (Rosa et al., 2012, p. 349). Lastly, many countries have adopted quality assurance and accreditation to foster a quality culture wherein individuals and institutions continuously improve the status quo (Dill, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Hayward, 2017).

Critics such as Imbulgoda (2019) states that quality assurance efforts at the international, national, and institutional levels have failed to address the primary goal of ‘quality improvement’; conversely, an increase in accountability, a secondary purpose,
dominates quality assurance practices. This observation suggests that university stakeholders treat quality assurance as a form of compliance to externally developed standards and regulations without internalizing the process and introducing it as a part of organizational culture (Imbulgoda, 2019; Kalayci et al., 2012). Further, critics believe that quality evaluations resemble “the ideological symbol that legitimates government policy to increase productivity and control while reducing resources” (Taousanidis & Antoniadou, 2010, p. 92). In other words, quality assurance mechanisms are often subjective and politically driven and may put higher education at risk instead of promoting improvement if it is not given well thought (Taousanidis & Antoniadou, 2010).

**Establishing Quality Assurance Systems in Developing Countries**

Many countries in the developing world have adopted quality assurance and accreditation to improve quality and participate in the knowledge economy (Salmi, 2015). Nearly all of these countries have chosen accreditation as “the standard mode of quality assurance in higher education” (Hayward, 2017, p. 20). However, implementing quality assurance and accreditation has sometimes created more challenges for higher education institutions in developing countries rather than leading to improved quality (Lim, 1999; Suresh & Kumarvelu, 2017). In other words, most countries in the developing world have adopted the quality assurance and accreditation systems established in the developed countries (Lim, 1999). Since developed nations have sophisticated economies and advanced higher education systems, adopting their quality assurance models in developing countries does not match the realities of higher education institutions (Lim, 1999).
Although poor infrastructure and scarce resources are fundamental problems for higher education in many developing countries, some scholars express concerns about under-investment in higher education resources (Hayward, 2017; Salmi, 2017). An example from Ghana shows that with increased enrolment and expansion of the higher education system in recent years, public investment in higher education has not changed (De-Graft, 2019). Research indicates that investment in higher education directly affects the quality of teaching and learning, research, and services (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2014; Harvey & Newton, 2007; Salmi, 1992). Further, Salmi (2017) uncovers a lack of connection between degree programs and employment opportunities in developing countries. Salmi (2017) argues that governments can no longer afford maintaining a planned economy when the market economy and free trade have become so invasive that no country is immune from it. Therefore, universities need to train graduates with employable skills to survive in a competitive market (Salmi, 2017).

While the quality of higher education varies among developing nations, one can summarize the overlapping quality challenges as: mass enrollment, insufficient funding, low salaries, inadequate learning materials, underdeveloped medium of instruction, unqualified faculty members, and outdated degree programs that do not lead to employment, improper workplace spaces, and, in some cases, ongoing interference in the appointment of faculty and staff members (Altbach, 2013; Hayward, 2015; Lim, 1999; Suresh & Kumaravelu, 2017). Further, according to Lim (1999), implementing quality assurance methods developed elsewhere creates more problems than improving the status quo. For instance, Lim (1999) divides universities in developing nations into three categories: “elite, urban-based, and rural-based” (p. 381). According to him, among the
three, only “elite” universities have the potential to compete at the international level. At the same time, the latter two can barely meet the minimum requirements due to insufficient qualifications of academics and scarce resources (Lim, 1999, p. 381). This suggests that developing nations need to either customize quality standards developed elsewhere or establish their own standards that are informed by the internationally recognized standards and match the contextual realities.

Nevertheless, Lim (1999) argues that the quality assurance experience will be beneficial when the policies correspond to the contextual realities and are “simple in design, modest in the expectations, and realistic in the resources required for implementation.” (p. 389). This statement suggests the localization of international quality assurance experiences to fit into the contextual realities of developing nations. Similarly, other researchers support that quality assurance in higher education in developing countries should “be more pragmatic in policy, scope, and delivery that reflect current challenges and translate into core activities of teaching and learning, research and community engagement” (Abukari & Corner, 2020, p. 205). This argument suggests that higher education systems in developing nations need to carefully balance local needs and global expectations while developing quality assurance policies and practices (Abukari & Corner, 2020; Suresh & Kumarvelu, 2017). Although governments and states provide some funding for higher education, the survival of universities in the current globalization age depends heavily on their competitiveness and connections with the national and international market (Abukari & Corner, 2020; Hanh et al., 2020; Hayward, 2006).
The literature on higher education highlights factors affecting the quality of teaching and learning in developing nations (Harvey and Newton, 2007; Hayward, 2015/17; Salmi, 1992/2015/2017). According to Salmi (1992), “the quality of teaching and learning has declined as a result of overcrowding, inadequate staffing, deteriorating physical facilities, poor library resources and insufficient scientific equipment” (p. 21). Developing countries have exacerbated the problem by rapidly expanding the higher education system without scrutinizing the relevance of academic disciplines to the labor market, which has increased unemployment in countries such places as “Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Peru and Egypt” (Salmi, 1992, p.21).

However, Hayward (2017) believes that quality assurance and accreditation have improved the quality of teaching-learning and research to some extent. He argues that the process has not only increased individual and institutional dependability but has also helped HEIs to create public trust and guard higher education against corruption and poor quality (Hayward, 2017).

Although the rationale for establishing a quality assurance system is contextualized, Hayward (2017) explains that some countries use accreditation to guard against low-quality institutions and to make sure HEIs meet the minimum quality standards, which are informed by “state of the art” or “international standards” (p.24). Salmi (2015) adds that the poor quality of higher education has forced some countries in the developing world to enforce strict measures when universities and HEIs fail to satisfy quality standards. That being the case, “universities in many countries complain that accreditation procedures have become so bureaucratic and cumbersome that… [they] add little value to the actual quality of programs and pedagogical practices” (Salmi, 2015, p.
15). Furthermore, Hayward (2017) argues that quality assurance has transformed higher education in countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan and South Africa. The culture of external evaluation was non-existent, and peer-reviewers doing quality assessment needed hands-on experience and training to make judgments (Hayward, 2017). Further, Hayward (2017) summarizes that quality assurance “processes around the world are remarkably similar with respect to goals, methods, and expectations” (p. 22).

**History, Scope, and Governance of QAA in Developing Nations**

There is an ongoing debate whether developing nations need to create quality assurance systems and whether they should adopt best practices from elsewhere (Blanco-Ramirez & Berger, 2013; Hayward, 2017). A literature review on quality assurance and accreditation experience in some developing countries sheds light on the rationale, outcomes, and challenges of implementing quality assurance in these countries. The quality assurance experience in most countries in the developing world started in the 2000s (Hanh et al., 2019; Hayward, 2017; Lim, 2018; Salmi, 2015). For instance, quality assurance and accreditation systems in Europe started as a formal process in 1998, followed by the Bologna Process in 1999 (Huisman, 2019). Still, in other countries such as Australia, Malaysia, Bahrain, and South Africa, the process was established and revisited during the 1990s and early 2000s (Ali et al., 2018).

Countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, and Nigeria established quality assurance policies to ensure higher education institutions and programs comply with accreditation standards (Hanh et al., 2020; Nguyen & Shah, 2019). On the contrary, these countries use quality improvement as a means to ensure accreditation standards (Hanh et al., 2020; Harvey & Williams, 2010a). To manage external quality assurance and accreditation,
Vietnam and Malaysia have established single authorities: Vietnam Qualification Agency (VQA) and Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA). In contrast, Nigeria has established three accrediting institutions: the “National Universities Commission, National Board of Technical Education, and National Commission for Colleges of Education” (Hanh et al., 2020, p. 134). Although HEIs have autonomy in the areas of administration and finance, nearly all HEIs lack academic autonomy, particularly in admitting students, which is a key challenge for all three countries (Hanh et al., 2020). Lastly, according to Hanh et al. (2020), a balanced emphasis on internal and external quality assurance has helped higher education in Malaysia and Vietnam prosper. However, in Nigeria, quality assurance solely relies on external evaluations (Hanh et al., 2020).

Quality assurance and accreditation at public and private universities in selected countries in the Middle East – Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia – dates from the 2000s (Lai et al., 2016; Mussawy & Barns, 2020). Jordon and Egypt, for example, initially established accreditation to evaluate quality in the private higher education sector (Lai et al., 2016). Later, in the mid-2000s, accreditation became common to ensure quality at public and private HEIs (Mussawy & Barns, 2020). Similarly, Saudi Arabia established accreditation as a voluntary process in 2004 to ensure HEIs compliance with standards (Salmi, 2015). Then, in 2013, the Saudi kingdom made accreditation mandatory for all HEIs even if they had international accreditation status (Allam, 2020). A study of quality assurance in Saudi Arabia indicated that factors such as “teaching and learning, institutional resources, admission criteria, curriculum content, outcome and assessment, and pedagogy” were considered important in determining the quality of higher education in universities (Allam, 2020, p. 3-5).
While a survey of the literature on quality assurance development in developing nations provides a broader context, exploring the trend in the regional countries further assists in understating quality development in Afghanistan's higher education. The following section focuses on quality assurance and accreditation in regional countries that share culture, borders, or language with Afghanistan.

**Quality Assurance in the Region**

Reviewing the literature on the development of higher education in the region that focusses on quality assurance and accreditation helps this study draw implications for higher education quality in Afghanistan. For this purpose, I selected six countries that share culture, religion, language, history, and socio-political characteristics with Afghanistan. Pakistan and Iran, for example, not only share culture, language, and geographical borders, but they also have socio-political ties to Afghanistan. From a historical perspective, Iran and Pakistan have supported Shia and Sunni communities by establishing religious schools and training religious leaders and Islamic scholars in Afghanistan. In recent years, the two countries have provided academic exchange programs for thousands of adults in Afghanistan to pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees (MoHE, 2020). Since the expansion of higher education happened so rapidly in Afghanistan, some private universities have adopted curriculum and recruited faculty members from Iran and Pakistan. In addition, Iran has established three branch campuses – Islamic Azad, Al-Mustafa, and Payame-Noor universities – in Afghanistan. Given these interactions, examining higher education with a focus on quality assurance development in Pakistan and Iran seems relevant in investigating quality assurance and accreditation in Afghanistan.
**Quality Assurance in Pakistan**

Like many developing countries, the quality of higher education has been a significant concern in Pakistan (Batool & Qureshi, 2007). In 2002, Pakistan established the Higher Education Commission (HEC) to address quality in the higher education sector across the country (Khawaja et al., 2012). This reform resulted in the establishment of a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) at the national level and Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) at the institutional level (Khawaja et al., 2012). The HEC further expanded the higher education reform by adopting four-year bachelor's degrees and two-year master's degree programs so that Pakistan's degree programs would be compatible internationally (Khawaja et al., 2012, p.2). The HEC adopted the QAA system in 2004 based on the US model (Batool & Qureshi, 2007; Hayward, 2011; Herani et al., 2015).

The existing literature on quality assurance in Pakistan suggests that teaching quality has improved utilizing student-centered pedagogies, curriculum development, and awareness about quality assurance (Arif et al., 2019; Ayaz et al., 2020). A study of quality perceptions reveals that higher education stakeholders in Pakistan emphasize faculty qualifications, increased access, relevance, teaching/learning, and research (Memon et al., 2010). According to Mastoi et al. (2019), inputs, processes, and outputs drive quality in Pakistan HEIs. This definition incorporates the views of student parents and employers (Memon et al., 2010). However, Nisarulhaq et al. (2020) and Reid (2011) critique the current quality assurance management process for failing to engage and incentivize faculty and staff members. Other studies uncover quality assurance challenges and list factors such as inadequate financial resources, insufficient capacity, lack of awareness about quality assurance, the poor commitment of university leaders,
inadequate physical infrastructure, dated curricula, and the absence of a feedback loop to improve quality as significant challenges (Malik & Ameen, 2020; Rasool et al., 2019; Latafat, 2017).

The literature on quality assurance in Pakistan shows several commonalities and some important differences with Afghanistan's current quality assurance approach. While the two countries share faith, ancestral heritage, and culture, for example, Pashtu and Hazaragi (هزارگی) – a dialect of Farsi/Dari – languages, their higher education structures vary. Pakistan, for example, as former British colony, follows the British system. Higher education in Afghanistan, on the contrary, follows a Russian model due to the Russian invasion in 1979. Although Afghanistan was invaded by the British in early 20th century, they have not left any legacy on the education system.

In Pakistan, the recent higher education reform - 2002 onward – emphasizes decentralization, which resulted in establishing the Higher Education Commission (HEC), an independent organization to oversee higher education development at the national level (Khwaja et al., 2012). However, there is no comparable institution in Afghanistan (Mussawy, 2020). The higher education reform and new legislation in 2004 in Afghanistan paved the way for system expansion and the emergence of a robust private higher education sector (Babury & Hayward, 2014). As a result of these reforms, the two countries have adopted the academic credit system to replace the traditional fixed curriculum approach with no choice of courses for students (Hayward, 2017). Additionally, they instituted a US accreditation model, which is intended to be compatible with international standards (Hayward, 2015). The higher education sectors in
Afghanistan and Pakistan face similar challenges such as limited resources and inadequate human capacities that affect higher education quality in many ways.

However, the management and structure of institutional quality assurance vary between Afghanistan and Pakistan. For instance, the quality enhancement cells (QECs) in Pakistan HEIs have a separate budget line and report directly to the QAA agency (Batool & Qureshi, 2007). In contrast, institutional quality assurance units (IQAUs) in Afghanistan are part of the internal structure of HEIs, reporting to the HEIs (Babury & Hayward, 2014). Although IQAUs and QECs emphasize similar goals – improving higher education quality – the structural arrangement suggests that external quality assurance is emphasized more in Pakistan than in Afghanistan. One can trace the differences between the two countries in the governance structure of higher education. As a demonstration, the QAA in Pakistan is established within HEC, an autonomous organization. In contrast, the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate (QAAD) in Afghanistan is a department within MoHE – commissioned to develop quality assurance policies and oversee external quality assurance and accreditation (Mussawy & Rossman, 2021).

**Quality Assurance in Iran**

Although Iran and Afghanistan share language, culture, history, religion, and geographical borders, a literature review suggests that their higher education systems are considerably different. Organized efforts to assess higher education quality in Iran started with internal evaluation (self-assessment) of medical education in 1998, followed by non-medical fields in the years after (Bazargan, 2001; Haatemi et al., 2011). More precisely, Bazargan (2009) reports that the three steps were taken to build the foundation for a
national quality assurance system in Iran. These steps included the development of internal evaluation policies in 2003, followed by the establishment of the National Council for Internal Evaluation (NCIE), and the Quality Assessment Center in Tehran University in 2006 (Bazargan, 2009). However, the efforts were halted due to government interventions in turnover of NCIE leadership, quantitative expansion of HEIs, and re-centralization of higher education governance (Bazargan, 2009; Jafar-e-Thani et al., 2020).

Farasatkhah et al. (2008) characterize the quality of higher education in Iran as "very problematic" due to limited funding, poor curriculum relevance, and lack of student readiness (p. 3). For these authors, the evaluation of higher education quality has been sporadic, inconsistent, poorly managed, and too bureaucratic to be effective. Some authors critique the government for imposing political and ideological interests while failing to develop a systematic and rigorous quality assurance structure at the national level (Abbaspour et al., 2016). For instance, Farasatkhah et al. (2008) argue, "External evaluation through volunteering the universities and departments for site visits from their specialized peers… has never been institutionalized; rather, it was carried out typically in the form of auditors" (p. 135). The observation confirms the lack of an external quality assurance mechanism, which peer reviewers commonly carry out. The statement also suggests that in Iran, HEIs need to improve their quality by themselves (Abbaspour et al., 2016; Mujtabazadeh et al., 2018).

The current research shows that HEIs in Iran have a adopted a bottom-up approach to quality assurance (Bazargan, 2009 & Naseerian et al., 2013). Hence, several studies have proposed quality assurance models to improve the higher education quality
at the national, institutional, and program levels (Abbaspour et al., 2016; Mohammadzadeh et al., 2017; Motaherinizhad et al., 2012; Mujtabazadeh et al., 2018). Among others, Haatemi et al. (2011) and Naseerian et al. (2013) suggest establishing an independent quality assurance agency – autonomous from government interference – responsible for overseeing quality across all HEIs. Similarly, Bazargan (2009) advocates for a quality assurance network that emphasizes improvement over bureaucracy within the complex higher education system in Iran.

In the absence of national quality standards, recent research studies have attempted to identify quality problems and gaps in areas such as students expectations vs. institutional services, students vs. faculty members perceptions, and students vs. administrators experiences (Abili et al., 2011; Arefi et al., 2012; Gilavand & Maraghi, 2019; Yarmohammadian et al., 2011). For example, in a case study of the Urmia University in Azerbaijan province of Iran, Galavandi et al. (2017) found that the difference between student expectations and services was significant in both academic and non-academic aspects. Other problems noted were the lack of expertise in quality assurance and accreditation as a professional field (Naseerian et al., 2013), parallel evaluation structures (Haatemi et al., 2011), and the lack of coordination between policymakers and implementers (Jafare-Thani et al., 2020). Similarly, Naseerian et al. (2013) suggest that when the government uses evaluation results as a tool to interfere in a university's internal affairs, quality assurance turns into a political agenda, which results in the demotivation of university leaders and faculty members.

A focused review of the literature on quality assurance in Iran reveals a dilemma of state control vs. academic freedom, which is in contrast to the experience in
Afghanistan. The higher education system in Iran allows universities to exercise some autonomy in academic, finance, and administration areas – suggesting that HEIs make decisions about curriculum, the appointment of staff, student admissions, and students and parents sharing the cost of higher education. At the same time, the government oversees policies and provides part of the funding. Therefore, the relative institutional autonomy has allowed Iranian universities to use a bottom-up approach to quality assurance, although it was eventually sabotaged by government politics.

In contrast, the government is the sole funding source for public higher education in Afghanistan, with no contribution from students, parents, or alumni. Additionally, the quality assurance system was institutionalized as a top-down policy that encountered no significant resistance among public and private HEIs (Couch, 2019). The higher education sector in Iran lacks a national quality assurance structure to participate in regional quality assurance networks. In fact, the higher education system in Iran seems less willing to adopt Western quality assurance models due to ideological and political differences. The situation in Iran suggests that one cannot separate political and ideological factors in developing quality assurance systems. That being the case, the policymakers in Iran have failed to promote local quality standards and adapt quality frameworks from elsewhere.

**Quality Assurance in Central Asia**

Afghanistan shares several commonalities with the Central Asian countries. In addition to history and culture, these countries share the Soviet Union's legacy of centralized governance and higher education systems with Afghanistan. Central Asian countries have taken important steps to modernize the higher education sector and fit in
the international higher education structure by adopting the credit system, shifting five-year bachelor programs into four years, and developing quality assurance and accreditation. However, major decisions such as student admissions, faculty appointments, research funding, and budget allocation are controlled by the central government, as in Afghanistan. Hence, examining the development of quality assurance systems in Central Asia helps this study better describe and draw conclusions about the implications of quality assurance in Afghanistan.

The higher education sector in Central Asia experienced tremendous change soon after the USSR collapsed, and these countries claimed independence in 1991 (Brunner & Tillett, 2007). While the four Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan – adopted different approaches, they all emphasize higher education as an engine for the modern economy. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, expanded the higher education system by allowing both public and private sectors to contribute to the growing demand (DeYoung et al., 2018; Huisman, 2019). The higher education sector in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, in contrast, remains in control of the government with limited growth that does not satisfy the expectations of college applicants (Huisman, 2019; Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018).

The global changes in higher education have motivated these governments to develop national and adopt international quality standards to produce a relevant workforce (Huisman, 2019). In theory, these countries follow the European quality standards and Bologna Process for quality assurance, although three out of four are not signing members of the Bologna Convention. Below, I briefly discuss the quality assurance landscape in each country and its implications for Afghanistan.
Quality Assurance in Kazakhstan

Since its independence, the quality of higher education in Kazakhstan has fluctuated due to educational reform and the emergence of the private higher education sector (Bischof, 2018). In 2001, noticing a decline in higher education quality, the government of Kazakhstan issued a set of policies and standards to ensure quality at the institutional and program levels (Bischof, 2018; Brunner & Tillett, 2007). The government created several structures such as the "Committee for Supervision and Attestation, the National Center for Education Quality Assessment, and the National Accreditation Center" to oversee quality and enforce policies (Ahn et al., 2018, p. 210). Desperate to improve the quality of higher education overnight, in 2001, Kazakhstan enacted an untested "system of state accreditation," which granted accreditation to "59 universities" in just three days (Bischof, 2018, p. 87). Soon, the credibility of state accreditation was challenged, and the government had to replace it with "a centralized quality control process" that led to the "closure of many HEIs, branch campuses, and suspension of multiple programs" (Bischof, 2018, p. 86). As a result of the regular evaluation, the number of private HEIs dropped from 120 in 2001 to under 75 by 2015/16 (Ahn et al., 2018, p. 214; Nassipbayeva & Dalayeva, 2013).

Eager to align the higher education system with international standards, Kazakhstan signed the "Lisbon Convention in 1999 (an agreement related to the recognition of higher education qualification)" and became a signing member of the Bologna Process (Huisman, 2019, p. 475). To satisfy the Bologna Process, Kazakhstan adopted four-year undergraduate degree programs, established boards of trustees for
universities, and promised institutional autonomy (Ahn et al., 2018; Bilyalov, 2016; Nassipbayeva & Dalayeva, 2013).

Although granting institutional autonomy is one of the conditions for the Bologna Process, the government of Kazakhstan continues to set "educational standards (including curriculum), approve degree programs, and determine tuition and fees" (Ahn et al., 2018, p. 215). Several studies critique the centralized system for managing quality (Brunner & Tillett, 2007; Nassipbayeva & Dalayeva, 2013). Ahn et al. (2018), for instance, argue that because top-down policies require faculty members to teach multiple courses, the culture of rigorous research and publication seems absent. Insufficient payment is another essential factor forcing many faculty members to seek secondary jobs (Ahn et al., 2018). Furthermore, Huisman (2019) maintains that fighting corruption is an overarching challenge for the government to ensure fairness and quality in the higher education system.

While Afghanistan and Kazakhstan went through a similar experience in expanding the higher education system and promoting the private sector, the government in Kazakhstan has taken a stronger position in enforcing accreditation policies than Afghanistan. In contrast, the quality assurance and accreditation department may not force the closure of private universities despite their poor quality in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, both Afghanistan and Kazakhstan share the challenges of centralized control, corruption, insufficient salary for faculty members, and poor quality of research. The comparison with the approach taken in Kazakhstan suggests that higher education in Afghanistan would benefit more if there is a strong and autonomous quality assurance agency with adequate authority to enforce policies across public and private universities.
Quality Assurance in Kyrgyzstan

Although Kyrgyzstan is not a signatory member of the Bologna Process, the higher education sector in this country follows the European Quality Assurance Standards (Merrill, 2016; Nabi et al., 2016). Similar to Kazakhstan, the post-independence higher education reform in Kyrgyzstan encouraged system expansion and provision of higher education by public and private sectors, which resulted in the establishment of "18 private and 34 public" HEIs, respectively serving 12 and 88 percent of the student population in 2015 (Shadymanova & Amsler, 2018, p. 238). Quality assurance in Kyrgyzstan started in 2003 with the establishment of the "Central Education Quality Commission Control Department" (CEQCCD) to provide licensing and attestation at the national level (Brunner & Tillett, 2007, p. 61). Kyrgyzstan attempted to end the Soviet legacy of state licensing and attestation by establishing an independent accreditation agency in 2014 (Huisman, 2019). However, there was a delay in passing legislation, which led HEIs to directly follow the European quality standards to improve quality (Merrill, 2016).

While Kyrgyzstan has undertaken significant efforts, such as attempting to join the Bologna Process to improve quality, some policy decisions have backfired. For instance, increasing the tuition and fees in 2007 resulted in a nearly 50 percent decline in student enrollment from 2005 to 2013 (Shadymanova & Amsler, 2018). Further, scarce funding for higher education and low salaries of faculty members have forced one-third of faculty members to seek secondary jobs, including moonlighting in private universities (Nessipbayeva & Dalayeva, 2013). Although Kyrgyzstan has a formal system for quality assessment, word of mouth about a university's reputation serves as a determinant of
quality among the public (Merrill, 2016). Similarly, "family connections" remain a significant factor in employment opportunities instead of educational qualifications (Merrill, 2016, p. 28).

The tension between political will and legislative restrictions over establishing an independent quality assurance agency in Kyrgyzstan resembles the experience in Afghanistan. However, unlike the quality assurance structure in Kyrgyzstan, QAAD in Afghanistan is semi-independent, as MoHE does not interfere with its decisions regarding accreditation (Hayward, 2017). The commonalities across the two countries are the role of social/familial networks in employment, the impact of word of mouth in characterizing the quality of institutions, and the number of faculty moonlighting. In other words, in both countries, the public does not view accreditation status as an indicator of quality; instead, the informal institutional reputation dominates university selection. The situation suggests further transparency and strengthening accreditation process as a means of quality improvement in Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan.

**Quality Assurance in Tajikistan**

Unlike the situation in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, higher education in Tajikistan seems underdeveloped (Kataeva, 2020). Despite adopting several policies to modernize, increase access and enhance the quality of higher education, with the exception of foreign branch campuses, only public HEIs operate in Tajikistan (DeYoung et al., 2018; World Bank, 2014). Solely funded by the government, the funding for education in 2015 was 5.2 percent of the national expenditure, of which only 10 percent was dedicated to higher education – serving "167,660 students in 2015" (DeYoung et al., 2018, p. 367; Kataeva, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Given the limited budget, according to several studies, the
quality of higher education faces challenges of dated curricula leading to employer dissatisfaction with graduate's skills (DeYoung et al., 2018). Factors challenging faculty members are low salaries and a lack of capacity development programs (Kataeva, 2020; Nessipbayeva and Dalayeva, 2013). Given the low wages and lack of incentives at public HEIs, many faculty members have secondary jobs in the private sector, including non-government organizations (NGOs) (Kataeva, 2020).

To ensure the quality of higher education, Tajikistan has established the "State Agency for Supervision in the Sphere of Education (SASSE)" within the Ministry of Education (Brunner & Tillett, 2007). SASSE serves as an external quality evaluation body and enforces mandatory "licensing, attestation and accreditation" (Brunner & Tillett, 2007; World Bank, 2014, p. 38). The attestation process in Tajikistan resembles the accreditation process in the rest of the world (Kataeva, 2020). However, the process relies solely on quantitative measures with no inputs from the faculty members, administrative staff, or students (World Bank, 2014). In addition, the term accreditation in Tajikistan suggests a process that only involves SASSE with no inputs from peer reviewers or a self-assessment (World Bank, 2014). Given that the government controls all decisions, several studies critique attestation and accreditation as superficial processes because accreditation outcomes, whether positive or negative, do not often affect HEIs (Deyoung et al., 2018; Kataeva, 2020). In other words, according to the World Bank (2014), although "a majority of HEIs do not meet most of the standards," they are all accredited nationally (p. 44). Similarly, DeYoung et al. (2018) state that even though the country has adopted the Bologna Process framework to standardize degree programs, the central governance structure hampers adopting European quality standards in Tajikistan.
The quality assurance development in Tajikistan suggests some similarities as well as substantial differences with Afghanistan. Both countries have created quality assurance bodies within the government institutions under a central governance system that controls essential decisions. However, Tajikistan lacks a private higher education sector to contribute to national development and access to higher education. Another important difference is the structure of attestation and accreditation, which are equivalent to external quality assurance in Afghanistan, narrowly defined in Tajikistan. Attestation and accreditation in Tajikistan solely rely on quantifiable values with no inputs from university stakeholders, whereas in Afghanistan accreditation engages stakeholders at various levels and draws on quantitative and qualitative information.

Although Tajikistan has adopted the European quality model, its national accreditation system contradicts the European one in many ways. In essence, the government's strict control over quality assurance processes and outcomes has undermined the goal of quality assurance as an international experience.

Quality Assurance in Uzbekistan

Like other Central Asian countries, the higher education sector in Uzbekistan underwent extensive reform after the Soviet Union collapsed. The government investment focused on training competent graduates with skills to meet employment demands (Brunner & Tillett, 2007; World Bank, 2014). The higher education reform in Uzbekistan focuses on economic prosperity and international compatibility. However, with the exception of seven branch campuses of foreign universities, all HEIs are public, including "20 universities, 36 specialized institutes, two academies, and 13 branch campuses" (Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018, p. 448). The expansion of higher education in
Uzbekistan, contrary to the experience in other countries, has been gradual (World Bank, 2014). For instance, the number of HEIs grew from 43 in 1989 to 65 in 2009 and 71 in 2014 (Nessipbayeva & Dalayeva, 2013). The gradual expansion has led to a larger supply and demand gap (Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018). Research shows that the number of students admitted to HEIs has increased only 18 percent from 1996-2014 ("49,000 - 58,000) respectively while the number of applicants has increased five times – "106,000 in 1996 to more than 540,000 in 2014" (Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018, p. 454). Given the uneven balance of higher education supply vs. demand, scholars encourage for a rapid growth of the higher education system to meet the current expectations (Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018; World Bank, 2014).

Uzbekistan also follows the European qualifications and quality standards (World Bank, 2014). Uzbekistan has transformed their five-year bachelor's degree programs into four-year programs, which fits the Bologna convention (Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018). However, Uzbekistan lacks a separate institution or unit in charge of quality assurance and accreditation (Krouglov, 2017; Peterson, 2019; World Bank, 2014). Instead, different ministries and institutions, including the "Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialist Education (MHSSE) and the State Testing Center (STC)" are in charge of licensing, attestation, and accreditation (Krouglov, 2017. 178). This means that MHSSE and STC carry out routine inspections and monitoring of HEIs without a quality assurance manual (Krouglov, 2017; Ruziev & Burkhanov, 2018). Furthermore, higher education governance, attestation, in particular, is centralized and bureaucratic to the extent that the "Cabinet of Ministers" approve quality assurance reports and outcomes (Krouglov, 2017, p. 178).
The higher education reform in Uzbekistan has tackled the issues of "relevance" and "investment," but the government has failed to address "access" and "quality," (World Bank, 2014), which are equally crucial in modern higher education. More importantly, while Uzbekistan embraces the European quality assurance model, the existing mechanism at the national and institutional levels lacks the important structures to correspond to the internationally compatible mechanism.

Unlike universities in Afghanistan, HEIs in Uzbekistan are well off with educational resources and infrastructure. However, Afghanistan has managed to increase access to higher education and establish a moderate quality assurance system in contrast to Uzbekistan. This suggests that Uzbekistan has been slow in increasing access to higher education and developing a modern quality assurance system that is compatible to the regional and international countries.

**Summary and Implications of the QAA in Regional Countries**

A review of the quality assurance and accreditation systems in selected regional countries reveals significant commonalities and differences across these countries. To begin with, all of these countries have established some form of quality evaluation systems to ensure public trust and integrity of their higher education institutions. Pakistan, for example, has adopted a quality assurance model developed in the United States and the United Kingdom, while the four countries in Central Asia claim that they follow the European quality standards (Hayward, 2011/2017; Hirani et al., 2015). Although the quality of higher education in Iran seems relatively stable as internal evaluations date back to 1998, the country has not established a national quality
assurance structure to provide oversight at the national level (Abbaspur et al., 2016; Bazargan, 2009).

The analysis of the quality assurance approach in these countries reveals two broad categories. The first category suggests that quality assurance in Iran, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan occurs in the form of inspection and audit, which are summative and primarily serve reporting purposes. The second category is characterized by the processes in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan that resemble the dominant quality approaches acculturated in the US and Europe – involving a self-assessment by HEIs, followed by peer review, and decision-making by the quality assurance agency. From a structural perspective, the quality assurance process in Afghanistan falls in the latter category as the QAAD acts semi-independently in making decisions about institutional and programmatic accreditation. However, the existing literature in Central Asia is limited to quality assurance structures with no empirical research on stakeholder experiences. Although some studies investigated participants' experiences with quality assurance in Pakistan, most lacked rigorous analysis to draw implications on processes and outcomes. Since Iran lacks a national quality assurance framework, most studies focus on conceptual issues and service quality beyond the current study's scope.

The shift from the elite to the mass higher education system and development of private higher education seems a central theme across most of these countries, with the exception of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where the government owns the higher education sector (Ahn et al., 2018; Huisman, 2019). While the higher education sector in the region has experienced incredible growth since the 1990s and the 2000s, nearly all regional countries face challenges concerning the adequacy of resources, physical infrastructure,
and technological advancement (Bischof, 2018; Khwaja et al., 2012; Mussawy, 2020; Salmi, 2015). Faculty members in most of these countries receive low salaries and benefits, which encourages them to moonlight or seek secondary jobs elsewhere (Hayward, 2017; Nassipbayeva & Dalayeva, 2013; World Bank, 2014). Furthermore, the central governance system, political intervention, and corruption continue to undermine the quality of higher education (Ahn et al., 2018; Galavandi et al., 2017). In Central Asia, for example, the governments have failed to establish independent quality assurance systems to be able to participate in the Bologna process (Bischof, 2018; Brunner & Tillett, 2007).

A common theme across these countries is the re-centralization of decisions that used to be controlled by HEIs (Kataeva, 2020; Naseerian et al., 2013; Nessipbayeva and Dalayeva, 2013). For instance, HEIs in most of these countries had the liberty to admit students at the institutional level (Huisman, 2019; World Bank, 2014). However, an increase in demand coupled with the policy change has led to establishing national university entrance exams to identify students who will be admitted to HEIs (DeYoung et al., 2018; Galavandi et al., 2017). This policy change has limited HEIs' autonomy to admit new students. This trend has implications for Afghanistan as well. Centralization of decisions has had an effect on student admissions. For instance, although private HEIs previously had autonomy in admitting new students, the national entrance exam authority in Afghanistan now requires all private HEIs to admit new students through Kankor – the national university entrance exam (MoHE, 2020). The policy change in Afghanistan and regional countries reinforces a centralized higher education system that limits institutional autonomy.
Quality Assurance in Afghanistan

Niroo and Glass (2021) describe the quality assurance experience in Afghanistan as "malfunctioning" and being an "illusion," arguing that lack of primary educational resources coupled with inadequate human capacity barely makes quality improvement possible (p.13). Pointing out the uneven progress of universities, Niroo and Glass (2021) maintain that university stakeholders perceive quality assurance as a controlling and compliance process instead of a quality improvement effort. They assert that faculty members, to some extent, resist implementing the quality assurance policy, as they believe it does not fit the context of Afghanistan (Niroo & Glass, 2021). Acknowledging some improvement in teaching and learning experience, Niroo and Glass (2021) explain that quality assurance emphasizes administrative processes such as paperwork and document production. They also add that engagement of different donors emphasizing different aspects of quality assurance has further complicated the process (Niroo & Glass, 2021). Since the study was only carried out at the capital city, the study fails to account for the experiences of stakeholders beyond Kabul.

Another study by Welch and Wahidyar (2019) criticizes the QAA system as Western-based and external to higher education in Afghanistan. Welch and Wahidyar (2019) believe that quality assurance has not been embedded as part of institutional culture given the top-down control over decisions and overemphasis on administrative protocols. These authors summarize quality assurance challenges in Afghanistan as: limited training for peer reviewers, insufficient compensation for faculty members - which forces them to moonlight at private universities, limited financial and educational resources, dependency on foreign aid, insufficient qualifications of faculty members, and
inadequate capacity of the QAAD (Welch & Wahidyar, 2019). Further, they allude that corruption in student admission, recruitment of faculty members, and infrastructure projects hampers higher education quality in Afghanistan (Welch & Wahidyar, 2019, p. 10).

A critical study by Couch (2019) claims that quality assurance in Afghanistan emphasizes economic prosperity over "social cohesion and political stability" (p. 9). Based on Couch's (2019) study, the current conceptions of quality assurance in Afghanistan resemble the "fitness for purpose" definition of quality. Still, they are unlikely to result in the transformative aspect conceptualized by Harvey and Green (1993). Given the context in Afghanistan, Couch (2019) recommends that quality assurance activities acknowledge the importance of socio-political context, the ongoing conflict, and the political struggle to understand quality and serve the interests of the local and global environment. Taheryar's (2017) study of quality conceptions at a public university in Afghanistan shows that faculty members in Afghanistan perceive quality as (a) conformance to accreditation standards and (b) access to advanced educational resources and infrastructures. The latter conceptualizations correspond to Harvey and Green's (1993) definition of quality as "fitness for purpose" and Cheng's (2016) input-driven indicators.

Tracing factors affecting higher education in Afghanistan, Hayward and Babury (2015) state that over 30 years of conflict, destruction, displacement of academics, and corruption in the admissions system and faculty recruitment have had an effect on quality. According to them, access and quality were two primary priorities of the National Higher Education Strategic Plans (NHESPs) (Hayward & Babury, 2015). The
authors add that quality assurance agendas must address "establishment of accreditation, faculty development, curriculum upgrading, and commitment to merit recruitment and promotions" (Hayward & Babury, 2015, p. 19). However, the lack of "financial resources, corruption, and political interference" continues to challenge the process (Hayward & Babury, 2015, p. 19).

Similarly, in another study, Welch and Wahidyar (2013) state that the lack of a relationship between universities and economic sectors, and the absence of "Board of Trustees" act to disconnect HEIs from the needs of employers, which affects the quality and relevance of higher education in Afghanistan (p. 168). The authors critique the system for inefficient classroom spaces and a low student-faculty ratio (Welch & Wahidyar, 2013). However, they fail to account for their claim of low student-faculty ratio given that other sources, such as the Ministry of Higher Education, report a high student-faculty ratio of 25 or more students per faculty member (MoHE, 2016).
CHAPTER 4
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SENSEMAKING AND SENSEGIVING IN ACCREDITATION

Rationale

The issue of quality has been an ongoing struggle for HEIs in Afghanistan (Hayward & Babury, 2014). However, three significant events: radical system expansion, diversification, and a desire for external legitimacy gave rise to the development of a quality assurance and accreditation system as a national policy (Babury & Hayward, 2014; Hayward, 2015). Recognized as a higher education priority, starting in 2012, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) in Afghanistan institutionalized accreditation as a mechanism to improve the quality of higher education (Hayward, 2015). Although the quality assurance policy and accreditation framework have been in place since 2012, no empirical study has investigated how university leaders and key informants make sense of quality assurance and accreditation, how they give sense to their institution stakeholders, and how faculty and staff members respond to it. In other words, there is a gap in higher education literature in Afghanistan to indicate how education policies, particularly quality assurance and accreditation is institutionalized. There is also no literature to document the role of university leaders and key informants in internalizing top-down policies and approaches used to influence subordinates (faculty and staff in this case).

This study is based on the belief that implementing quality assurance and accreditation disrupts routines and the organizational culture in universities (Mussawy & Rossman, 2021; Stensaker, 2007). The study also argues that quality of higher education is no longer an internal university issue but is influenced by the external environment.
(Harvey, 2006). Therefore, university leaders and managers need to adopt strategic approaches to sustain the institutional identity (Degn, 2015; Eckle & Kezar, 2003). Since implementing accreditation, as means to improve quality, involves substantial change at teaching and research universities, using a theoretical framework is important for understanding those processes (Collins, 1998). That being the case, this research adopts “sensemaking and sensegiving” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995) as a theoretical lens to explore how university leaders, managers, and other key informants engage in the process of quality assurance, and accreditation in particular, at teaching and research universities in Afghanistan.

The study argues that sensemaking and sensegiving of institutional leaders and managers are instrumental in successfully implementing accreditation at teaching and research universities. Sensegiving and sensemaking allow the study to explore whether key informants are familiar with multiple “P’s” of policies, programs, and accreditation practice (Rallis et al., 2008; White & Crump, 1993) and whether they can present a new direction by giving sense to their constituents to obtain faculty and staff buy-in (Kezar, 2013). If the process of accreditation fails to strengthen internal structures and practices, then implementing accreditation would be perceived as only rhetoric instead of change to improve quality.

Implementing change in HEIs and other organizations requires fundamental and systemic interventions that involve multiple parties within and without the institution (Kezar, 2013; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Similarly, quality assurance efforts occur over time, which requires a long-term commitment of key stakeholders such as university leaders, faculty members, and staff (Harvey & Green, 1993). Therefore, effective implementation
of accreditation will involve structural adjustment, environmental scanning, strategic planning, and priority setting (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Dewi et al. (2021) argue that limited "awareness" of accreditation hampers policy implementation (p. 511). When accreditation disrupts organizational routines, Mussawy and Rossman (2021) argue that awareness of institutional leaders, faculty members, and staff is significant in making sense of the policies and practices and giving sense to others (Rallis et al., 2008; White & Crump, 1993).

In addition, a growing body of literature emphasizes adopting corporate management models in universities to survive in an increasingly competitive higher education market (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Kezar, 2013). To do so, universities need to establish a robust evaluation system, for example, an internal quality assurance system to hold individuals and groups accountable for their roles (Bolman & Deal, 2018; Harvey & Williams, 2010b). Accreditation should also challenge individuals’ and groups’ presumptions (Weick, 1995), shape their experiences (Stensaker, 2007), and change their attitudes (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Kezar, 2013; Trowler, 2008). Therefore, sensemaking and sensegiving are instrumental when changes in universities “destabilize existing identity and image” while nurturing modified ones (Gioia & Thomas, 1996, p. 371). Some argue that individuals in power positions have some advantage in assigning meaning (Hope, 2010; Rouleau, 2005). However, Wick et al. (2005) state that sensemaking/sensegiving involves a two-way relationship – suggesting that opportunities are present for all university stakeholders to make sense and give sense to others.
Sensemaking and sensegiving are considered useful analytical frames in the organizational change literature (Brown, Stacey & Nandhakumar, 2008; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Kezar & Eckle, 2002; Weick, 1995). Schon (1983) and Shotter (1993) were among the first scholars who contributed to the growth of sensemaking as a new strand to study organizational phenomena. Later, Weick (1995) and Gioio and Chittipeddi (1991) established sensemaking/sensegiving as an analytical approach to examine how meanings are constructed and reconstructed, and how they are used to shape others’ interpretations. Other studies, for example, Maitlis (2005), built on the existing structures by introducing micro sensemaking/sensegiving approaches which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Strategic management in the context of external quality assurance (accreditation) translates into prioritizing outcomes, changing current processes and structures, effectively managing resources, and cultivating new understandings (Cameron, 1984; Eckle & Kezar, 2003; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). The research focuses on the processes used by institutional leaders and internal quality assurance units (IQAUs) to make sense of the policy and give sense to their constituencies.

Definitions

Many studies define sensemaking as an exploratory and dynamic process of learning, understanding, developing meaning, and identifying patterns (Degn, 2015; Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). Specifically, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) describe sensemaking as a process of “meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties” (p. 442). Sensemaking is also understood as a social and collaborative learning process, which encourages ongoing interpretation (Maitlis, 2005).
Sensemaking processes involve referencing patterns and frameworks to develop *plausible* meanings instead of absolute ones (Weick, 1995). For example, to make sense of a new experience, individuals and groups may need to collect information from various sources, extract cues, and create a plausible meaning (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2008; Weick et al., 2005). This suggests that meaning constructed in the initial phases is subject to change as the information flows from one level to another. Sensemaking and sensegiving at the organizations begin with the leaders and as they adapt the process to fit organization realize the meaning evolves over time (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Weick et al. (2005) state, “Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409).

*Sensegiving* refers to a “process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, p. 442). Sensegiving is also defined as “an interpretive process in which individuals exert mutual influence to affect others’ sensemaking” (Kraft et al., 2015, p. 311). Sensegivers usually provide cues and frameworks to deliver a message to other actors interested in making meaning of a (new) phenomenon (Gioia et al., 2000; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2008). Sensegiving serves two important purposes in organizations: (a) diffusing an assigned meaning and (b) imposing boundaries over meaning construction by delimiting alternative understandings (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Giuliani, 2016). Although institutional leaders have advantages in giving sense due to their social roles (Kraft et al., 2015), they have no control over the outcomes – how interested parties process the information and connect to their prior knowledge (Levine Daniel & Eckerd, 2019). According to Weick (1995), sensemaking and sensegiving are sequential, which
centers on gathering information, assigning meaning, and communicating it in a way that shapes others’ understanding.

Sensegiving in organizations occurs in diverse forms and approaches (Levine Daniel & Eckerd, 2019). According to some, organizational sensegiving takes vertical, horizontal, and bottom-up forms depending on the environment, organizational context, and the role of sensegivers and sensemakers (Hope, 2010; Kezar, 2013). Others suggest that organizational leaders use a combination of direct and indirect sensegiving approaches such as policies, mission statements, presentations, and artifacts to convey the message (Levine Daniel & Eckerd, 2019; Weick et al., 2005). Since sensegiving and sensemaking emphasize a two-way relationship, sensegivers are expected to frame the problem in a way that resonates with the sensemakers, who in turn process it by connecting it to their presumptions (Hope, 2010). As a theoretical lens, sensegiving and sensemaking suggest the flexibility that a diverse group of stakeholders has a role in making sense of policies and procedures in an organization.

The how and why of making sense of unknown and ambiguous constructs and giving sense to others encompasses the central purpose of sensemaking/sensemaking literature (Weick, 1995). The process of sensemaking/sensegiving involves cognitive processing, critical thinking, social engagement, and inferential gestures (Weick et al., 2005). Weick (1995) contends that sensemaking/sensegiving is a reciprocal process encompassing inductive and deductive inquiry that may involve an individual or peers to establish meanings and use different means to communicate those meanings. Sensemaking/sensegiving is triggered when a new initiative is introduced, when an unprecedented event occurs, or when uncertainty prevails (Weick, 1995). Given these
justifications, a question arises, how does sensemaking/sensegiving become an organizational issue with respect to implementing accreditation?

Building on Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) and Weick’s (1995) characterizations, recent studies refer to sensemaking/sensegiving as a mutual process of discovering and attributing labels, with some insisting on the unique situation of individual/s and organizations (Brown et al., 2008; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Maitlis, 2005; Rouleau, 2005). For Weick (1995, p. 14), sensemaking “highlights the invention that precedes interpretation”; however, Smerek (2011) describes the process as streams of interpretation. In line with these assumptions, Brown et al. (2008) characterize sensemaking as crafting and forming an institution, while Weick et al. (2005) describe it as an alternative to the “process of organizing” (p. 409).

Further, Brown et al. (2008) classify the sensemaking/sensegiving literature into two conflicting categories – one emphasizing homogeneity in understanding ongoing disruptions, and the other underscoring heterogeneity. The first one argues that individuals and groups involved in the same organizational culture are expected to make sense of the world in the same way; however, the other category stresses variation in sensemaking among individuals and groups that depends on their capacities and social roles (Brown et al., 2008). Weick (1995) echoes the latter argument and suggests that variation exists in individuals’ sensemaking. However, he emphasizes the unique role of institutional leaders to set priorities and shape others’ meanings. Weick (1995) maintains, “The process of sensemaking is intended to include the construction and bracketing of the text-like cues that are interpreted, as well as the revision of those interpretation based on action and its consequences” (p. 8). This statement partly underlines social roles that
privilege some authority to set boundaries (bracket - set priorities) when multiple issues unfold and control the meanings diffused across the organization.

Critics like Helms Mills et al. (2010) challenge Weick’s (1995) sensemaking model for being skeptical of organizational politics and power issues. They argue “individuals with more power in organizations may also exert more power on sensemaking of organizational members” (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 189). In addition, they maintain that although individuals make sense of their environment independently, research should investigate how their social roles and environmental issues influence their sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Although Weick et al. (2005) argue that sensemaking/sensegiving can be a democratic process that should allow individuals to have an equal opportunity to exercise power, they fall short in discussing social roles and positional authority and the extent to which organizational leaders have an advantage over decisions. In short, Helms Mills et al. (2010) acknowledge how power relationship affects individuals’ interpretations of organizational events.

Maitlis et al. (2013) argue that the role of “emotions” is underestimated in sensemaking narratives (p. 226). The assertion that emotion influences an individual’s decision to participate in sensemaking has roots in Weick’s (1995) earlier work: “when people encounter an event whose occurrence is implausible, they hesitate to report it for fear they will not be believed” (p. 1). This assertion exemplifies how emotions affect one’s judgment of a particular event and whether – and how – to engage in sensemaking. To illustrate further, Maitlis et al. (2013) make the following proposition: “Individuals are more likely to engage in sensemaking when potential triggers lead to moderately intense emotions that energize the process” (p. 227).
Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Organizational Studies and Higher Education

Institutional change and reform are highlighted as the triggers of sensemaking and sensegiving in organizations (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Eckel & Kezar, 2003). In university settings, the change may involve the appointment of a new leader or a group of individuals, establishment or dismissal of a new unit/department, development of a new policy or program, and other similar activities that disrupt routines that create “ambiguity or uncertainty” requiring new understanding (Helms Mill et al., 2010; Weick et al., 2005, p.413). Since this study argues that implementing accreditation, as a new experience, requires a change in the way quality evaluation is conducted, university leaders need to actively engage in the process to understand the expectations and convey the meaning of change to university stakeholders (Kraft et al., 2015; Weick, 1995). Thus, sensemaking/sensegiving at the organizational level involves reflecting on current events, identifying patterns, making connections between various signs, seeking input from others, and crafting a plausible meaning that serves the purposes of a particular organization (Kezar, 2013; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Maitlis et al., 2013; Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking and sensegiving are well tested in organizational studies, including higher education contexts (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Giuliani, 2016; Kezar, 2013; Smerek, 2011). For instance, many studies focus on the sensemaking experience of institutional leaders to unveil how they navigate uncertainties (Degn, 2015; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Smerek, 2011). Several other studies explore sensemaking and sensegiving based on employees' experiences at the middle and lower levels (Kezar, 2013; Hope, 2010; Rouleau, 2005).
Kezar and Eckel (2002) applied sensemaking to study change management in higher education. They report that university leaders initiated five strategies: “senior administrative support, collaborative leadership, robust design, staff support, and visible action” to introduce change to the university community (Kezar & Eckel, 2002, p. 312). This study shows that sensemaking as a social process with leadership – engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes – enriches individual and institutional identity (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Similarly, they describe the sensegiving process occurring in formal and informal dialogues, presentations, speeches, and inter-departmental conversations, to name a few, to promote community engagement with change processes (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Utilizing various means of communication to engage stakeholders and eliminate resistance was a significant finding of Smerek’s (2011) study of new leaders’ sensemaking/sensegiving approach in organizations as well.

Although Weick’s (1995) framework serves as a roadmap to study organizational processes in various contexts, Degn’s (2015) study highlights the relevance of some characteristics of the sensemaking framework in her research on transformative change in Danish universities. Degn (2015) states that Danish higher education administrators emphasized institutional reputation, daily conversations, and observable actions. For instance, Degn (2015) observes, “the top-level managers have remodeled and redefined their sense of self, from their past identity as an academic (researcher/teacher) to a manager with an academic background” (p. 908). This new identity development (sensemaking), in my view, underscores the importance of contextual factors in shaping organizations.
Kezar’s (2013) study of transformational change in 28 HEIs in the United States shows that sensemaking and sensegiving are mutually dependent. Her findings suggest that emphasizing sensemaking over sensegiving or vice-versa has minimal impact on the ground. She concludes that universities where sensemaking and sensegiving are balanced made more progress towards change agendas than those that failed to balance.

Recent studies by Marshall (2016, 2018) use sensemaking and sensegiving to conceptualize quality in higher education. Marshall’s (2016) study describes quality experiences at the student, organization, and national levels. He argues that the “sense-making process connects the abstract potential of any change with the concrete experiences and reality of the enacted educational experience” (Marshall, 2016, p. 221). Since Marshall’s articles focus on conceptual understanding of quality through a sensemaking/sensegiving lens, they lack empirical evidence on how stakeholders on the ground make sense of and provide insight about quality assurance.

Implementing Sensemaking and Sensegiving at Three Levels

As an internal process, sensemaking is explored at various levels within organizations. To begin with, Kezar’s (2013) study examines sensemaking and sensegiving at lower levels, department, and program levels. His findings suggest that unlike top-down mechanisms infusing a shared meaning throughout an organization, sensemaking and sensegiving at lower levels serve alternative aims. Kezar (2013) maintains that staff in lower management positions utilize various strategies to overcome technical and administrative impediments to accomplish desired results – sensemaking diffused by institutional leaders.
Hope (2010) and Rouleau (2005) investigate sensemaking and sensegiving of middle managers. They both highlight that power and politics are rarely addressed in sensemaking literature; therefore, the way middle managers respond to change agendas is contingent on contextual factors. Hope (2010), for example, contends that line managers hold some valuable expertise and knowledge that enable them to influence knowledge construction and dissemination. Accordingly, line managers’ responses to leadership sensegiving might take a complementary or alternative form (Hope, 2010). When mid-level executives buy into a change agenda, they deconstruct it to be accessible to bottom-line employees, thus helping them integrate the new meanings in their routines (Hope, 2010).

Rouleau (2005) states that sensemaking takes a different form when mid-level executives feel concerned/threatened. He claims that, unlike senior executives, mid-level managers have limited information about their organization’s prospective agendas. Therefore, they primarily rely on communication skills to strategize sensegiving (Rouleau, 2005). This strategy examines alternative mechanisms to sensemaking and sensegiving when positional power is absent. Weick et al. (2005) support this observation stating that communication skills are persuasive tools that accelerate unified meanings. Rouleau (2005) adds that mid-level and lower-level employees can draw on common sense, and implicit and explicit consciousness to make sense of events and incorporate them into their activities.

However, the majority of sensemaking research concentrates on top management and ways that senior executives make sense of ongoing interruptions and organizational chaos (Kezar & Eckle, 2002; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Smerek,
Studies focusing on top-level management underscore the role of leadership and communication in making sense of the internal and external environment and projecting a polished meaning to strategize change, influence parties, and develop a roadmap for a future vision (Degn, 2015; Smerek, 2011). As the role of top-down leadership unfolds, one can clearly sense the issue of power and executive privileges involved in dominating sensegiving processes (Weick et al., 2005). In practical terms, Smerek (2011) shows that leaders’ engagement with various individuals generates multiple understandings (sensemaking), and therefore they need to act strategically by inspiring subordinates’ buy-in and being selective in executing strategic actions (sensegiving). Weick (1995) also acknowledges that institutional identity is an important property that holds all members together.

The three levels of implementing sensemaking/sensegiving discussed above directly affect how accreditation is enacted at teaching and research universities in Afghanistan. Exploring processes involved in introducing accreditation at teaching and research universities and ways that institutional leaders including chancellors and vice-chancellors dealt with it would analyze sensemaking at the institutional level. The establishment of institutional quality assurance units (IQAUs) as experts on QAA corresponds to mid-level managers who possess technical knowledge. Lastly, implementation of accreditation at the college, department, and individual levels would satisfy sensemaking at lower levels. Given the scope of this research, I am interested in examining the implementation of accreditation at top and mid-level management. In the following paragraphs, I discuss three common sensemaking and sensegiving frameworks that serve as a roadmap for the study.
Sensemaking and Sensegiving Frameworks

A review of the literature on sensemaking/sensegiving uncovered three lenses that are important in studying quality assurance and accreditation in higher education. The first lens is based on Weick’s (1995) seven sensemaking properties, the second one focuses on sensemaking phases (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), and the third lens discusses sensemaking forms (Maitlis, 2005). Lastly, I introduce an integrated sensemaking/sensegiving framework that guided based on the three lenses.

**Sensemaking/Sensegiving Characteristics**

Weick (1995) has identified seven properties: “identity, retrospect, enactment, social, ongoing, extracted cues and plausibility” that describe the sensemaking/sensegiving experience (Weick, 1995, p. 62). For instance, Weick and colleagues describe the connection between the characteristics stating, “sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Weick’s (1995) seven characteristics of sensemaking suggest a deep insight into studying organizational change in the higher education context. Weick’s (1995) properties of sensemaking/sensegiving are described as follow.

1. Identity – denotes how members of an organization identify themselves, which shapes their actions.

2. Retrospection – shows a reflection process that individuals make connections between current events. According to Weick (1995), retrospection allows
individuals to draw on previous exposures to make sense of and enact in the present.

3. Enactment – suggests actions precede thinking. Weick (1995) describes enactment as a sensemaking property that means engaging in an action to think and later rationalize/justify the outcomes. He believes that people are often hesitant to act as they solely rely on thinking before action.

4. Social – underscores sensemaking as a social property allowing people to engage in conversations to make sense of something or have a conversation with themselves. In other words, the social aspect of sensemaking denotes a conversation with community members and with ourselves.

5. Ongoing – denotes the people engage with the environment continuously and modify their understanding of the phenomenon. In other words, meanings change over time as people engage in their environment, reflect on previous meanings and form new understandings.

6. Extract cues – defines the process of how people connect the dots to draw a bigger picture. They have control over the selection of cues and whether or not they are relevant to the context.

7. Plausibility – draws on the notion of enactment and describes how the interpretation of events changes as ongoing engagement with the environment shapes people’s understanding. Weick (1995) discusses plausibility in contrast to accuracy, suggesting that meanings are shaped and reshaped by the context, including external politics (Weick, 1995, p. 17).
Marshall (2016, 2018) uses the sensemaking/sensegiving characteristics to reflect on higher education quality. Marshall (2018) explains that engaging in quality discourse should involve all stakeholders to enforce a unified understanding. While individuals share their interpretation of quality and quality assurance in universities, sensemaking/sensegiving becomes sustainable when university leaders facilitate strategies that encourage them to contribute to a shared understanding (Marshall, 2016; Weick et al., 2005). Quality assurance outcomes affect individual and institutional identity and image of HEIs in many ways (Marshall, 2018; Weick, 1995). Therefore, engaging in quality assurance at the individual and community levels helps universities construct independent and unique identities and guards the institutional image against the external environment (Boros, 2009; Marshall, 2018; Weick et al., 2005).

Describing quality as sensemaking seems retrospective – suggesting how previous experience informs present performance and predicts future practices (Marshall, 2018). The reflective nature of sensemaking allows university stakeholders to diagnose quality issues by deliberating on past courses to identify gaps and plan for the future (Marshall, 2016; Weick et al., 2005). Similarly, the enactive property of sensemaking creates opportunities to act and monitor how events unfold (Weick, 1995). Enacting may also take the form of developing policies or processes that may disrupt or support the current understanding of quality among faculty and staff members (Marshall, 2016; Mussawy & Rossman, 2021; Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking in quality requires ongoing engagement with the field and market expectations to ensure that educational degrees are relevant for employment and civic purposes (Marshall, 2016). This observation suggests that quality standards need revision
as expectations change (Harvey, 2007; Marshall, 2018). Since sensemaking of quality involves evaluating and examining current environments, identifying cues is instrumental in making plausible judgments that allow for modification as new meanings are constructed (Marshall, 2018; Weick, 1995).

**Sensemaking/Sensegiving Phases**

While Weick’s (1995) framework introduces specific characteristics to examine the sensemaking/sensegiving experience, Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) work focuses on sensemaking phases/sequences. They present four sensemaking/sensegiving phases that lay out a sequential order beginning with institutional leaders' engagement with change and proposing direction to the followers, followed by meaning making and infusion at the community level (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). A summary of these phases reads:

1. **Envisioning** – refers to collecting information and making sense of the new issues by the leadership.

2. **Signaling** – suggests a sensegiving effort by the leadership to communicate a vision or interpretation to stakeholders and a broader community.

3. **Re-visioning** – denotes sensemaking effort by stakeholders. Stakeholders intend to figure out the meaning of the proposed vision and revise their existing conceptualization.

4. **Energizing** – indicates a sensegiving effort by stakeholders wherein they respond to the proposed vision and attempt to influence its realized form. However, it also is a stage marked by the emergence and communication of an organization-wide commitment to action toward the visions (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 443).
This framework underlines the dynamic nature of sensemaking and sensegiving in organizations that correspond to the study of quality assurance and accreditation in higher education. The rationale is that quality standards need revision and adaptation over time to match the expectations.

**Sensemaking/Sensegiving Forms**

Maitlis (2005) offers a micro sensemaking/sensegiving framework that focuses on how sensemaking/sensegiving occurs in organizations and other social settings. Maitlis’s (2005) framework has four forms “guided, fragmented, restricted, and minimal” (p. 32). According to Maitlis (2005), in the *guided form*, sensemaking and sensegiving occur in a structured approach, suggesting that organization leaders construct a unified meaning and circulate that across the organization. However, sensemaking takes a *fragmented* or *restricted* form when (a) organization leaders and followers interpret issues differently, and (b) followers partially participate in the process while leaders carry the burden (Maitlis, 2005). Lastly, *minimal* sensemaking happens when institutional leaders and employees are reluctant to engage in the change agenda, leading to a trivial outcome (Maitlis, 2005). Since implementing quality assurance and accreditation causes some disruptions in how universities handle day-to-day operations, the engagement of university leaders, faculty members, and staff members may vary. Therefore, Maitlis’s (2005) framework helps this study explore how key informants describe the engagement of university leaders, managers, and faculty members with quality assurance and accreditation at teaching and research universities in Afghanistan.
An integrated Sensemaking/Sensegiving Framework to Study QAA

I combined Wieck’s (1995), Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991), and Maitlis's (2005) sensemaking/sensegiving models under one umbrella, an integrated sensemaking and sensegiving framework, to study accreditation from three inter-connected lenses (See Figure 7). Wieck’s (1995) model provides an overview of sensemaking/sensegiving experience in understanding the experiences of key informants at teaching and research universities. It helps the study unpack what characteristics are common among university leaders, deans of colleges, IQAU members, and ordinary faculty members as they make sense of accreditation and give sense to others. The sensemaking/sensegiving characteristics help the study analyze participants' experiences deductively to uncover what sensemaking/sensegiving properties are present as HEIs implement accreditation. Wieck’s (1995) sensemaking/sensegiving characteristics address the second research question – how does sensemaking/sensegiving occur as teaching and research universities implement accreditation?

![Figure 7 An integrated sensemaking/sensegiving framework to study QAA](image)

**Figure 7** An integrated sensemaking/sensegiving framework to study QAA
The second lens guides the study to examine the flow of sensemaking/sensegiving experiences at the leadership and subordinate levels. More particularly, the analysis focuses on how university leaders interpret (make sense) QAA; how they share their understandings with others in charge; how faculty and staff members interpret sensegiving made by the leaders; and how they integrate quality assurance and accreditation expectations in their routines. The sensemaking/sensegiving phases of the integrated model will help in answering the first research question – what the experiences of stakeholders at teaching and research universities are concerning quality assurance and accreditation. The key here is whether there is any difference in the way university stakeholders at teaching vs. research universities follow the order of events – starting with institutional leaders’ sensemaking and sensegiving and ending with the subordinates (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

The last lens, sensemaking/sensegiving forms, helps the study explore participants’ level of engagement with quality assurance and accreditation. More precisely, Maitlis’s (2005) micro sensemaking/sensegiving approach will assist in describing individual and group behavior patterns concerning the implementation of accreditation. For instance, whether university leaders at teaching vs. research universities engage in sensemaking/sensegiving of accreditation in the same way, whether an alignment exists the way university leaders, deans of colleges, IQAUs, and ordinary faculty members understand the policy and implement it. Thus, with an emphasis on micro-level sensemaking/sensegiving of quality assurance and accreditation, Maitlis’s (2005) framework helps answer the third research question by uncovering factors that affect accreditation at teaching and research universities.
CHAPTER 5
METHODOLOGY

The current research uses a qualitative approach (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) to study the implementation of the quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) system in the higher education sector of Afghanistan. This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach as a means to investigate QAA followed by a description of a multi-case study. Next, the chapter focuses on how data were collected via three methods: interviews, archival analysis, and observation. Following data collection, I discuss the procedures for data analysis and then ethical considerations that arose during data collection. Lastly, the chapter ends with the researcher’s positionality/biography.

Research Design

The methodological literature offers several approaches and genres to conducting a qualitative study (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). I used a multi-case study approach that involved selecting participants from multiple sites which included teaching universities, research universities, key informants from the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate (QAAD), and representatives of donor agencies who were involved in supporting higher education in Afghanistan. The empirical research included thorough document analysis, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. Incorporating participants from multiple sites helped me develop a deeper understanding of the complexities associated with the implementation of accreditation at public universities in Afghanistan.
According to the methodological literature, a case study is defined as “an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the richness and complexity of a bounded social phenomenon (or multiple phenomena)” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 49). Two of the most cited authors, Stake (1995) and Yin (2018), describe case study research as an investigation of the contemporary situation(s), for example, social and economic interventions, policy implementation, and others that occur in a defined context. In the case of higher education in Afghanistan, accreditation was introduced as a new policy in 2012 (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018), and its implementation has become a management intervention since 2014.

Current research indicates that case studies intend to “generate understanding and deep insights to inform professional practice, policy development, and community social action” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 49). The case study design as a method and multi-cases as the unit of analysis was chosen to explore the underlying assumptions and practices involved in adopting accreditation at public teaching and research universities. Throughout the study, I engaged in thoughtful discourse to investigate individuals’ and institutions’ assumptions of accreditation, steps taken to integrate the discourse in practice, and approaches used to assess progress. By probing participants’ experiences across multiple sites, observing the physical spaces, and digging deeper into documents produced by these institutions, I was able to draw a clear line in terms of commonalities and differences across the teaching and research universities.

The selection of a research site is a major component of qualitative studies. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) advise having a clear rationale for selecting a research site. With that in mind, I collected data from three teaching universities, two research
universities, the National QAA Directorate, and representatives of international donor-funded projects involved in higher education in Afghanistan. The criteria for choosing universities included: medium of instruction (all these universities use Dari as the language of instruction); accessibility, the investigator could recruit participants and receive authorization to conduct research; security, the environment was safe for both participants and the investigator; and interest, the investigator is passionate about the experiences of public teaching and research universities in implementing accreditation. All interviews were conducted in Dari except for two interviews that were done in English. The procedures involved in translating the interviews are discussed later in this chapter.

Similar to site selection, the rationale for choosing a particular research design is equally important. To begin with, I chose a multi-case study design to generate an in-depth understanding of what was going on at teaching and research universities regarding the implementation of accreditation. I selected both public teaching and research universities because they differ in access to resources, size, location, and others. The goal of this design is to use the research findings to problematize adopting policies from one context to another and challenge the administration of a one-size-fits-all policy. Further, the findings will be used to provide policy advice to the QAAD in order to revise/adjust the QAA processes in light of the realities of public universities.

Studying the implementation of accreditation at the selected public teaching and research universities was not meant to compare and contrast, but to navigate the experiences of key informants concerning processing complex chains of thoughts and concepts (sensemaking), and steps taken to mobilize the institution to buy into them
Yin (2018) states that a multi-case study design follows the same philosophical foundation as a single-case study, except for the number of cases in the study. He argues that a multi-case study design generates data that are more convincing as compared to a single-case study (Yin, 2018). However, he cautions about the laborious aspect of choosing a multiple-case study. Acknowledging that a multiple-case study requires more time and energy to gather data from the field and conduct analysis, I used this design to gather insightful evidence from a broader audience in order to understand multiple aspects of implementing accreditation at public teaching and research universities.

From a theoretical standpoint, case study research falls within the realm of “interpretive constructivist” and “critical” paradigms” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 50). While the former intends to illustrate the link between locally bounded activities to systemic norms, the latter relies on contextual indicators to challenge or build on a structural assumption (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Given the paradigmatic orientation, case study research seems flexible in terms of data collection approaches – allowing investigators to gather data using various methods in order to have an in-depth understanding of the situation in targeted contexts (Yin, 2018). However, Rallis and Rossman (2012) caution that the data collection method/s should flow from the conceptual framework and correspond to the research questions. That being the condition, this research used semi-structured interviews, archival analysis, and open-ended observation as inter-related mechanisms to triangulate the data and surface an in-depth understanding of accreditation experiences at both types of universities.
In addition, given the decision to use a multiple-case study design, I followed an inductive interpretive and pragmatic lens to make sense of data and to communicate my understanding of the situation in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Wieck, 1995). I strongly view knowledge creation as a product of a systematic and sometimes undefined cycle of inquiry which involves the researcher/s interpretation of realities grounded in who they are, the lenses they are wearing, and the quality of data in front of them – “the knower and the known” discursive stand (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Since conducting this study required interaction with people, the case study design allowed me to have direct contact with research participants (Yin, 2018). That said, every interaction and contact was a unique learning experience during the fieldwork as participants came from diverse backgrounds. In other words, I had to prepare for each interview, by doing informal background checks on each participant through colleagues and students, making at least one or two phone calls prior to the interview, and outlining alternative plans to motivate them to share what was meaningful to my research.

In addition, scholars contend that the role of the researcher is instrumental in qualitative studies, and the process is a heuristic experience through which the investigator makes sense of lived experiences and constructs new knowledge and understanding of the world around him/her/them (Peshkin, 1988; Rossman & Rallis, 2016). From an interpretive standpoint, subjectivity is the core of research, and it encourages investigators to be aware of personal biases when the research happens on the ground (Heshusius, 1994; Peshkin, 1988; Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Further, when an interpretive lens is blended with a pragmatic orientation, the research process becomes transformative affecting both investigator and the research outcome. Clements (2004)
argues that in as much as the investigator’s presence and involvement affect research participants, the process may also influence the researcher’s behavior.

**Research Setting**

The study only involved public universities for three main reasons. First, except for higher education institutions that had not graduated at least two cohorts of students, all public teaching and research universities were undergoing national accreditation during the data collection. However, only a limited number of private universities were included in the accreditation process since they started the process a few years after the public ones. Second, most of the private higher education institutions did not qualify for accreditation since they were newly established and had not graduated two cohorts of students from their degree programs. Third, given the political and security situation in the country and the timeline for data collection, collecting data was more feasible at public universities than private ones. For these reasons, and to limit the scope of the research, the study only involved public universities. More specifically, the study was carried out at five public universities including two research (of the eight) and three teaching universities (of 15 public teaching universities; see Appendix C for details). The study also explored the experiences of key informants at the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate (QAAD) and representatives of donor-funded projects. In the subsequent paragraphs, I provide a brief description of each institution involved in the study.

**Research University 1 (RU1)**

RU1 is one of the major universities in the country with four graduate and 27 undergraduate programs. Initially established as the Pedagogical Institute, RU1 has
dramatically evolved over four decades with the current enrollment of nearly 8,000 undergraduate and 200 graduate students. Although the physical structure of this institution is quite limited compared to other graduate universities, RU1 houses nine faculties/colleges where 452 full-time employees (285 faculty members, 82 administrative staff, and 85 maintenance/support staff) work. RU1 is the only university in the country where the number of female students (58%) exceeds male students. At RU1, the faculty-student ratio is 1/25 excluding the evening shift and graduate programs. Given the history of the institution, faculty members have higher academic ranks. For instance, 38 percent of faculty members are in the professorate range (assistant professor, associate professor, and full professor) and 62 percent are lecturers (novice, junior and senior lecturer). Similarly, gender distribution among faculty members is quite moderate as females constitute 38 percent of faculty members.

RU1 benefits from its proximity to MoHE and other government and non-government institutions. This location allows its faculty members to serve on national higher education boards and commissions. RU1 was among the first universities where accreditation was piloted in 2009 and formally started in 2012 with the birth of the Directorate of Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAAD). RU1 was able to achieve national accreditation in 2020 after nine years. While the faculty body and location are major strengths of RU1, the lack of adequate physical buildings remains a major challenge for RU1.

**Research University 2 (RU2)**

RU2 is one of the largest universities in Afghanistan with 21 colleges, and 109 undergraduate and 21 graduate programs. RU2 serves around 22,000 undergraduate
students. In terms of faculty capacity, RU2 has around 850 full-time faculty members, the majority of whom hold graduate degrees. In fact, within a period of 15 years (2003 – 2017), 111 faculty members completed PhDs and 425 received their master’s degrees. Although located in an urban city, the gender disparity at RU2 is relatively higher both among faculty members and students. Coincidently, in 2019, both female faculty and students constitute 28 percent of the faculty and student population at RU2. The faculty-student ratio at RU2 is 1/25.

Although RU2 lost many of its senior faculty members who had PhDs as a result of a new higher education policy that forced retirement, RU2 still has the highest number of faculty members at the level of professorate (164). Given contextual factors, female faculty members are disadvantaged as only a few of them hold professorate academic rank and graduate degrees. More specifically, only five percent of female faculty members have PhDs, 44 percent with masters, and the rest have bachelor's degrees.

In terms of physical capacity and resources, RU2 has been the center of attention as both government and international communities invested in building new classrooms, laboratories, research hubs, and recreational facilities. RU2 is one of the most selective universities with abundant space, resources, and proximity to the central government, NGOs, and foreign embassies. Faculty credentials, history, and resourcefulness are three significant strengths of RU2 that place it among the elite universities in the country. Given this, currently, RU2 has thirteen academic journals which publish both subject-specific and multidisciplinary articles. In addition, RU2 has been able to house 3,671 students (3,167 males and 504 females) in dormitories.
RU2 was among the first few universities in the country that achieved national accreditation in 2018. While the faculty members resisted the implementation of the credit system for one decade, the leadership of the institution played a significant role in integrating quality assurance institution wide. Now that RU2 is nationally accredited, abundant in resources, strong human capital, its graduate programs will assist the institution in achieving its strategic goals. However, RU2, similar to other public universities, is challenged to keep its faculty members home as the majority of them moonlight at private universities and NGOs.

*Teaching University 1 (TU1)*

Established in 1998 in a Northeast province, TU1 is a public university that serves around 6,000 undergraduate students. Initially, TU1 was established with six colleges and a few departments; however, in line with MoHE’s expansion plan, three new colleges with several new degree programs were added to this institution in order to meet the increasing demand for higher education. Currently, TU1 has nine colleges and 28 undergraduate programs. At TU1, the faculty-student ratio is 1/33, and there is one administrative staff per 54 students.

TU1 has a total of 180 full-time faculty members with only seven percent holding PhDs, 50 percent with a master’s degree, and the rest with a bachelor’s degree. Similarly, the academic rank for the majority of faculty members, 95%, is within the range of lecturers (junior-senior), and only five percent hold professorate ranks. The gender disparity among faculty members is huge, as female faculty members constitute only eight percent of the faculty body. In terms of physical capacity, the TU1 received a land grant of 60 acres from the government in 2011, and since then, new buildings have been
built on this property. While the TU1 has been successful in attracting some funding to
build a few academic and administrative buildings, the institution continues to lack
enough space for classrooms, laboratories, and administrative offices. In addition, 52
percent of TU1 students are listed in need of dormitory services and there are no female
dormitories for 446 women who come from distant neighborhoods.

**Accreditation**: TU1 was enlisted as a candidate for phase-one accreditation in
2014 and successfully achieved it in 2015. However, in 2016, TU1 was unable to satisfy
the expectations of peer-reviewers to achieve phase two candidacy of accreditation.
Currently, TU1 has an internal quality assurance unit (IQAU) with 13 members, and nine
sub-committees for quality assurance and accreditation, one at each college. The IQAU is
responsible for continuous teaching evaluation, preparation of self-assessment reports,
and supervision of curriculum implementation.

**Teaching University 2 (TU2)**

TU2 was initially established in 1993 with the efforts of intellectuals who were
internally displaced during internal conflicts (1992-1995). However, after three years of
operations, TU2 services were discontinued as the Taliban regime took power (1996 –
2001), and the majority of faculty and staff were forced to flee the area. Soon after the
Taliban were withdrawn from power, in 2003, TU2 was re-established as a public higher
education institution with two colleges: Colleges of Education and Agriculture. Located
in a northern province, 160 miles from Kabul, TU2 continued its operations with two
colleges until 2010. However, with a change in the leadership of the institution, it
expanded rapidly from 2011 to 2015 as the institution established five new colleges, and
the student enrollment quadrupled. The expansion also assisted TU2 to achieve the status
of a university – a promotion from a higher education institute. TU2 has around 155 full-time faculty members that serve around 5,500 students, 20 percent of whom are females. The faculty-student ratio at TU2 is 1/35 and there is one administrative staff per 70 students.

While offering only undergraduate degrees, currently TU2 has 27 degree programs that are distributed in seven colleges. The faculty members’ qualification is relatively low at TU2 as only two percent have PhDs, 43 percent with master’s degrees, and the rest with bachelor’s degrees. Similarly, in terms of academic rank, almost all faculty members are within the range of lecturers (junior-senior), and only three percent have professorate ranks.

Currently, TU2 operates on three physical campuses each seven to eight miles far from one another. Although an abundance of space is supposed to be beneficial for development plans, the institution faces multiple challenges in terms of management, transportation of faculty members, staff, and students, and allocation of resources.

Accreditation: TU2 was enlisted for phase one candidacy accreditation in 2013 and achieved it in 2016 due to staff shortage at QAAD – not being able to send reviewers. In other words, while many public universities were enlisted by the government for accreditation, QAAD could only afford to conduct assessments at large universities with graduate programs. TU2 barely received any feedback on its self-assessment reports for the first three years. TU2 completed phase two of accreditation candidacy in 2021.

Teaching University 3 (TU3)

TU3 is an undergraduate teaching university that was initially established as a teacher training academy in 1961 and was promoted to a higher education institution in
2002. The institution was promoted to university status in 2011 after three new colleges were added. TU3 serves around 5,500 students, 10 percent of whom are females. TU3 has eight colleges that offer 25 undergraduate programs. Like some other provincial teaching universities, the faculty-student ratio at PU is 1/35.

TU3 has around 150 full-time faculty members, 52 percent of whom have graduate degrees (masters and a few PhDs). Similarly, the majority of faculty members, 92 percent, are lecturers, and only eight percent hold professorate ranks. Administrative and supporting staff are scarce at TU3, as the student and administrative staff ratio is 1/104, and there is 1/72 support staff per student. Given its location as a sub-urban university, the gender disparity is high as female faculty members are only five percent while females constitute 12 percent of the student population.

Although lack of physical infrastructure was a major challenge at TU3, the university leadership team was able to secure adequate funding from the government, international donors, and foreign embassies to construct six large buildings in the past five years. Their efforts paid off because now, TU3 has sufficient space for academic and administrative purposes; however, the institution lacks adequate infrastructure for recreation and study spaces. Currently, TU3 accommodates 1,576 male and female students in dormitories.

**Accreditation:** TU3 started the phase one accreditation candidacy in January 2013 by establishing an institutional quality assurance unit (IQAU) chaired by the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs. Nevertheless, TU3 failed to satisfy the minimum requirements for phase one candidacy level for two consecutive years, 2016-2017. In 2018, with some changes in the leadership of the university, TU3 was able to complete
phases one and two of accreditation candidacy. The institution has not achieved full accreditation yet.

Now that the five universities have been introduced, Figure 9 provides a graphic presentation of faculty members’ academic ranks, and Figure 10 presents the distribution of gender among students at these universities.

**Figure 8** Faculty members' academic ranks across the five universities

**Figure 9** Gender distribution among students across five universities
Research Participants

Given the scope of the study, I conducted 35 individual interviews, and two focus group discussions with four categories of participants. The first and primary research participants were key informants at the two research and three teaching universities. At teaching universities, I conducted nine individual interviews. I also facilitated a focus group discussion with seven participants at one of these teaching universities. The roles of participants varied from vice-chancellors to college deans and members of the internal quality assurance units (IQAUs). The ages of these participants were within the range of 30 – 40 years old. Inquiring into the views and experiences of the participants was meant to assist in developing a sense of where these universities were in terms of the accreditation process, and what strategies and plans they had to meet the requirements of accreditation.

The second category of research participants were key informants at research universities. I interviewed a total of 21 participants from two research universities including 15 individual interviews and one focus group. Although they shared insights about ongoing processes concerning accreditation at their respective universities, three of these participants served as peer-reviewers and national quality assurance and accreditation commission members. The participants’ ages were between 35 and 65 (for further information about participants’ characteristics, see Table 1).

Including both teaching and research universities in the study helped me learn more about the factors and processes involved in implementing accreditation. Since research universities were more advanced in implementing accreditation, I was able to learn and explore how they navigated the process in their favor and whether there were
some best practices to be introduced to teaching universities. I was particularly interested in learning the factors that assisted them to complete the three phases of accreditation, and the challenges they experienced to integrate QAA into their routines. The information acquired from research universities provided invaluable insights into ways that teaching universities could apply their experiences in order to achieve full accreditation.

The third category of research participants were members of the quality assurance and accreditation directorate (QAAD). These participants were full-time staff of QAAD and members of the national commission for quality assurance and accreditation or national peer-reviewers who were mainly affiliated with public universities as faculty members. I interviewed five individuals at QAAD. These participants provided information about implementing accreditation at the national level and their expectations for teaching and research universities. In addition, some participants were in charge of the bureaucratic process involved in implementing accreditation, and their views and experiences were instrumental in learning how the process works beyond the universities. More importantly, the goal of incorporating their side of the story was fruitful for creating proxy indicators and crosschecking how much correspondence there is between the way QAAD describes accreditation processes and outcomes and what realities are on the ground at teaching and research universities.

Lastly, I interviewed six representatives of international donor-funded projects that contributed to the establishment and implementation of accreditation in higher education. The participants represented three organizations: three individuals from the Higher Education Development Project (World Bank), two from the University Support
and Workforce Development Project (USAID), and one from the British Council.

Although USAID and British Council were no longer involved in accreditation, they were the primary projects/funders that assisted MoHE in establishing QAA in Afghanistan. Incorporating the views of practitioners from donor-funded projects was critical because they provided all the technical and logistical support to develop an accreditation framework and QAA policy. An important reason for including all technical partners in this research was to learn whether the donors’ activities are/were coordinated, and how their interests aligned with those at QAAD.

Overall, including the experiences of different stakeholders such as policymakers, donors, administrative staff and implementers was fruitful in developing a deeper understanding of accreditation in Afghanistan, focusing on public universities. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the research participants.

Table 2 Characteristics of Institutions, Participants, and Date of the Interviews

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<th>Position</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>30-40</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>35-60</td>
<td>2-Females 4-Males</td>
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<tr>
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<td>50-60</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>June 18</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<td>45-55</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>June 18</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>29</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>July 16</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>July 16</td>
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<tr>
<td>31</td>
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<td>35-40</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Higher Education Development Program World Bank (USWDP) Expat</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>June 09</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>40-50</td>
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<tr>
<td>36</td>
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<td>60–80</td>
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<td>Oct 01</td>
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<td>60–70</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Totals</td>
<td>35 individual interviews 2 focus groups</td>
<td>46 Individuals</td>
<td>8 Females/ 38 Males</td>
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Data Collection

I used three distinct methods: document review, open-ended observation, and individual/group interviews to collect data for this study. Analyzing relevant documents, observing participants, institutions, and processes, and conducting interviews with key informants was central to exploring the historical background, organizational culture, and procedural codes embedded in the accreditation cycle. The interviews with participants were the core of this research which aimed at uncovering lived experiences and assumptions of the participants in relation to implementing accreditation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The methodological literature on qualitative studies presents “four methods to collect data: a) participating in the setting, b) observing directly, c) interviewing in-depth, and d) analyzing documents and material culture” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 141). However, given the intention of the research, I focused on the last three. In the following section, I elaborate on the details of collecting field data.

Access to Institutions

In Afghanistan, it is legally required to request permission or seek approval from senior authorities when one wants to conduct a research project at public institutions. Abiding by the rules, the first thing I did was send an email to the Deputy Minister (DM) of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) explaining the purpose of my research and requesting his permission to allow me to conduct my research in public universities. Given my previous work experience and direct relationship with the DM, he approved my request immediately, referred me to the QAAD, and asked the director of QAAD to assist with my research project.
Next, I met with the Director of QAAD to obtain a letter from his office to officially introduce me and my research project to QAA Commission members and public universities. The director of QAAD asked me to include both public and private universities in my study because they were curious if private universities were complying with QAA policies. However, I respectfully declined to incorporate private universities given the purpose and scope of my research. The next issue was the selection of public institutions where I should conduct my research. The director kept proposing large research universities as according to him they were doing better compared to the smaller teaching universities. To address this problem, I agreed with their suggestion, but instead of five universities, I asked them to give me referral letters to ten universities including teaching and research universities. I knew that I needed a referral/permission letter from QAAD to access public HEIs; however, protecting the identities of institutions and participants was a challenge. The reason why I requested referrals to ten universities was (a) to be flexible in terms of switching sites if one or more institutions did not cooperate in my research, and (b) to protect identities, and to be able to observe some level of confidentiality as the research was conducted in only five universities.

Access to Individuals

Recruiting research participants varied across the five universities. While three universities, two research and one teaching, allowed me to recruit participants on my own, the other two provided me with a list of participants whom they recommended for the interviews. One of the last two even made arrangements in terms of time and location for the interviews. Although the official letter from QAAD granted me access to institutions and individuals, recruiting participants became a challenging task because
participants’ identities were no longer anonymous within the institutions as their colleagues and university leadership either recommended them or knew whom I interviewed. For instance, one of these universities even discussed the matter in their academic council meeting on whether or not to participate in the study. In addition, in some cases, when I was trying to recruit senior administrators for the study, they referred me to individuals who were experts on QAA in their colleges. In institutions that allowed me to attend the internal quality assurance unit (IQAU) meetings and observe various activities in relation to QAA, I was able to identify and recruit individuals more easily.

The recruitment of individuals for my research became easier when I introduced myself as a Ph.D. candidate and described the goals of my research project. In addition, I gave the consent form to research participants when I introduced the purpose of my research project. Although the IRB did not require me to ask participants to sign a consent form because, according to IRB, my research focused on QAA processes rather than people’s feelings and perceptions, I presented the consent form to research participants as a way to attract their attention to taking the questions more seriously. Soon I realized that faculty members and administrators were interested in my research topic when I provided them with a brief description of the study. In the meantime, the research participants were very respectful of my research as they were about the space and timing of the interviews.

During my interactions with research participants and visits to institutions, I had to make a series of decisions to ensure that the data I collected was relevant to my research questions. I also knew that data collection, data management, and data analysis were interrelated activities, and failing to observe a systematic plan at one stage would
affect the outcome. Therefore, following Marshall and Rossman’s (2016) recommendation, I created an interview log where I recorded detailed information about the setting (location), individuals’ characteristics, specific time, and my personal reflections on the moment. Completing the interview log during or after each interview/focus group was a helpful step toward data analysis as it included hints and cues that reminded me of a particular interview. Since I was interested in learning the lived experiences of participants, recording their facial expressions and reactions was meaningful to interpreting what they meant by certain words, phrases, and cues.

**Access to Documents**

Accessing archival data was quite challenging as self-assessment reports (SARs) and peer-review reports (PRR) are treated as confidential and are not publicly available. Although I made several formal requests, neither the universities nor the QAAD provided me access to either SARs or PRRs. Given that archival analysis was an important element of my study, I used informal channels of communication and was able to get copies of those documents for each of the five universities included in the study.

**Data Collection Methods**

**Archival review**

The nuances of fieldwork unfolded as I initiated some conversations with relevant stakeholders involved in accreditation. According to the initial plan, I was supposed to start with an archival analysis of relevant documents from various sources to learn where teaching and researcher universities are, who is involved in internal quality assurance processes, how the universities are depicted in written form, how does QAAD leadership perceive these universities, and what are the overall strengths, weaknesses, and
opportunities to achieve the national and (possibly) international accreditation. However, I soon learned that both self-assessment reports and peer-review reports were treated as confidential, and accessing them through the MoHE and respective universities were impossible. Therefore, I started the fieldwork by observing, meeting with, and interviewing key individuals at QAAD respectively followed by research universities, teaching universities, and donor representatives. In other words, unlike the initial plan, the archival analysis was postponed; instead, I focused my attention to find ways to obtain those documents in order to be able to draw a better picture of the selected institutions.

Given the goal and direction of the research, I collected two categories of documents. The first category was publicly available documents such as the accreditation framework, quality assurance policies, peer-review checklist, and self-assessment report outline. The second category included an array of “confidential materials” which I obtained through unofficial connections. The rationale for collecting these documents was two-fold. On one hand, an analysis of QAA policy, accreditation framework, self-assessment reports, peer-review reports, and universities’ strategic plans gave me a broader sense of where institutions were in the process, what their expectations were, and where institutions wanted to be. On the other, reading through the meeting minutes of the internal quality assurance units (IQAUs), strategic plans, monthly reports, action plans, data collection instruments, and evaluation criteria assisted me in understanding how sensemaking and sensegiving were taking place when institutions implemented QAA.

The in-depth review of documents served two important purposes: (a) the outcome of document analysis was a rich description that sheds light on the histories,
culture, structures, and organizational system in the selected five universities and (b) the findings also enlightened about the current status of these universities with accreditation standards.

**Interviews**

Interviews are categorized based on structure and type (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Structurally, three formats are suggested: “highly structured, semi-structured, and unstructured/informal” (Merriam, 2009, p. 89). While the purpose and use of each category vary, in highly structured interviews, the content and order of questions are fixed; in contrast, unstructured/informal interviews are exploratory by nature, loosely designed to assist the researcher/s to make sense of the research phenomenon; and lastly, semi-structured interviews fall in between the two, with a set of structured questions that are flexible to change and allow for follow-up questions (Merriam, 2009, p. 90).

For the current research, I used semi-structured interviews mostly face-to-face, and two interviews via Skype (O’Donoghue, 2006). Semi-structured interviews refer to a set of “specific questions in a specific sequence” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 150). Semi-structured interviews are favored for triggering a purposeful thorough investigation of unknown phenomena and a deeper understanding of context and issues. This method allowed me to create rapport and a trusting relationship with research participants in order to have a meaningful conversation about multiple aspects of the topic of interest (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Before the fieldwork, I created interview protocols in light of the conceptual framework and research questions for individual interviews and focus group discussions.
(see Appendix A). I used a combination of pre-defined and probing questions to gather information from the interview participants. A key challenge encountered in the focus group discussions was that a few participants dominated the conversations. I realized that executive power and seniority were the two main variables contributing to the problem. To address the problem, I made sure to ask each individual in the group to reflect on the question and/or add on someone else’s response. I also interrupted the conversation to provide clarity about the question/s, focus on the topic, and ask a different person to make sure everyone was heard.

The interviews and focus group discussions were primarily conducted in Dari as the local participants were fluent in Dari. Only two interviews were conducted in English as the participants were native speakers of English. Individual interviews lasted between 35 minutes and one hour and 20 minutes. However, focus group discussions lasted between one and two hours. Given the nature of semi-structured interviews, I was able to modify some of the interview questions and add follow-up and probing questions that matched the contextual circumstances and were valuable for the goals of this research (Gray et al., 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2016). In addition, the semi-structured interview protocols allowed me to adjust the questions based on the context to learn more about the participants’ experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Robert & Sari, 2007).

I chose semi-structured interviews for their heuristic nature (Rallis & Rossman, 2013). Using this method as the core data collection approach helped me explore individuals’ lived experiences in relation to QAA and what the implementation of QAA meant to them in real-life situations (Seidman, 2013). Informed by the guidelines of semi-structured interviews, I created close rapport with research participants and
encouraged them to share their experiences by integrating probing open-ended questions aligned with pre-defined questions (Davies, 1997; Seidman, 2013). Rossman and Rallis (2016) suggest that open-ended questions in qualitative research are based on the assumption that “the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it and not as the researcher views it” (p. 155). As soon as I started the interview sessions, I learned that each interview session was unique, and I adapted the tone of questions depending on the individual and the kind of information shared by the participant (Schostak, 2005). In other words, research participants had different roles in their respective institutions and each of them had specific information and experiences that were not shared with others (Schostak, 2005; Stephens, 2007); therefore, I attended to the uniqueness of each individual’s experiences by acknowledging the value of information shared with me.

Observation

I conducted unstructured and participant observations with a focus on processes, interactions, information sharing, physical resources, and symbolic presentations in relation to QAA. The observations occurred in episodes ranging from 15 minutes to five hours a day. I participated in several IQAU meetings at both research and teaching universities and attended the QAA Commission meetings at QAAD. I learned a lot about internal processes at the national and institutional levels, especially ways that members of IQAUs made sense of accreditation goals and processes. Because I was previously affiliated with one of the public universities and my research focused on accreditation, both QAAD and IQAUs treated me as a colleague by allowing me to attend their internal conversations as they discussed QAA issues. As I participated in these meetings, I also
shared my insights and what I learned from the literature. I was also treated as an expert and asked by the QAAD to give a presentation on the historical development of QAA and where Afghanistan stands in comparison to the neighboring countries. The rapport I developed was instrumental as I had an opportunity to provide insight into QAA development in the light of literature. In other words, although I was in the field for a short period of time, when I attended the meetings, I was treated as an internal member, therefore, my role became more of a “participant-observer” (Rossman & Rallis, 2016).

Choosing the right space is significant while conducting an observation. That being the case, I sat around the same table with the rest of the members. This selection helped me in two ways. First, I was able to see participants’ faces and movements. Second, it gave me the feeling that I belonged there as I exchanged conversations by commenting and asking why they approached things in a certain way. As I chose to have an unstructured observation, I was able to observe the setting and participants holistically. During the observation, I realized that I had to keep a balance in terms of taking notes and participating in a conversation. To ensure that my notes were complete, I usually designated some time right after my observations, interviews, and focus group discussions to write memos and fill the notes.

Nevertheless, my role as a participant-observer granted me an advantage to connect with participants and understand the topic well. Before the meetings started, I let the chair of the meeting introduce me and my research to the participants so that they become familiar with me. Then, I elaborated on my role and talked to them about my background. I often commented on issues and asked questions so that my presence was valued. Rossman and Rallis (2016) suggest that “co-participation” and participation
observation benefit a researcher to learn inner insights “emic understanding” and implicit dynamics in a social setting (p. 131). That said, I found it easier to collect data when I realized that participants saw me as a colleague rather than a strange observer. Reger (2001) states when an individual feels belonging to a community or setting, the person will find it easier to work with the members of the community. My position in the role of a colleague helped me save time and effort to access and learn about research participants. However, when conducting my observations, I was very careful in terms of protecting identities, respecting privacies, and maintaining my relation and engagement with the participants. During the observations, I was very comfortable understanding the group conversation and connecting with the participants as the topic of discussion was meaningful to all of us. My role as a participant-observer let me participate in the process by asking questions, sharing comments, and taking notes about the setting, topic, and individuals’ behavior. Emerson et al. (1995) state that participation observation benefits an investigator in understanding an issue through “writing, participating and observing” (p. 19).

Although unstructured observations do not tell a researcher what to observe and what not to observe, the researcher needs to make a number of decisions about whether to focus on the content of the conversation, the behaviors of participants, or other aspects of the setting. As a participant-observer, I encountered situations that were not directly related to my research, however, I could not help noticing them because they explained a lot about individuals and the way things were in a certain context. For instance, on one occasion, I realized that the IQAU team leader dominated the entire meeting and barely paid attention to what other members were sharing. Instead, the team leader kept
imposing his/her view. Similarly, on another occasion, I realized that four of the 12 IQAU members were newly appointed in this role, and their team leader barely oriented them about the process. They were simply told once, “please study the QAA manuals to be able to engage in the meeting.” While some of these observations were directly related to my research and others indirectly relevant, they captured significant moments that shed light on understanding issues with the implementation of QAA at these universities.

Similar to interviews, observation requires the full attention of the researcher while he/she is trying to record useful moments. Given my research interest, I was curious about the content that members of IQAUs discussed and the approaches they used to interpret QAA outcomes and processes. The first quarter of my observation notes was more general as I paid attention to the entire setting; however, as time passed, the observation focused on the pattern of events that seemed meaningful to my research. Emerson et al. (1995) maintain that as a researcher one may intentionally “look for events that should be written down for research purposes” (p. 18). That was the rationale why my observations shifted from a general outlook to more specific cues and gestures.

I included observation in my research as a way to learn about inner stories and make sense of the process by engaging and spending more time with key informants (Rossman & Rallis, 2016; Emerson et al., 1995; Reger, 2001). However, as a participant-observer, in addition to the purpose of the research, I had ethical obligations considering social relations and whether to record and report on sensitive issues. To put it simply, I felt more connected to research participants when they allowed me in their meetings and shared their stories without censoring them.
In sum, the observations allowed for learning certain aspects of the problem that were not otherwise accessible through interviews and archival analysis. There were moments when I felt exhausted; there was too much to write, and I had to make choices about issues that were relevant to my research. In the first few sessions, my participation was limited, and soon I realized that I needed to contribute to the conversation in order to build trust and rapport. I believe self-reflection is a form of observation, as one changes role and attention. However, my focus was on the social aspect, to have a balanced contribution, not just relying on one thing (field notes) at the cost of another (membership of the community). In a nutshell, I found the observation process dynamic as I made decisions regarding the what, where, when, and how-to of my observation notes (Rossman & Rallis, 2016).

Data Collection Procedures

Institutional Review Board Approval

On April 09, 2019, I acquired the institutional review board (IRB) approval for my dissertation research from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Office of Human Research Protection. Based on the IRB memo, my research was not determined as involving “human subjects.” In accordance with their assessment, my research on policy implementation analysis did not “meet the definition of human subject research under federal regulation 45 CFR, 46. 102, (d)” (See IRB approval in Appendix B). The IRB memo indicated when “a project is determined as ‘Not Human Subjects Research,’ must still be conducted in accordance with the ethical principles … respect for persons, beneficence, and justice”. However, based on this memo, I am not required to submit a post-research report to IRB.
**Administrative Processes and Data Management**

I used a digital recorder and my iPhone 6s to record interviews and focus group discussions. I made sure the digital recorder was functional before each interview and asked for participants’ permission to use my iPhone as a backup. In addition, to take precautionary steps, I transferred the audio files from the recorder and my iPhone to my personal password-protected computer at the end of each day. Meanwhile, when I had access to the internet, I saved a copy of the files in the Box, an online secure data storage supported by the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Office of Information Technology.

To better manage the data, I saved each file with a name and date and placed them in the folder designated for interview data. In the findings section of this research, I used pseudonyms and generic terms to protect the identities of interview participants and to avoid a breach of confidentiality. I also created a log that entailed details of interview participants and pseudonyms attached to them. Acknowledging that personal computers are not immune to internet viruses and malware, I uploaded the interview transcriptions and archival data into Box which had more security protection.

**Ethical Considerations**

Conducting research with human participants is a delicate process that requires an investigator to attend to moral principles throughout the study. The literature on research methods refers to moral principles as research ethics (Etherington, 2007; Rossman, Rallis & Kuntz, 2010). Qualitative researchers treat ethical consideration as a core criterion and evidence for the credibility and trustworthiness of a study (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Meanwhile, empirical studies and methodological literature confirm that ethical
consideration goes beyond procedural processes that include acquiring IRB approval, developing consent forms, and recruiting participants with ethics of beneficent, care, and justice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In fact, ethical dilemmas arise when the researcher notices amoral practices when a researcher commits actions that undermine the trustworthiness of a study, or in other situations and circumstances that the researcher has little or no control (Rossman & Rallis, 2016; Sixsmith & Murray, 2006). To ensure confidentiality and protect the identities of the research participants, not only did I avoid the use of identifiable characters in the research report, but I also attended to the following procedures and practices that aimed at increasing the trustworthiness of the current research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

To begin with, during my interviews, I often mentioned the value of information shared with me as participants responded to my questions and/or provided data. I made sure the research participants felt valued for their work and their willingness to participate in my research. One way to do this was by paraphrasing what they said, asking probing questions, and commenting on the importance of their work. Other times, particularly in those settings where I had the role of participant-observer, I shared my findings from the literature or scholarly work in order to maintain a discursive process for information sharing and gathering. In addition, apart from sending thank you notes to each participant after my interviews, before and during the interviews, I acknowledged their work and their roles in their respected universities.

From the procedural aspect, I used a consent form during the recruitment of research participants as a way to introduce the research goals and to inform them about their rights, and the benefits and risks of participating in the study. During the
introductory meetings, I ensured participants the confidentiality of their responses to interview questions. Similar to individual interviews, I ensured the confidentiality of information in focus group discussions and requested the same from the participants since five to seven participants attended the focus group. Before they agreed to participate in the study, I informed them about the voluntary nature of their participation. They realized that they have the right to avoid answering any questions that were uncomfortable to them, or the right to quit at any time if they wanted. In addition, I explained that they would not receive any compensation for their participation. Nonetheless, I did not require the participants to sign the consent forms as the IRB did not require it.

To reduce any risks associated with individuals’ and institutions’ identities as a result of participating in my research, I observed the following precautions while conducting research. When I visited any university, I made sure not to disclose any information about other institutions where I visited or planned to visit. Similarly, in writing the research report, I avoided mentioning any identifiable characteristics that disclose the identities of individuals and institutions. Instead, I used pseudonyms and neutral/generic phrases when I referenced individuals or institutions. In addition, I used a broad category such as senior/junior officials, faculty, or administrator to refer to key informants. The reason I used these substitutions was that the number of individuals in leadership positions or IQAUs is very small, and one can easily identify them if a description of a job or role is too obvious. For instance, only nine members are serving on QAA national commission; therefore, one could easily identify them if their job titles or roles are disclosed. Furthermore, I conducted the majority of the interviews in an environment where participants were free from social interference. However, only two
participants insisted to have the interview in their offices, and the interviews were interrupted two-three times because their staff kept interrupting them. Other than these two, the rest of the interviews were held in a space where interviewees felt less distracted and comfortable in terms of sharing their views and stories.

**Translation and Transcription**

I completed the transcription and simultaneous translation of interviews and focus group discussions from Dari into English in the Fall of 2019. To ensure the accuracy of the translated materials, I had two critical friends who are fluent in Dari and English review the original data and compare them against the translation. I reviewed and incorporated their feedback into the data before running analyses. I also consulted with critical friends regarding a few short excerpts in Dari that would go along with the English text for their unique meanings in the original language with their English interpretation. As an example, some research participants were referring to institutional accreditation as /kaghaz parani/, and I had to go back and forth with my critical friends to come up with a term and/or an explanation to capture the meaning as “administrative bureaucracy”. In other words, using the phrase administrative bureaucracy /kaghaz parani – کاغذ پرانتی is the closest meaning that emphasizes the process over outcomes the way it is understood in the local language.

Seeking inputs from critical friends in reviewing translation also helped me to focus on the natural meaning of the words in the local language as opposed to theory-driven and research-driven terms and concepts. As an exercise, we re-translated the phrases from English back into Dari/Farsi to make sure the closest meanings were captured. For instance, I realized that I often used sensemaking and sensegiving
opportunities as an alternative to awareness programs while the participants had no idea about the meaning of the terms sensemaking and sensegiving.

In addition, the transcription and translation of interview data involved careful listening to the audio files several times to ensure that the exact meaning intended by the participants was captured. I also had my field notes and interview logs during the transcription and translation process. The notes helped me to integrate participants’ facial responses and gestures into my interpretation of what they meant by certain terms or phrases. Knowing that scrutiny in data collection and data management contributes to data quality, the following section briefly describes the ethical consideration observed in the study.

**Data Analysis**

The data for this research included documents (policies, strategic plans, self-assessment reports, peer-review reports, minutes of meetings, etc.), interview transcripts, observation notes (field notes), and analytic memos. I gathered the qualitative data by interviewing individuals, making copies, writing notes, and reflecting on events (e.g., writing analytic memos). In this research, my role was instrumental in gathering and interpreting field data because the quality of data highly depended on how I attended to research rigor by paying attention to specific events, social norms, contextual factors, and elements of culture (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Given my personal epistemology, I know that my research will not contribute to the establishment of a single truth; it rather involves streams of interpretation and meaning making by analyzing each case and across cases (Miles et al., 2014). In other words, qualitative data are unique for their focus “on
naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 14), and for their thick and in-depth descriptions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The data analysis was an iterative process beginning with data collection, processing, and writing the research report (Creswell, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Throughout this process, I wrote memos that documented and reflected on events and processes that were meaningful to the goals of the current research. The memos either reflect on the setting and individuals (methodological memo), the relationship between conceptual framework and participants’ responses (theoretical memo), or patterns across responses (analytic memo), which represent the analysis of some kind (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The aim was to make sense of the corpus of data by reducing them to manageable portions, organizing them in a coherent order, and drawing a connection between and across categories (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative methodologists also advise on specifying data analysis modes by making decisions on whether to use traditional coding by hand or using computer software to analyze qualitative data (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). For the sake of current research, I used NVivo (computer software) to code the data and run queries.

Miles et al. (2014) frame data analysis as three interrelated activities: “data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification” (p. 17). The first step, data condensation, refers to a range of activities that occur prior to data collection and through data analysis. These processes are “selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and/or transforming the data that appear in the full corpus of written-up field notes, interview transcripts, documents, and other empirical materials” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 17). The authors describe data display as a way to “assemble organized information into
an immediately accessible, compact form so that the analyst can see what is happening and either draw justified conclusions or move on to the next step of analysis that the display suggests may be useful” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 18). The last step, *drawing and verifying conclusion*, denotes specific processes used to interpret events and meanings that research participants hold into, and assess “their plausibility, their sturdiness, their confirmability – that is, their validity” (p. 19).

In the current research, I used two levels of analysis. The first one followed Marshall and Rossman’s (2016) generic steps for qualitative data analysis: “organizing the data, immersion in the data, generating case summaries and possible categories and themes, coding the data, offering interpretations through analytic memos, searching for alternative understanding, and writing the report” (p. 217). The second level drew on a multiple-case study design that encompasses “a detailed description of the setting or individuals, followed by an analysis of data for themes or issues” (Creswell, 2014, p. 267).

To analyze interview transcriptions and archival data, I began with data cleaning and organization. To do so, I created a spreadsheet that listed demographic information about research participants. I found the spreadsheet useful for creating case nodes in NVivo. Then, I read the interview transcriptions closely and performed minor editing and formatting. Once the data were clean and ready, I uploaded them to NVivo 12. I created a separate folder for each data type that included interview transcriptions, field notes, memos, and archival documents.

Once the data were organized, I read them multiple times to detect underlying issues/concepts by allocating time and space to let the information marinate as I thought
through them. Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggest that “immersion” in the data assists researchers to see the bigger picture such as themes/categories and provides them preliminary insights for coding the data. Following a thorough reading of the text, I used a combination of theory-laden and organic insights to generate codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To analyze data in light of sensemaking/sensegiving, I underlined events and incidents that texts referred to as stages of deliberate understanding and meaning-making, and organized disruption of existing assumptions and actions. In other words, the analysis focused on how the meaning-making processes occurred and how individuals or institutions understood them. The analysis also examined whether a pattern existed across cases (universities), and how individuals endured the accreditation processes and outcomes.

By creating a series of parent and child nodes (major codes and sub-codes), I categorized the texts that were centered on the research content (accreditation), purpose (identification of influencing factors), context (teaching/research universities), and theory (sensemaking and sensegiving). A complete list of codes, for instance, was created to capture specific information that can be associated with the conceptual framework and research questions. As an example, codes and sub-codes for factors influencing accreditation at teaching universities include inputs such as library resources, physical facilities, curricula, and leadership as challenges and/or opportunities. Figure 10, for example, provides a consolidated hierarchy of NVivo codes compared by the number of items referenced in participants' responses.
In addition, using NVivo 12 helped me run queries to examine overlaps within and across parent codes (categories). Running queries simplified the process, as I was able to generate themes and categories by putting the dots together, observing patterns across themes/categories, and reflecting on thought processes that assisted in generating themes in correspondence to the conceptual framework and the research questions.

Figure 11 provides a visualization of independent and cluster coding for a focus group discussion.
Figure 11 An example of single and cluster coding and theme/s for an interview (TU3 VC).

NVivo 12 also made it possible to promote or demote a particular code to the parent or child code, cluster a group of codes around one major one, or run cross-case analyses to see overlaps. Using NVivo 12, I was able to put together interrelated themes and compare participants' responses (See Figure 12). A comparison of institutional strengths and challenges, for instance, helped me see what factors were described as
challenges vs. strengths, and what are common areas. Then I created a description of what these codes meant and how they informed my research question/s.

I started writing reflective and analytic memos that addressed a particular aspect of the research question or conceptual framework throughout the data analysis process.
including field visits and post-interviews. The analytic memos reflected on the likelihood of implementation of accreditation at each institution, whether participants had a good grasp of the policy, and the extent to which there was a shared interpretation of the policy at the institution and college level. In these memos, I focused on the evolution of accreditation at each institution (sequences of sensemaking/sensegiving), the link between interpretations and actions (the what and how of sensemaking), and level of emphasis on cognition and action (approaches of sensemaking and sensegiving).

Furthermore, writing analytic memos served two important purposes for my research. First, they captured the chain of thoughts that occurred at a particular moment during data analysis. Second, they eased the interpretation of phenomena and processes as they produced narratives that were embedded in data and/or had connections with the conceptual framework and the research questions. Acknowledging that case study research does not intend to produce generalizable results, I share the aspiration that a thorough and rigorous analysis of data from Afghanistan contributes to our understanding of the complexities of conducting primary research in a fragile context (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Writing a thick description of cases facilitated a more robust and complex analytic exercise to see connections within and across themes, identify theoretical and contextual discrepancies, and draw preliminary hypotheses. While the theory suggests that thematic analysis helps “aggregate data into a small number of themes, something like five to seven themes” (Creswell, 2012, p. 267), practical evidence informs that “identifying salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings together is the most intellectually challenging phase” in data analysis (Marshall
This suggests that themes do not appear simply by reading the text; themes are generated when the investigator attends to the second level of analysis following coding to discover how codes are/are not related and decide how to put them together to address research purposes (Braun et al., 2019). One way to do so was to cluster several codes together to form a unifying pattern that surrounds a particular topic (Marshall & Rossman, 2018). For instance, as a preliminary step, I grouped codes and sub-codes that informed sensemaking and sensegiving of accreditation at teaching and research universities. I also created a separate theme where the factors overlapped and described conditions and how one factor affected others.

Once themes were created, I referred back to them with fresh eyes, re-examining relationships among codes, adding new categories, or eliminating codes that did not go together. This step of analysis allowed me to rethink the initial themes/categories and further engage with the data. Braun et al. (2019) characterize good themes as the ones that “do not try to do too much, as themes should ideally have a singular focus; are related but do not overlap…; and directly address …[the] research questions” (p. 66). With all these guidelines in mind, the interpretation of findings involved organizing themes in a way that produced a coherent story – a logical argument that flowed in line with the conceptual framework and addressed the research questions. When writing the section on the interpretation of results, I used analytic memos and themes/categories generated as the primary source coupled with insights from theory. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) note that “the researcher’s interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, and personal reflection contribute to the reader’s overall understanding of the case study” (p. 51).
**Researcher Positionality**

Qualitative methodologists describe the researcher’s role as instrumental in conducting fieldwork (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Throughout the conceptualization, data collection, analysis and interpretation, I reflected on my role. I acknowledge that my positionality as a current doctoral candidate and my previous roles as a public university leader and faculty member shape my worldview and the way I engage with accreditation as the phenomenon under study (Palaganas et al., 2017). I also understand that my interactions with research participants have a mutual effect on both me and the participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). The literature refers to this relationship as “reflexivity, … the package of reciprocal and iterative reactions between the researcher and the participants in the setting” (Rossman & Rallis, 2016, p. 37). Informed about my personal assumptions, values, and social roles, I approached research participants with a brief introduction including my former role as an administrator at one of the public universities and my current research interest. Below, I lay out my biography, and how it might have influenced the research.

I come from an educated family that resided in a Western province, Ghazni. My parents settled in Kabul, the capital city years before I was born. Therefore, I received most of my education in Kabul. I speak Farsi/Dari as my native language and am familiar with Pashto and English. I identify as a Shia Muslim that constitutes roughly 20 percent of the population in Afghanistan. I started my career as a faculty member at Baghlan University in 2006 and was promoted to Department Chair of English, and later as the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs. Throughout my ten-year tenure at Baghlan University, I participated in national and international conferences, workshops, and
seminars which in a way helped me develop relationships with other university leaders and officials at MoHE.

In addition, I worked as a consultant with the University Support and Workforce Development Project (USWDP) in the summer of 2016. My responsibilities at USWDP involved working closely with the Ministry of Higher Education, particularly the Deputy Minister for Academic Affairs and the Director of QAAD who was in charge of implementing accreditation at the national level. Although the time was short, I developed a close professional relationship with the staff of QAAD and other senior officers at MoHE. So far, my relationship with MoHE, QAAD, and some universities was instrumental in conducting this study.

While my previous affiliation with one of the public universities was instrumental in accessing research sites, participants showed more value for my enrollment in a doctoral program at a prestigious university. Not only did the teaching and research universities support my research by providing access to the university and individuals, but also three of the five universities coordinated my visits and offered private spaces where I could conduct my interviews. Unlike my concerns, my background in higher education and my studies in the United States served me well in terms of accessing individuals and institutions to collect meaningful data.

However, there were times that I felt that participants were hesitant to share their internal challenges; instead, they often blamed MoHE for their problems. I noticed the reluctance at some research sites where participants were introduced by the leadership or their colleagues. Although they have extensive experience and information about accreditation at their institutions, they often avoided disclosing any information that
would provide a negative image. One of the participants who had a leadership role declined to participate in the study after they reviewed the interview protocol. Other examples included problems and challenges associated with the university leadership and the way accreditation was managed at a particular institution. Nevertheless, as described in the finding chapters, most participants came forward and shared their lived experiences without any apparent censoring.

As much as the participants were influenced by my presence, they also had a similar effect on the way I phrased questions, asked probing questions and the tone used to communicate with them. Given my previous roles, I always encountered senior officials and university leaders with the communication protocols common at public institutions in Afghanistan. I made sure my tone was respectful as I used to report to some of them and avoided direct eye contact to respect the cultural norms. This was particularly important in interviewing women and senior officials.
CHAPTER 6
FINDINGS

This study explored sensemaking and sensegiving of quality assurance and accreditation processes at public teaching and research universities in Afghanistan. I inquired into the lived experiences of key informants at the institutional and national levels to learn how teaching and research universities mobilize efforts to implement internal quality assurance in order to succeed in accreditation. I also looked into factors that affect the implementation of accreditation at both types of universities. The qualitative multi-case study design allowed me to collect data from a wide range of participants who were directly involved in QAA at the national, institutional, and program levels. Correspondingly, the data from semi-structured interviews, field observations, and the desk review revealed themes and sub-themes that inform my three research questions:

- What are the experiences of stakeholders at public teaching and research universities concerning quality assurance and accreditation?
- How does sensemaking/sensegiving occur as public teaching and research universities respond to quality assurance and accreditation policy?
- What are some major challenges that public teaching and research universities face as they implement quality assurance and accreditation?

Participants of the study described how their experience shaped their understanding of institutional accreditation and ways that they identified opportunities and barriers to implementing it at their institutions. To present their stories, the findings are organized into three chapters based on the research questions.
SENSEMAKING AND SENSEGIVING OF ACCREDITATION AT UNIVERSITIES

The current research offers new insights into how quality assurance and accreditation is understood in higher education settings and how university stakeholders engage in its implementation at the national and institutional levels. In a broader sense, the findings indicate that organizational cultures and contextual factors play a key role in sensemaking/sensegiving of quality in higher education. In particular, the centralized structure of higher education in Afghanistan plays a significant role in exploring meaning construction (sensemaking) and giving sense to the topic of quality and QAA processes.

The current chapter discusses QAA in light of sensemaking and sensegiving concepts. The chapter is divided into three sub-themes, each of which describes participants’ experiences. The first one, QAA as Organizational Sensemaking/Sensegiving, discusses sensemaking characteristics that correspond to participants’ experiences with QAA. The second theme, Sensemaking/Sensegiving Phases of accreditation, encapsulates participants’ experiences regarding the breadth of policy implementation at institutions. Lastly, Sensemaking/Sensegiving Forms of Quality, describes the depth of policy implementation, unpacking the likelihood of involvement and whether or not public teaching and research universities have the supervision structures in place to oversee employees’ engagement with QAA.

Accreditation as Organizational Sensemaking and Sensegiving

Participants characterized quality assurance and accreditation as organizational sensemaking and sensegiving centered on observable actions, reflections, and ongoing efforts to make the process meaningful to the university community. According to them, enacting QAA involves having the technical expertise to train staff, develop internal
policies and procedures, and coordinate activities. The process also entails structural adjustments such as the establishment of quality assurance units at the institutional, college, and program levels to manage QAA related operations. Lastly, participants stated that implementing QAA is an ongoing learning experience inspired by previous exposure to a phenomenon (retrospection) and communicated through differentiated channels so that participants can extract cues and make a plausible interpretation. Subsequent paragraphs elaborate on these components of sensemaking and draw on their explicit and implicit presentation.

**Institutionalizing Accreditation – Sensegiving and Policy Enactment**

Many participants emphasized developing policy documents, by-laws, and guidelines as essential in sensemaking/sensegiving of quality. They also stressed that capacity building programs intended for the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate (QAAD) staff and university employees were equally important in implementing accreditation at the national and institutional levels. The participants from both public teaching and research universities noted that QAAD and donor-funded projects offer a series of awareness programs to institutionalize QAA in nearly all universities in Afghanistan. They also explained that QAAD has worked rigorously to develop policies, procedures, and guidelines to help universities implement QAA. For instance, at the national level, a senior official from QAAD said, “We created policies and guidelines for institutions to conduct their self-assessment reports. We also created a template and guidelines for peer-reviewers to prepare their reports.” Similarly, a junior official from the same Directorate added, “We worked hard to communicate the value of
quality assurance for all universities. We created checklists, questionnaires, rules, regulations, templates, and mechanisms to help ease the process”.

While the above examples explain QAAD’s involvement in the dissemination of QAA as a national policy, participants acknowledged the role of foreign donor-funded development projects such as the University Support and Workforce Development Program (USWDP) of the United Agency for International Development (USAID), Higher Education Development Project (HEDP) of the World Bank and British Council in supporting the establishment of QAA in Afghanistan. Several participants at QAAD noted that these projects supported awareness programs (sensegiving) at the national and institutional levels. A member of the National QAA Commission stated that donor-funded projects had hired foreign experts to assist MoHE in developing the quality assurance policy and accreditation framework. She added that the development projects (HEDP, USWDP, and British Council) also worked with universities to make sure the faculty members and university leaders understand the policy and develop structures to implement it.

Similarly, a representative of a donor agency described his involvement while serving as a senior advisor to MoHE with a focus on QAA said, “I gave the Commission some structures…, e.g. to ask questions; they would sort of act like reviewers. Otherwise, we could never get them to make a decision.” This quote shows an obvious example of sensegiving facilitated by a representative of a donor. Another representative of a donor-funded project described her experience with QAA, noting,

We created a process to help [public teaching and research] universities measure their progress in the area of quality assurance and accreditation. We developed a
‘tracking document’ with the assistance of universities in the UK. The universities use the tracking document to assess their progress against the accreditation framework, identify their strength and weaknesses, and develop strategies to address the problems.

While donor-funded projects like HEDP and USWDP were involved in QAA from the very start, they suggested that QAAD and the leadership of universities organize internal processes in a way that employees are held responsible for quality improvement. A representative of one of these projects argued that teaching and research universities should be held accountable for quality improvement. “We are not responsible for quality improvement; it is an internal issue of the universities. We support the establishment of quality assurance units [physical space and technologies]. We developed a manual that explains the responsibilities of quality assurance units,” he explained. For the donor representatives, quality improvement depends on universities as an internal responsibility where the donors provide tools to assist the universities in implementing policies.

Since engagement with QAA involves a series of decisions, participants from teaching and research universities made notes of observable actions intended to manage quality from a technical standpoint. While the participants described their engagement with QAA (sensemaking/sensegiving) as a learning opportunity that was intended to increase awareness and ownership of the process, their experiences varied between teaching and research universities. According to the Dean of a College from a research university, their institution provided many workshops and training sessions for university employees to inform them about the goals and objectives of QAA. He added, “Because quality assurance was new at the beginning, in addition to general awareness workshops,
we used a bottom-up approach to involve faculty members and Department Chairs in the process. We created plans at different levels, including faculty development plans, teaching improvement plans, and department and college improvement plans.” This quote provides an example of a structured approach to sensemaking and sensegiving of QAA at a research university.

Participants from research universities also talked about developing tools for reaching out to university stakeholders about the purpose of QAA. A member of IQAU, for example, explained that the IQAU at their university created “catalogs and brochures” to communicate an institution-wide commitment to quality improvement. On a similar point, the Dean of a College said, “Our catalog and brochures have key information about our mission and vision, human resources, expectations for graduation, and curriculum to help our students know the roadmap to their degrees”. Although research universities were the pioneers in implementing QAA since the very beginning, participants often referred to sensemaking/sensegiving of QAA as an ongoing process. A member of IQAU described their institution’s approach to quality improvement as follow:

Our institution has allocated a specific budget for quality assurance and accreditation. We will spend the budget to train faculty members and staff in the area of teaching improvement plans, syllabus design, action plans, department responsibilities, college-level activities, and interpretation of accreditation standards.

According to this quote, engaging in QAA is an ongoing process at research universities.

Unlike the research universities, participants from teaching universities reported more mixed experiences. While some highlighted a lack of awareness among faculty
members and staff as an issue of concern, others pointed out other factors affecting quality. One such case is well described by the Dean of a College at a teaching university:

The accreditation framework asks whether we have a mission and a strategy. If we have developed our missions and strategy, no matter what, we will proceed. The same is true for other accreditation standards. For example, if we do not have financial resources, we create a plan on paper. This satisfies [peer reviewers]. If we do not have space for classrooms, we incorporate it into our strategic plan and create a proposal for it. Having a proposal means we did something although we do not have the [actual funding] to build the classrooms. If our plan does not happen because of a lack of resources, that does not mean we did not do anything. For this participant, administrative processes undermine the intention of accreditation as a quality improvement effort. Nevertheless, the lack of adequate resources surfaces as an underlying challenge at teaching universities.

Some participants also criticized QAAD for not providing enough awareness programs at teaching universities. The Dean of a College described, “Our faculty members have not attended any awareness workshops to learn about quality assurance processes. The ones who participated in these workshops have barely transferred the technical knowledge to the institution. This is our biggest challenge now.” Echoing the sentiment, the Dean of another College explained, “Unfortunately, the awareness level is poor at our institution. Not everyone has a good grasp of quality assurance processes and outcomes, or they do not have any commitment to quality improvement.” These two quotes show a gap between the assumptions of authorities at MoHE, QAAD in particular,
and the realities on the ground. Failing to attend to the sensemaking needs of faculty members and staff at teaching universities, will mean that the implementation of QAA will likely be treated as administrative protocol. The case is exemplified in the following observation by the Dean of the College of Economics at a teaching university, “We do not know how to interpret the accreditation standards. This is why we do not know what to do.” For participants like the Dean, sensemaking and sensegiving of QAA should be a priority for stakeholders at teaching universities before they can implement the policy as expected. In other words, the Dean suggested that university employees need to have a clear picture of QAA so that they are able to interpret it and develop strategies to address the problems.

*Enacting Policy – Creating Taskforces and Structures*

Many participants indicated that QAAD as the national authority on QAA provides a set of prescriptive guidelines and policies that are meant to help universities navigate the QAA processes at the institutional and college levels. To implement these policies, participants noted that their institutions have established taskforces such as the internal quality assurance units (IQAU) and quality assurance committees to implement the policy at the institutional, college, and department levels. For some participants like the Dean of the College of Science at a research university, the experience seems well integrated at research universities given that these institutions created a salient interconnected structure that oversees the implementation of quality assurance activities throughout the institution. Specifically, the Dean of a College described, “To effectively manage quality assurance activities, [our university] created a leadership council that includes deans of colleges and university leadership. The Deans are expected to present
their activities concerning quality assurance at each meeting, and others provide feedback.” For this participant, QAA is interwoven across the institution at this research university. Further, the following two quotes provide more context on existing structures and approaches used at research universities to communicate QAA:

Our work on quality resembles a chain – at the university level, we have a leadership council, then a Senior Manager for quality assurance who chairs the institutional quality assurance unit [IQAU]. We also have quality assurance committees at each college. The members of the institutional quality assurance unit serve as the head of quality assurance committees at their respected colleges. It is our job to share new developments with these members who in turn transfer the information to the college committees and sub-committees (Member of IQAU, Research University).

We created a strategic plan and an action plan for the internal quality assurance units [(IQAU)]. The [IQAU] members are aware of these plans, and they are supposed to inform their colleges about our plans. For us, the quality assurance unit serves as a web that has links from top to bottom. Specifically, the [IQAU] members serve as heads or members of quality assurance committees at each college. The members of the college quality assurance committees are usually Department Chairs who also serve as the head of quality assurance committees in their departments. This way, we have been able to reach a larger audience (Member of IQAU, from another Research University).

These comments suggest that research universities have established an internal QAA system that facilitates information sharing and communication with academic units.
within the university. The experience of a member of IQAU at a research university corroborated this when he commented, “I work in both committees: the institutional quality assurance unit and the college quality assurance committee. When I face any problems, I bring them to the institutional committee meetings. We discuss the problem and construct meaning. Then, I disseminate the new information to our college.” While both printed materials and field notes supported these statements at research universities, managing QAA was different for several participants at teaching universities.

Participants from teaching universities indicated that although they have created IQAUs and QAA committees at each college, these committees are barely functional as their work is limited to carrying out self-assessments. A few of these participants who serve as members of IQAUs highlighted the knowledge gap in the area of QAA. They said that have they neither attended any training nor have they been self-motivated to study any materials on QAA. As an example, when I asked the participants in a focus group whether they had studied the accreditation framework or the quality assurance policy. Two-thirds of them answered “No”. Although the experience from one teaching university cannot be generalized to all teaching universities given that a few of them made similar progress toward accreditation as the research universities, this example explains the lack of motivation among Deans and limited sensemaking/sensegiving opportunities at teaching universities. On a similar note, when one of the Vice-Chancellors was asked what activities they had done to engage faculty members and staff in quality assurance, he responded, “The Ministry of Higher Education has established some rules and regulations. If we all observe the rules, quality of higher education will improve.” However, he acknowledged that “the level of understanding about quality
assurance processes is limited to basics, probably just the framework.” Although these responses represent participants’ perspectives and experiences from selected teaching universities, the study suggests a pattern in how senior managers handle QAA at teaching universities.

Despite the limited engagement of senior staff at teaching universities, some participants acknowledged that QAA is no longer perceived as only an administrative duty but also as an organized approach for quality improvement. In one such instance, the Dean of a College expressed his experience, “They [faculty members] realized that other factors improve quality of teaching and learning such as libraries, labs and other facilities. In the past, they did not know that administrative offices had an influence on quality.” This example indicates some shifts in how faculty members perceive QAA at teaching universities. This development is further explained by how universities motivate stakeholders’ participation in QAA and ways that they attend to their emotional needs.

Creating Motivation and Engagement

Many participants thought that stakeholder engagement with QAA was quite superficial as both teaching and research universities lack an organized approach to motivating faculty members and administrative staff. Nevertheless, some of the universities where the leadership was actively involved in sensegiving and sensemaking made substantial progress in implementing accreditation. Participants from teaching and research universities mentioned approaches such as public recognition, competition among colleges, one-on-one conversations, and a few others that incentivized individuals and institutions to engage in the QAA more seriously. One such example was conspicuous at a teaching university where faculty members and deans of colleges
acknowledged the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs for his leadership by attending to the sensemaking needs of faculty members and staff. The experience is best explained in the Vice Chancellor’s own words:

The first thing I did was believe in quality assurance and accreditation. I have been patient throughout the process. I asked the faculty members to create a mechanism for external [peer] reviewers. I never followed an autocratic approach but valued a democratic one. On several occasions, I asked the department chairs the amount of time they needed to complete a task. If they said 15 days, I told them to take 25 days. I let the process be flexible as adding pressure would not help. I also initiated a competition among colleges which encouraged them to focus on academic productivity.

For this participant, attending to the sensemaking needs of university employees entailed various leadership approaches and communication mechanisms to cultivate QAA as an institution-wide activity and to help the colleges and programs have ownership of the process.

Some participants from research universities also talked about the engagement of university leaders in QAA as a positive approach. One such case was evident at one of the research universities where the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs served as a role model to guide others. A member of IQAU noted, “the Vice-Chancellor not only encouraged deans and department chairs to engage in the process, but he was also personally involved in the process by creating guiding documents, reviewing outcomes, and identifying areas of strengths and weakness.” Another member of IQAU echoed the sentiment stating that “the Vice-Chancellor worked until late evenings and accompanied
the committee [IQAU] members throughout the process to the extent that our university received full accreditation.” These examples clearly explain the role of institutional leaders in sensegiving and implementing QAA at both teaching and research universities.

While a few participants stated that QAA has created the positive competition as universities consider accreditation scores as unofficial indicators of university ranking, public ceremonies such as recognition of accredited universities have increased employees’ engagement at teaching and research universities. According to a peer reviewer, when the QAAD organized a formal ceremony to praise selected universities for completing all phases of accreditation, other universities became motivated to increase their QAA activities to another level. That being the case, participants also felt that institutional leaders needed to utilize a combination of internal and external stimuli to increase employee engagement in QAA. One such example was using inspirational speeches. The Dean of a College maintained, “The quality of higher education is something that ‘even’ the president of the country emphasizes.”

However, some participants found alternative approaches useful when public recognition did not work at a research university to engage senior faculty members in QAA. A member of IQAU mentioned that “improvements have not occurred in faculty members’ willingness to create course syllabi and individual plans. We pressured them and made them do it. We established an internal policy to require each faculty member to have a quality assurance compliance folder when their cases are reviewed for promotion. Now, they all implement them.” Although using enforcement to implement QAA seems an unusual experience, participants referred to it as a significant approach to holding faculty members accountable and addressing resistance. In sum, based on participants’
experiences, senior leadership and IQAU members use various strategies to increase participation in QAA.

**Extracting Cues**

Scholars, like Karl Weick and colleagues, describe sensemaking in organizations as stakeholders’ engagement to make sense of uncertainty, and to look for unknown cues and patterns to be able to understand ‘what is going on’ (Weick et al., 2005). According to Weick (1995) when the situation is unknown, members of an organization look for cues, “simple, familiar structures that are seen from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring” (p.50). In QAA, participants of the study referred to certain contexts that provided them hints to better comprehend the policy and its implementation at the national and institutional levels.

Participants frequently referred to sensemaking of quality as an ongoing process as they relied on various contexts such as social settings, training, workshops, site visits, and document review to assist in their meaning-making. Among the contexts, they highlighted unorganized settings and informal interactions that helped them identify and extract cues to be able to draw a clearer picture of QAA. For instance, participants described the organizational structure at QAAD as too small to be able to oversee quality assurance processes across the country. According to a senior official at QAAD, “the Directorate [QAAD] has only 21 staff which is a small number given our scope of work – to conduct accreditation at 169 universities including 131 private universities and 38 public universities.” The participant also explained that they “do not have enough personnel to assess incoming documents and provide detailed feedback.” While limited human resources deprive QAAD of the ability to manage the process promptly,
informants highlighted other factors that challenge QAA across the country. An official member of QAAD summarized these challenges in three areas:

One of the challenges is the financial problem as faculty members [peer-reviewers] are not willing to go to remote areas [provinces – rural neighborhoods] when we pay them little money. Fortunately, the World Bank is helping us to some extent in this area. Another challenge is security. Our staff and peer reviewers cannot travel to some provinces. This makes our work harder as we cannot perform site visits. The last challenge is resistance against accreditation. Some universities do not value accreditation and our assessment. They ignore our suggestions for improvement, instead, they defend their positions.

This example reveals that context is a significant factor in implementing QAA. Financial restrictions due to lack of mechanisms to charge fees and limits to generating income put QAAD in the position to be dependent on donor-funded projects’ as they provide financial support. On top of that, security threats in some provinces force QAAD to supervise the process remotely which limits the sensemaking and sensegiving of QAA. These conditions create limits to university stakeholders’ ability to execute QAA, and whether or not they are effective. This issue is well described by a senior official from QAAD, “Given that we are working with too many universities, we have a hard time supervising them. Some universities work on their problems while others deal with them superficially.”

Since quality improvement has been a major interest for foreign donor-funded projects, representatives of these projects described their engagement in policy development, capacity building, and logistical support. Like university stakeholders,
these development projects identify gaps in skills and expertise to provide support in those areas. Among other activities, according to a representative of a development project, they hire international experts to work with the national and institutional quality assurance units in Afghanistan in order to improve their capacity. One of these experts (a representative of a donor) described his sensegiving approach as deductive and inductive. He explained his experience as follows:

… on a practical thing, what I would do is, whenever I had a chance, we did a kind of professional development program … and I would take the first 30 minutes of the meeting and go through one topic. We would do the same thing with one of the strands [standards] in the framework. We would take that, and I tried explaining it as best as I could. I gave them examples of how they could see that. I used one of the standards: mission [of institution]. I said if you are at the first level … I might come to your institution, at the very least, you would have a mission statement for the university. Maybe, it is posted on the wall of the chancellor’s office. But at the highest level, I will be able to go out in the hallway and talk to a random student, faculty, or maintainer, and they would have some knowledge about the purpose or mission of the university. They would not have to recite it word by word, but they would have some understanding of here is why we are here. And they will be able to tell you that. And that would be the kind of discussion that we would have.

This participant explained that while his role was advising members of the QAA Commission and peer reviewers on how to assess documents, lack of awareness among the stakeholders encouraged him to engage in sensegiving. In other words, he extracted
cues by observing the meetings and discussions among peer reviewers and members of the QAA Commission and then adjusted his role to work together with them to make sense of the issue.

While identifying cues at QAA Commission and development projects primarily focus on QAA at the national level, participants had mixed experiences at the institutional level. According to some, faculty members at research universities resist engaging in QAA in a meaningful way. For instance, a member of IQAU stated that senior faculty members do not care about QAA as they have never been held accountable for what they do, and when they are asked to submit their educational plans for the semester, they are unresponsive. A peer reviewer who also worked as a university leader echoed the sentiment and said, “The problem was lack of awareness at lower levels [faculty and staff] in these universities. They used to treat quality assurance as administrative paperwork, not a long-term process for improvement. They did not believe in it.” This is an example of a disconnect between university leadership and their subordinates.

Some participants from research universities felt that lack of engagement and resistance of faculty members are caused by poor communication and poor sensegiving. A member of IQAU, for example, explained that the value of QAA is barely communicated to the faculty members and students. She added, “We usually act receptively. When the university asks us to conduct a self-assessment of the institution, we send the questionnaires to faculty members and department chairs to complete. We never explain the rationale behind it.” On a similar note, another member of IQAU from a research university asserted, “We ask students to evaluate faculty’s teaching, but we never talk to them about it. Students fill out the questionnaires based on their relationship
with faculty members.” In both examples, participants referred to poor communication (sensegiving) as factors that increase faculty members’ resistance and encourage students to provide biased responses when they complete a course evaluation.

Participants also speculated that, unlike teaching universities, sensemaking/sensegiving activity at research universities should be greater because they are the center of attention given their history and proximity to MoHE. The Dean of a College explained, “Integration of quality assurance will take time in Afghanistan. However, our university was more familiar with the process in comparison to other universities because we have more contacts with the Ministry.” Acknowledging that proximity to MoHE serves the interests of research universities, the Vice-Chancellor of a teaching university commented that access to MoHE, QAAD, was advantageous to research universities as they received more awareness workshops than teaching universities.

This observation was corroborated when the deans of several colleges from a teaching university complained that their faculty members have not attended any awareness programs. On top of that, a member of the QAA Commission described, “The workshops and assessments that we organize benefit them [teaching universities] less compared to research universities. They are not involved that much. The universities [primarily teaching universities] that are located in remote regions have little interest in QAA if the MoHE is not supervising them.” This example supports the position of the participants from teaching universities that MoHE and QAAD hardly attend to their sensemaking needs of QAA. The quote also highlights the limitation of a centrally
controlled governance system in executing QAA and giving sense to university stakeholders who come from rural, provincial institutions.

**Bridging Past, Present, and Future**

For many participants, their past experience prominently shaped their current understanding of quality concepts and quality assurance processes which inspired their future actions. One such instance was associated with peer review visits. Some informants from teaching and research universities recalled experiences that they had with peer reviewers in the past, and those experiences inspired their work on QAA. The Dean of a College from a teaching university argued that peer reviewers assess whether their institution has carried out necessary work to accomplish personal and institutional goals. He said, “When we make any requests, we should include them in our plans, which means we worked on it… When peer reviewers visit our university, they will give us a score that we did something. We also need to have a plan to show that we are addressing these problems.” This quote explains the rhetoric that accreditation emphasizes providing evidence, in this case documenting what institutions did to achieve their goal/s. Some participants from research universities reported similar experiences and ways that peer review visits affected their performance. The following two quotes further illustrate this:

We are trying to align our work based on the lessons learned from phase two of accreditation [candidacy]. We organize meetings at the colleges and departments to discuss ways to improve the status quo. If their [peer reviewers’] suggestions are within our authority, fine, we will do it. However, if they are beyond the capacity of our college, we refer them to [the leadership of] the university (Dean of a College, Research University).
When peer reviewers visited our institution, they had a checklist to compare what existed and what did not exist at our institution… As I observed the situation, we had multiple problems. Once the peer reviewers finished their visit, I developed a report explaining the process and areas that our university needed further work on (Member of IQAU, Research University).

These assertions show a pattern of how peer review visits shape meaning making at the individual and institutional levels. This observation supports previous research that boundary spanners, in this case peer reviewers, share the collegial identity with university stakeholders as their roles overlap between assessor and sensegivers (Schotter et al., 2017).

While peer review visits are intended to make judgments about the quality and characteristics of institutions, primary reliance on those experiences might be misleading if peer reviewers have a limited understanding of QAA processes and outcomes. Participants from teaching and research universities had mixed experiences with peer reviewers. According to some, peer reviewers were biased and/or lacked competence. For instance, one of the Vice-Chancellors from a research university evaluated the experience at their university as follows.

Last year, peer reviewers assessed our university. Reviewing the number of active committees was one of the items on their list. Although e-learning is our strongest committee because we started it earlier than any other university… the peer review team reported that our institution does not have an e-learning committee… We were among the first universities that utilized the EdX platform, and we offered online courses. Despite all these improvements, they reported that we do
not have an e-learning committee. This example shows that they [peer-reviewers] do not have adequate experience or maturity (The Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Research University).

While this example exhibits a mismatch between university stakeholders' and peer reviewers’ descriptions of an e-learning committee, my field notes and evidence from document analysis verify the assertions above. Specifically, in one instance, peer reviewers allocated a score of six out of 10 for a sub-criterion simply because the institution’s website was not updated to reflect the most recent developments at the institution. Given this, when peer-reviewers emphasize administrative issues (such as updating an institution’s website) and use quantification (scoring) as a unit of analysis, the result is that stakeholders at the universities interpret QAA as a trivial protocol.

However, for some participants, peer reviewing has improved compared to the past years. The Dean of a College from a teaching university noted,

Peer reviewers used to meet with a few individuals who hold leadership positions, and they made their decisions based on those meetings. Now, peer reviewers meet with all personnel at the university which motivates us. They [peer reviewers] have realized that other employees have a say in university affairs as well (the Dean of a College, Teaching University).

The improvements in peer review, according to a representative of a donor agency, are due to organized training sessions and exposure to university systems outside Afghanistan. The informant argued that lack of exposure to international experiences might influence the way peer-reviewers assess an institution. He argued, “Peer reviewers need to go to other places and observe how universities work. We are trying to define
what quality is. I think without examples and having direct experience, it is difficult for people to make judgments.” This being the case, another representative of a higher education donor-funded project explained that they are partnering with the Malaysian Qualification Network to train peer reviewers. However, a senior advisor to the Ministry of Higher Education cautioned that peer reviewers’ experience should not be limited to one country. According to him, despite funding concerns, Afghanistan should not solely rely on the Malaysian experience. “You do not want the Malaysian quality assurance model here,” he emphasized.

**Sensegiving through Awareness Programs**

As participants reported on how experience with peer reviewers shaped their meaning-making of QAA, most of them emphasized continuous sensegiving as a way to increase participants' understanding, support and motivation to engage in quality assurance. A peer reviewer explained, “Unfortunately, there are some universities that are unable to complete phase one and phase two of accreditation. Their biggest challenge is a lack of awareness. Therefore, when we visit a university, we often emphasize increasing awareness.” A member of IQAU from a research university supported this example explaining that in his experience “When faculty members realized the value of quality assurance and accreditation, they started engaging in the process.” Many participants from teaching universities also underscored the importance of sensegiving in shaping faculty members’ and staff experiences relative to QAA. One such case is well described in the following assertion from the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs at a teaching university:
I never pushed them [faculty members and Department Chairs] because they were not well aware of or did not have previous experience in quality assurance and accreditation. I tried to help them no matter what. When I noticed some problems during our self-assessment, I did not criticize them. Instead, I pointed out some positive aspects of their work and highlighted the missing part/s as something that would add more value to their work if they did them.

For this participant, university leaders should be patient when they implement a new policy. Therefore, he thought using an informative communication tone would benefit the university stakeholders to be able to see their progress and the efforts needed to achieve their goals.

Unlike the experience at most of the teaching universities, participants from the research universities observed that they embedded continuous sensegiving in their IQAU strategic plan. However, a few participants critiqued the way sensegiving of QAA commonly occurs. For instance, according to a participant from a research university who also served as a member of the National QAA Commission, “the training on quality assurance and accreditation includes multiple topics to reduce cost. When too many topics are presented at the same time, the takeaway is limited.” She went on to explain that the QAAD used to follow a cascade model - “training a few individuals from one institution so that they transfer the same experience to others at their universities. Because these topics are new, individuals hardly remembered anything.” This example also illustrates the limitations of cascade models unless the training of trainers (ToT) is extensive and practical. This quote provides a caution about the risks of a narrow sensegiving approach. However, other informants maintained that their institutions have
adopted diverse mechanisms such as informal conversations, on-the-job training, and other ways to assist university employees make sense of QAA.

**Plausibility in Sensemaking/Sensegiving of QAA**

Participants from both teaching and research universities noted some problems in interpreting quality assurance policy and accreditation standards. According to some, the accreditation framework is quite vague which allows for multiple interpretations. The Dean of a College from a research university illustrated that one of the ways to achieve quality was to interpret the accreditation standards as manageable actions. Likewise, one of the Vice-Chancellors from another research university expressed concerns over the interpretation of QAA policy. He said:

*We still do not have a transparent process for accreditation. Apparently, we have 11 standards and 49 sub-standards. However, it is just on the paper, not focused on action – we still see accreditation as a work in progress because it is not standardized and has some flaws. The process needs time. There should be revisions to it. I think we need foreign experts’ advice in this process because it was adopted from a foreign model. Internally, people have their own interpretations; it might be something else in reality. The interpretation can be different from reality.*

This example shows that the meanings of accreditation are not fixed, which is consistent with Weick’s (1995) description of sensemaking as “plausible”, requiring institutions and individuals to reflect and revise the meanings of a new concept or process.

Participants from teaching universities and QAAD also maintained that lack of prior experience with QAA allowed stakeholders at the national and institutional levels to
create personalized definitions of QAA which were not consistent. For example, a member of IQAU from a teaching university explained that at the beginning, QAA was vaguely introduced. He thought “a good start is very important. There was not a good understanding of quality assurance at the national level. When the problem originated at the national level [QAAD], the same flaw was transferred to the universities.” According to him, the central governance structure in Afghanistan exacerbates the problem if ambiguities exist at the national level. In other words, failing to provide a structured definition of QAA, except the policy itself, the member of IQAU said, QAAD let the university stakeholders construct multiple meanings of the policy. The same observation surfaced when an official member of QAAD pointed out conflicting interpretations of the accreditation framework when peer reviewers assign scores. He explained, “peer reviewers assign different scores depending on what team visits a university.” The inconsistency in peer reviewing is further explained when a peer reviewer discussed his experience as follow:

Yes, this problem [ambiguity in assigning scores] exists because the scores we assign are not weighed in. We need further work to weigh in the scores we assign. Although we do not assign scores on a random basis because we consider all situations, there might be a bit of difference between the two teams’ scores when they visit the same university. However, these differences are minimal. Each standard needs to be interpreted in a practical sense and scores should be assigned based on the interpretation.

This example is consistent with the broader discussions on quantifying quality and whether or not to use scores as a means of measuring quality. However, a representative
of a higher education development project serving as an expert on QAA expressed concern with using a scoring system as an indicator of quality. He said, “The one thing I was never comfortable with was that they used the scoring system which I kept saying that this is very unique in Afghanistan and nowhere else uses it…, some of the scorings were impossible to reach because they were stuck with it.” He also explained the problem with translation, noting “they were so poor…; they did not even match the framework; so, there was a lot of confusing stuff. It was just misleading.”

While the concern over the translation of the policy and accreditation framework was reported by several participants at teaching and research universities, according to them, the problem with sensemaking and sensegiving (interpretation) goes beyond the translation of materials and/or assigning scores – it reveals fundamental disparities in conceptualizing quality at a university rooted in cultural norms.

**Sensemaking and Sensegiving Phases in QAA**

Sensegiving and sensemaking phases mainly explain the engagement of institution leaders and followers to understand the unknown and develop a plausible definition (Weick, 1995) to be communicated with the community. I used Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) four phases for sensemaking/sensegiving as an analytic lens to make sense of participants’ experiences with QAA in Afghanistan's higher education system. To recap this framework, the four phases are summarized as follow:

1. **envisioning** – collecting information and making sense of the new issues by the leadership;
2. **signaling** – sensegiving effort by the leadership to communicate a vision or interpretation to stakeholders;
3. **re-visioning** – sensemaking effort by stakeholders, wherein they try to figure out the meaning of
the proposed vision to them and revise their understanding; and (4) energizing –sensegiving effort by stakeholders wherein they respond to the proposed vision and attempt to influence its realized form, but it also is a stage marked by the emergence and communication of an organization-wide commitment to action toward the visions (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 443).

Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) sensemaking/sensegiving framework resonated as participants of this study reflected on their experience with QAA. While participants at research universities were able to recognize environments that matched all four phases, the sensemaking/sensegiving experience at teaching universities only supported phases one and two (envisioning and signaling) which is bound to sensemaking and sensegiving of key stakeholders at the leadership and IQAUs. In other words, unlike the teaching universities, the level of awareness and enactment of QAA seemed fairly advanced at research universities as stakeholders were involved in the meaning-making and implementation of the policy as a community.

Participants indicated that sensemaking/sensegiving occurred in structured and unstructured contexts. While attending awareness workshops was the only experience for participants at teaching universities, informants at research universities enjoyed frequent sensemaking/sensegiving events in formal and informal settings. For example, a member of IQAU assessed the situation at a research university, saying that “quality assurance and accreditation were the first and significant processes that helped our university reach its strategic goal [national accreditation]. Currently, we are preparing for regional and international accreditation and ranking.” To do so, she explained that they “increased the awareness programs and created a culture among employees to learn about quality
assurance.” This example illustrates the institutional effort to attend to the sensemaking/sensegiving needs of stakeholders; however, at a personal level, a member of the QAA Commission who came from a research university described her sensemaking approach, “I did some self-study and attended quality assurance workshops…, combining the two helped me to a certain extent.” She continued, “Although I had some sense of the policy when I started serving at the Commission, I realized that I did not know much.” As this quote highlights, QAA seems a complex process that requires more frequent/regular sensemaking/sensegiving opportunities to be effective.

Other informants reported different experiences as they learned about QAA. A peer reviewer who also represented a teaching university explained that public awareness workshops helped him learn about the process to some extent; however, he noted “learning about quality assurance and accreditation requires more commitment; it requires inquiry and self-study.” He added that engaging in the process by attending “peer review workshops…, [an international] training, and visiting universities as a peer reviewer” helped him better learn the process. Similarly, a member of IQAU from a research university, described her envisioning:

I read many articles on quality assurance to learn the process more professionally. Aside from quality assurance, I studied several articles from other countries. I was self-motivated and learned about it as someone responsible in the process. I tried to make sense of the processes and content, first, to improve my knowledge, and then to implement it (Member of IQAU, Research University).
For the participants who had formal roles in policy implementation (e.g. members of IQAUs and leadership teams), engaging in QAA processes and expanding their horizons provides self-motivation and institutional support to internalize the process. In contrast, many informants, particularly those at teaching institutions, lacked a solid grasp of the process which requires further interventions to institutionalize the experience.

Participants at teaching institutions emphasized increasing awareness programs as a precursor to implementing a new policy (QAA). Nevertheless, informants at research universities complained about the lack of executive authority to enforce the policy and to hold individuals accountable when they do not participate in QAA initiatives. For instance, the Dean of a College from a teaching university observed that “quality assurance is a new phenomenon at our university. We have many problems with it. When a new program comes into existence, the first thing to do is to hold awareness workshops. However, I have not seen any awareness programs here.”

The issue of awareness did not seem much of a concern at research universities as participants had more exposure to QAA. “We attended several workshops inside and outside the country which were supported by USAID, the World Bank, and British Council,” the Dean of a College from a research university explained, “These training opportunities added to our experience as we made connections with foreign universities which encouraged us to work harder.” Unlike the research universities, some participants from teaching universities were concerned that they were isolated as MoHE not only avoids engaging them in important decisions but has a condescending view of them.

The lack of an executive role for IQAU members was also perceived as discouraging as they cannot hold someone accountable. A member of IQAU from a
research university described “I do not have an executive role which discourages me. I have decided to resign several times because some faculty members often criticize why we do so much administrative paperwork for accreditation. They do not stop there but tell me to report them to senior administrators.” However, other participants perceive the problem as limited experience in QAA. They suggested that QAA is still too new in Afghanistan despite its official implementation in 2012 and the progress made by a handful of universities to achieve accreditation. They requested that international donors support the process by improving local capacity including individuals at QAAD and HEIs in Afghanistan. According to a Vice-Chancellor from a research university, “We need some advice from experts to share their expertise with us. It is an international experience. Once it made its way here, it should be the right one. In fact, it is a strange process for us. The countries with 40-50 years of experience need to share their experience with us.” However, informants who oversaw the process at the national level seemed optimistic about recent developments. A senior official explained:

…the level of understanding has improved with reference to the past. If you visit higher education institutions, they have posted the [accreditation] standards on the hallways and outside the buildings. We also posted the policy and accreditation standards on our website. We organize capacity-building workshops about quality assurance and accreditation regularly. Most of the faculty members and administrative staff are informed of the process; however, only a limited number of people might be unaware of it.

While this quote exemplifies the assumptions of officials at QAAD, participants’ experiences at teaching and research universities were diverse. Informants at teaching
universities, particularly, identified lack of awareness as an important challenge. Therefore, they made sensegiving a priority in the implementation of QAA. Now that both teaching and research universities are encouraged to be accredited, representatives of a donor-funded project and QAAD described that they incorporated awareness programs in their short- and long-term plans.

Participants also reported that sensegiving of QAA (signaling) predominantly occurs in formal settings. However, an international expert who advised the QAA taskforce explained that he used a combination of formal and informal communication channels to get participants to buy into accreditation. Among several approaches, he used storytelling as an approach to drawing senior faculty members’ (the taskforce) attention to the value of QAA. He described the story as follows:

I worked in other places like Pakistan where they made the same comments [we cannot judge another institution], but I said, you do make such judgments. After all, you have a competitive admissions system. Surely, if you can judge students, you can judge universities. And eventually, they came around thinking, gosh, maybe it's a good idea. I also talked about the fact that almost every country in the world that had a serious higher education system, had an accreditation system of some sort. I said, with very few exceptions, as people got into the accreditation process, they were very pleased to be involved in it. They often would come and tell me, ‘Gee,’ this is such a good idea. We've learned so much. You know, we never would have looked at our economics department if it wasn't for accreditation, and it turns out the economics department is terrible.
This quote reflects a setting, QAAD, where participants have a voice in shaping the policy, whereas sensegiving at the institutional level is usually pre-determined as QAA is often presented as prescribed with limited or no input from participants. Accordingly, a member of IQAU from a research university described, “I think the way we present and enact quality assurance and accreditation has a direct influence on how faculty members perceive it.” Building on this statement, another participant from the same institution explained “the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs motivated university constituents by explaining the process very well. Once we learned the value of it, we became motivated…,” she thought the sensegiving was well structured because her colleagues at IQAU could carry “a positive image of accreditation to their colleges.”

Since sensegiving occurred in a guided-form at research universities, one of the participants expressed improvement. She explained, “My experience shows change since we started implementing the policy [quality assurance]. The process continues to improve quality.” Similarly, the Dean of a College noted quality improvement due to organized sensegiving. Nevertheless, he emphasized the need for system-wide sensegiving, as he urged, “We should have more workshops and seminars, not just in Kabul-based universities, but in provincial universities as well so that all institutions can benefit from it.” While realistic, this quote implies some disparity in how QAA is implemented at research universities vs. teaching universities.

Unlike the optimal approaches, sensemaking/sensegiving at some institutions takes place using more traditional passive forms. A member of IQAU from a research university explained ways that they train new IQAU members, stating “We use two approaches: first, our members come with some prior knowledge of quality assurance;
second, we provide them a package that includes all policies and procedures. They are supposed to self-study. We also provide them with on-the-job training.” Similarly, a senior manager from the same institution explained that their sensemaking approach resembles that of MoHE and QAAD. He said:

When quality assurance was established, the British Council and USWDP provided awareness workshops. Then we provided similar workshops at our institution. They are continuing as we are trying to build capacity. We have monthly workshops on this at the institutional and college levels.

Although the research universities followed a generic approach to increase awareness, the Dean of a College assessed the outcomes positively. She reported that nearly all faculty members have a better sense of QAA because department chairs and deans of colleges oversee the process regularly.

Many participants indicated that enacting QAA involved a series of bureaucratic and symbolic decisions to reinforce the process and to attend to their institution’s strategic goals. These decisions included developing policies and guidelines, designating office spaces, recruiting full-time staff, establishing working committees with regular meetings, delivering speeches, offering workshops, and conducting (internal and external) assessments. The Dean of a College from a research university stated that they “established seven committees to work on various aspects of quality. These committees are, research, curriculum, teaching and learning, and others,” emphasizing “the work of each committee directly or indirectly affect the quality of education.” He added that the QAA committee coordinates activities in light of accreditation while other committees work on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Echoing the sentiment, another
Dean of a College at a research university noted that creating technical and operational committees not only assists in keeping university stakeholders informed but also increases a sense of ownership and accountability. He said, “We are accountable to the public based on our jobs. We observe quality assurance activities very seriously. It is one of the ways that help us to improve the quality of teaching, service to students, needs of our society, and labor markets.” This example illustrates the engagement of stakeholders at the bottom of the hierarchy which reflects phases three and four of sensemaking of Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) framework.

At one teaching university, participants had mixed feelings about QAA, and their experience with peer reviewers exacerbated the problems of meaning-making of QAA. An observation by the Dean of a College at a teaching university revealed poor competencies of peer reviewers during the initial years. The Dean said, “Initially, peer-reviewers were not competent as they did not know how to interpret the standards. For instance, in their first visit, they asked us to provide them the ‘tracking document’ for accreditation yet they did not know its purpose.” He added that stakeholders at their university rarely participated in QAA given the ambiguities in the process. However, he acknowledged some improvement as peer reviewers gained more experience.

Emphasizing growth and professionalism among peer reviewers, the Dean described his experience, “Peer reviewers were unknown to us on the last visit. They were realistic as they met with each of us individually…, they insisted on being transparent with them by telling them exactly what we have, nothing more or less.” In line with the quote, a peer reviewer’s experience corroborated the claim that improvements occurred. The peer reviewer outlined ways that they assess quality when they visit a university.
We are interested in examining how things are in practice – whether university facilities are used, who has access to them, and the extent to which students benefit from them. We identify the problems and share them with university leaders and they are supposed to address them. Our recommendations are based on flaws with reference to each standard and substandard. We highlight that institution ‘X’ did not meet this standard and this is why they received this score. Here is the way to solve it in the short term, and … the long run. Because this process is new and some universities have difficulty with the interpretation of quality, we [peer-reviewers] provide recommendations during our site visits as a way to increase awareness. For example, when we see a huge problem, we guide the universities on how to address it.

As this quote implies, similar to the IQAUs, peer reviewers further engage university stakeholders in the process by holding individuals and institutions accountable for succeeding or failing in accreditation. This way, both institution leaders and followers feel the need to embrace QAA more seriously and invest in sensemaking and sensegiving to suffice expectations.

**Sensemaking and Sensegiving Forms of QAA**

The sensemaking and sensegiving forms, also known as micro-level sensemaking/sensegiving (Marshall, 2018), explain the stakeholders’ level of engagement in QAA in this study. To understand those forms, I used Maitlis’s (2005) framework, *guided, fragmented, restricted, and minimal*, to explore whether a pattern exists in ways that university leaders and followers make sense of QAA; whether their participations are self-directed or influenced by the external environment; and whether or not there is a
balance in sensemaking and sensegiving as university leaders and followers engage in QAA.

Participants discussed three common patterns that capture sensemaking and sensegiving experiences at the national and institutional levels. While the initial experience, planning, and exploring, characterizes QAA as an elaborative and discursive process that encourages the participation of all stakeholders, the following experience shows a hybrid of structured and unstructured sensemaking environment. In other words, for the participants engaged in QAA at the national level, when QAA, an international experience, was introduced into Afghanistan, the process emphasized a democratic approach through which faculty members from universities in Afghanistan had a chance to reflect on and provide feedback to adapt the policy and framework to the local context. According to an international advisor to MoHE, the policy development entailed long discussions among local faculty members and international experts because the local faculty members initially resisted including measurement in quality assessment, arguing that “Afghans do not say anything negative about another institution”. However, after long discussions, the international advisor reported that they realized that quality judgments are based on some sort of measurement. The example suggests that participants followed a *guided form* to make sense of QAA at the national level because the quality assurance task force was mutually engaged in processing new information and offering context-specific variations.

However, participants from both teaching and research universities described the sensemaking/sensegiving experience as a linear – top-down approach. For instance, for many participants at research universities, the experience took a blended...
sensemaking/sensegiving form due to the close supervision of institutional leaders and delegation of QAA processes to IQAUs. A member of IQAU contended that sensemaking and sensegiving at their institution occur in structured workshops, informal gatherings, and one-on-one meetings. In contrast, participants at teaching universities reported that the IQAU organized occasional awareness seminars primarily for deans and department chairs who should in turn inform their constituencies about the process.

Participants also talked about the sensegiving approach which primarily occurs in the form of a lecture in large settings. A representative of a donor-funded project explained his experience, noting “we did general, large-scale workshops with all of the chancellors, vice-chancellors, and some of the deans in Kabul.” The institutional leaders who attend the training, the donor representative maintained, are responsible to transfer the experience (QAA knowledge) to their home institutions. An institutional leader from a research university supported the statement, and concurred, “We provided the same workshops as the British Council and USWDP did.” This statement corroborates the nature of the workshop – following a similar approach as those offered by QAAD and foreign donor-funded projects.

Since QAA comes as a package that requires a series of actions, decisions, and processes to implement, providing training with no inputs from university representatives places the participants in a receptive/passive position. Participants maintained that QAAD developed a set of templates, guidelines, and questionnaires for accrediting universities to enforce consistency. This suggests that sensemaking/sensegiving events are pre-structured and lack the flexibility to address different circumstances that arise.
when implementing a new policy. The following quote from a senior official at MoHE further illustrates a top-down sensegiving approach:

We have sent templates to universities. We ask them to address important issues as outlined in the template. We want them to know the problem, and decide who is responsible to address it and who should supervise the process. We have also created a template for peer-reviewers. They prepare their reports in accordance with self-assessment reports. They need to write their scores along with the scores that universities provided. They should write a comment explaining why they provided a certain score, what the problem was, and what can be done to solve it.

This assertion suggests careful planning and management at the national level as the QAAD presents the policy and supporting documents to assist universities in implementing the process. However, neither the policy nor the supporting documents address varying contextual factors at teaching and research universities.

Participants from research and teaching universities recalled diverse sensemaking and sensegiving experiences at the institutional level. According to them, sensegiving and sensemaking forms seemed somewhat blended rather than being one of Maitlis’ forms. For some participants like the Dean of a College at a research university, the IQAUs serve as a bridge between faculty members and senior leadership. She thought that the leadership and IQAU members attend to sensemaking needs at the institution and individual levels by carrying out awareness programs, assessing curriculum, and evaluating teaching and learning to name a few. Similarly, a member of IQAU from a research university described her experience as follows:
We organized several awareness workshops for all colleges including deans, faculty members, and administrative staff. Then we brought the programs to the college level. The most important assistance has been having representatives from colleges in Institutional Quality Assurance Unit. This is how we were able to increase awareness.

This example illustrates how IQAU members and institutional leaders have equally emphasized sensemaking across the institution at research universities.

In addition, participants at research universities used the IQAUs in implementing QAA. A member of IQAU argued that “accreditation serves as a web that has links from top to bottom.” He further expanded that IQAU members sit on the university leadership board and each college’s QAA committees; and members of college quality assurance committees serve at department-level quality assurance committees. The Dean of a College also agreed that their commitment and hard work helped them to reduce resistance among senior faculty members. He said, “We worked to the extent that we sat down with faculty members and helped them develop their [teaching] improvement plans, action plans, and course syllabi.” Supporting the sentiment, the Dean of a College from another research university confessed that previously “faculty members did not have any plans for teaching, and when we asked them, they used to say that the plans are in their heads. Now, a majority of them have course syllabi and individual plans.” Given the level of integration and commitment of the leadership, the finding suggests that sensemaking/sensegiving at research universities seems a blend of guided and restricted forms (Maitlis, 2005), because both sensegivers and sensemakers follow a structured form when they participate in the process, but the degree of engagement varies since
sensemakers’ (faculty members) partially participate. In other words, research universities primarily follow a prescribed recipe with some inputs from internal stakeholders.

In contrast, for many participants at teaching universities, stakeholder engagement in QAA was described as selective because they primarily relied on conducting self-assessment and providing awareness workshops only for senior leaders and deans of colleges. In other words, their functions were limited to some aspects of QAA while other elements remained untouched. Unlike research universities, the sensemaking/sensegiving of QAA at teaching universities seemed to be an ongoing effort because most stakeholders had only a surface-level grasp of the policy. The following excerpt from the Dean of a College who also served as a member of IQAU summarizes sensemaking/sensegiving needs at teaching universities:

Our faculty members have not attended any awareness workshops to know the quality assurance and accreditation processes well. The ones who participated in workshops, mostly in Kabul, did not transfer the technical knowledge which challenges the implementation of the policy at [our institution].

This quote reveals the gap between teaching and research universities and the level of awareness at teaching universities. Although most of the participants claimed that they submitted their self-assessment reports to QAAD each year, failing to provide regular awareness programs to faculty members and staff exacerbated the problem with sensemaking. After all, their engagement with QAA resembles a compliance review in business as both university administrators and IQAU members try to check the boxes instead of unpacking and owning the process. Although an official from QAAD
described the work of one teaching university as exceptional because the university completed two phases of accreditation within a year, the level of awareness and engagement of stakeholders seemed minimal in the rest of them. The observation suggests that teaching universities have the potential to overcome some barriers when the leadership team and constituents are committed to QAA.

Other participants from teaching universities also admitted the gap in communicating QAA to university stakeholders. The Vice-Chancellor of a teaching university elaborated, “The level of understanding is limited to basics, probably just the [accreditation] framework. However, we hope to expand their knowledge and awareness.” While confirming the status quo, the assertion implies a lack of an organized plan to address the awareness problem at the teaching university. A similar experience was noted in another teaching university when the Dean of a College claimed, “Unfortunately, the awareness level is poor. Not everyone has a good grasp of quality assurance and accreditation, or they are not committed to doing so. I was appointed as a member of the institutional team [IQAU] last year; however, no training has been offered to us since then”. These two examples suggest that lack of awareness at the individual level (sensemaking) and poor communication of the policy (sensegiving) put teaching universities in a vulnerable position. In other words, stakeholders at teaching universities treat quality assurance and accreditation somewhat symbolically since activities are limited to the formation of QAA committees and the completion of self-assessment reports. The theory suggests that self-assessment should serve as a feedback loop to inform university stakeholders where they stand in relation to accreditation standards, and what they need to do to overcome gaps. In practice, the experience at teaching
universities suggests that they treat the self-assessment report as an end in itself with limited or no actions to follow.

Resistance of senior faculty members to engage in accreditation at research universities also suggests a lack of awareness. A member of IQAU at a research university alluded:

Whatever is going on, it still needs more work because the way the process goes on needs more practice, and more understanding among teachers and staff. They do not understand the reason why they are doing certain things. They just think the quality assurance process is playing with papers (کاغذ پرانتی), bureaucratic paperwork. They do not understand the value of QAA. We just give them a sample and tell them to make something like this.

While this example uncovers some complexities in executing a new experience, the Dean of a College from a research university echoed that “junior faculty members were more interested in the process than the senior ones. They realized that quality assurance is a mandatory process in academic institutions. Therefore, their efforts made it possible for us to achieve full accreditation”.

Nonetheless, for participants like a senior peer reviewer, one of the teaching universities performed exceptionally in QAA. He said that a change in the leadership of the institution made it possible for the teaching university to mobilize existing resources and reach out to all faculty members and staff. He went on to explain that the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs at that teaching university served as a mentor and a role model who put QAA as a priority and worked extended hours along with IQAU members to address expectations of peer reviewers for accreditation. When the Vice-Chancellor
was asked to share his successful experience, he said that the implementation of QAA in Afghanistan requires flexible leadership. He explained that he makes himself accessible to constituencies (faculty members, staff, and students) to have a dialogue about QAA and explore ways to address the problems. Given the exemplary evidence from one teaching university, the study reveals that bracketing sensemaking/sensegiving forms at teaching universities as *minimal* can be misleading. Moreover, a junior official from QAAD also commented on the role of institutional leaders stating, “universities where the leaders engaged in the process made more gains than the ones that took quality assurance and accreditation superficially.”

The deans of colleges and members of IQAU provided more examples that corroborated the role of institutional leaders in attending to the sensemaking needs of constituents at a teaching university. The Dean of a College stated that quality improvement has become a significant task at their institution as they have “regular meetings at the college and department levels to assess ongoing quality issues”. A member of IQAU from the same institution supported that their university is serious about accreditation processes as they “offer information sessions and provide templates for teaching improvement plans, action plans, faculty individual plans, and strategic plans.” Thus, the engagement of institutional leaders in QAA seems substantially important in increasing awareness and implementing the policy at both teaching and research universities.

Overall, given the qualitative nature of this study, the finding does not suggest a generalization that all research universities apply a *guided/restricted* sensemaking/sensegiving form while teaching universities to adopt a *minimal* form.
Some circumstances prevailed at both teaching and research universities that challenge a generic one-size-fits-all label. Instead, the findings uncover unique experiences that suggest further development and follow-up are needed to implement the quality assurance process institution-wide. In summary, Maitlis’s (2005) framework was valuable in exploring sensemaking/sensegiving forms of QAA at the national and institutional levels in Afghanistan. The findings suggest that in light of the evidence, sensemaking/sensegiving takes a guided form at the national level. However, the sensemaking/sensegiving experience at the institutional level seems more blended as research universities embrace a somewhat more guided/restricted approach while teaching universities tend to use a restricted/minimal form when they implement QAA. The findings also show that commitment of institutional leaders in QAA can strongly influence constituents’ engagement in the process.
CHAPTER 7
EFFECTS OF QAA POLICY ON EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Within this study, participants repeatedly referred to improvements in the academic dimension of quality with a focus on teaching and learning, assessment, and curriculum implementation as a prominent contribution of QAA. Participants from both public teaching and research universities indicated that quality assurance has created a movement at the individual and institutional levels—faculty members and institutional leaders take responsibility for their actions. These participants consistently reflected on their past experiences as they spoke about ways that QAA affected the educational experience at their universities.

Participants' Experiences at Teaching Universities

Participants at teaching universities, like the Dean of a College, argued that QAA has had little impact on “actual quality – it is more on paper” because the process emphasizes administrative work. For him, improvements in ‘actual quality’ meant “having adequate educational resources such as laboratories, libraries, and technologies to meet the current needs of students.” However, he realized some improvements in developing course syllabi and teaching evaluations. Another participant from a teaching university also reported some improvement, as he noted, “The experience has changed for the reason that the level of awareness has improved at the national and institutional levels.”

Participants also talked about ways that QAA affected practice. The Dean of a College stated that the effects of QAA on practice have been around “40 percent” given that their university lacks some primary resources. According to him, “Change does not happen unless the right resources are in place.” The concern was expanded by another
Dean of a College who reported, “We completed phase one and phase two of accreditation; however, our college does not have an adequate computer lab that corresponds to our day-to-day needs. We showed some pictures of the lab as evidence to pass phase two.” While reflecting a context-specific circumstance, this example shows a common pattern in relation to participants’ experiences and cues used to make sense of accreditation at teaching universities.

While the quality assurance policy emphasizes student-centered instruction, many participants thought the experience was different on the ground. Specifically, the Dean of a College contended that “there are usually 70-80 students in our classes, and it is almost impossible to do group activities”. He elaborated, “Presenting the lesson takes 90 percent of my time, and I cannot assess students. All I can do is to randomly select a few students and ask questions.” On a similar point, the Dean of another College observed, “Our faculty members are overloaded as they teach multiple shifts: mornings, afternoons, and sometimes evenings.” He added, “Most of our faculty teach four or five subjects. They can hardly afford to apply student-centered methods when they have limited time to prepare for classes. In other words, faculty apply student-centered instruction partially.” The last two examples show ways that environmental factors such as limited space, under-staff, and teaching load affect the quality of teaching.

Even though participants from teaching universities were skeptical about the impact of quality assurance on the ground, most of them acknowledged the importance of regularly assessing teaching and learning, identifying problems, documenting them with evidence, and seeking solutions to address them. Some participants thought quality assurance only serves as an accountability measure for faculty members and senior
leadership, the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs in particular. Namely, a Vice-Chancellor maintained that “the process [quality assurance] has increased a sense of responsibility. Both faculty members and leadership team pay attention to their scope of work and responsibilities.” Supporting this observation, the Dean of a College reported that QAA requires teaching evaluation, which gives students a role in assessing their instructors. “This assessment,” according to her, “helps faculty members to learn and reflect on their teaching. Markedly, the process makes sure activities are done and services are beneficial to students.”

Although faculty resistance did not appear as a concern at teaching universities, several participants admitted some level of reluctance during the initial years. The Dean of a College, reported, “When faculty members realized that quality assurance is a strong and complex program that involves all academic and administrative units, they started engaging in the process.” Echoing the experience, a Vice-Chancellor described the rationale why faculty members treated QAA superficially at the beginning. He maintained, “Two years ago, most of these people did not know about quality assurance and accreditation. Now, both faculty members and the university leadership recognize quality assurance as central to quality improvement – not just a process for documenting.” These two quotes underscore the importance of sensemaking/sensegiving – increased awareness – in stakeholder participation in QAA.

Correspondingly, some participants from teaching universities indicated that increased awareness contributed to teaching and learning experiences. For participants like the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, QAA has pushed university leaders and faculty members to develop “a series of plans to improve teaching, curriculum delivery,
and classroom assessment” that directly affect students’ learning. To demonstrate the application of these plans in practice, the Dean of a College elaborated, “In the past, the instruction was teacher-centered. Now, with the assistance of quality assurance, faculty members use student-centered approaches.” The Dean emphasized that improving students’ learning experience was their central goal to implement QAA. Furthermore, a senior manager also maintained that their engagement in QAA supports students learning experience in many ways. He observed:

   In my experience, all activities embedded in quality assurance and accreditation support students in some ways. Policies like equity and fairness guide us to treat students fairly irrespective of their geographic origin, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. When we establish new facilities in our classes, they are meant to facilitate a better learning environment for students.

The senior manager, nevertheless, was dissatisfied with the accreditation framework because it lacked the flexibility to accommodate the contextual realities of universities as far as student services are concerned. He urged, “Our universities should be evaluated based on the existing capacity.” For instance, he recalled his experience when a peer reviewer asked whether their university had a publication unit, a health clinic, or an ambulance service to transport patients to the local hospitals. He said, “The reviewers should study whether the Ministry [MoHE] has provided us those facilities, then they can assess how we use them. We do not have a say in the allocation of resources because decisions over budget and resources are made centrally.”

   Since the allocation of resources is a significant factor in quality improvement, participants from teaching universities argued that nothing would change on the ground.
Nevertheless, they maintained that they could satisfy peer reviewers' expectations as far as they provide documentation on whether they made requests for those facilities. In other words, participants recalled a checklist used by peer reviewers. According to the checklist, when universities make specific requests to address resource-related issues, peer reviewers consider that an important step to address the problem – extracting cues on what matters to peer reviewers. “There are only certain things that the university has control over,” a Vice-Chancellor emphasized, “a university should be held accountable to what they can offer, not to something beyond their capacity.” Notably, the observation made by the Vice-Chancellor and other participants suggests that limited capacity coupled with lack of resources put teaching universities in a difficult position to satisfy all expectations of accreditation. For the most part, according to several participants, teaching universities have limited physical infrastructure and facilities that are required in the accreditation framework, yet, they are expected to complete all phases of accreditation.

Although the lack of infrastructure and inadequate resources were underscored as negative factors in implementing QAA, at some universities the challenges go beyond access to resources. For instance, the Dean of a College discussed his experience with QAA, and noted, “In our college, we have been conducting self-assessment since 2016, at least once a year, yet the situation has not changed except for a few faculty members who received master’s degrees through foreign scholarships.” However, he cautioned that implementing QAA depends on the security and resourcefulness of a learning environment where students, faculty members, and staff feel safe and have access to adequate classrooms and facilities. He went on to explain that the ‘safety of individuals’
and ‘access to resources’ take precedent over QAA when a university operates in a conflict area. On a similar note, the Dean of the College of Agriculture reported an eyewitness example, noting, “Our students were taking exams, when all of a sudden, the conflict started in our close neighborhood. We were experiencing an ethical dilemma: on the one hand, we were concerned about the safety of students and faculty; on the other hand, we needed to calm down our students so that they could concentrate on their exams.” The examples not only highlight the negative influence of security threats on quality, but they also uncover the resilience of faculty members and students in persevering despite the dangers.

Aside from negative factors affecting QAA at teaching universities, some participants discussed ways that they customize the process to benefit their universities. The Dean of a College described, “We created many committees to focus on each of the 11 accreditation criteria. At the college level, I am responsible for regularly assessing the work of these committees and reporting to the Vice-Chancellor’s office.” Similarly, a senior manager talked about creating a campus-wide program focused on individual and group achievement. He said, “I initiated a competition among colleges which focused on academic productivity…, the process increased the commitment of the leadership and participation of faculty members.” When individuals and colleges are publicly recognized for their contribution to QAA, according to the senior manager, both students and faculty members feel “empowered” and “motivated”. As an example, the Dean of a College noted a good turnout of students in an essay writing contest.
Participants' Experiences at Research Universities

Similar to participants’ experiences at teaching universities, several participants from research universities reported that QAA primarily emphasizes documenting activities with limited impact on practice. A member of IQAU contended, “Quality assurance does not fix problems with facilities and infrastructure. We still have concerns about important areas such as lab equipment and classroom facilities.” However, the Dean of a College acknowledged that QAA has influenced non-concrete areas such as pedagogy of teaching and curriculum. He explained:

We have had some outcomes since we started quality assurance and accreditation at our university. Many faculty members who had no plans for their classes in the past are encouraged to have long and short-term plans for their courses and research. Now, they have a sense of accountability – to prepare certain things and to report to the Department Chair or the Dean. The same is true for faculty members' participation in committees. In the past, the committees were less functioning because they lacked an agenda and a schedule to meet regularly. For instance, our research committee, unlike in the past, meets regularly and documents their activities [They were not documenting their decisions in the past]. These are the positive results of quality assurance and accreditation.

While satisfied with faculty members' engagement in the process, the Dean suggested “more supervision to institutionalize” quality assurance at the program and individual levels.

Having faculty members develop course syllabi and diversify classroom assessment were prominent impacts as participants from research universities reflected on
their experience with implementing quality assurance. The Chancellor of a university contended, “Having a course syllabus is very important for teaching quality. Our students should know the goals and learning outcomes of a course they intend to take. Fortunately, quality assurance mandates all faculty members to provide students their course syllabi at the start of the semester.” The Chancellor noted considerable improvement in classroom assessment and course content. The Chancellor observed that quality assurance promoted transparency in faculty members’ instruction and assessment of student learning. As an example, a member of IQAU summarized the contribution of quality assurance in teaching and learning as follows:

First, there is no dictation at [our] university because PowerPoint presentations have replaced dictation. Second, our students are somehow involved in teaching and research. One such case is when teachers assign a group of students to facilitate the lesson for a week. Students lead the class, and the instructor evaluates the process. Now, we have textbooks instead of chapters [old lecture notes]. These materials are up to date. We regularly assess whether a faculty’s lesson aligns with the course syllabus and whether it is implemented.

Along with the progress made in the pedagogy of teaching and faculty members’ engagement in various committees, participants from research universities observed improvements in the educational curriculum. The Dean of a College maintained, “We conducted an annual review last year and learned from our alumni that two courses in our program needed revision because they did not match the expectations of employers.” For the Dean of this College and several other participants, accreditation mirrors where an institution or a program needs improvement. Chiefly, according to a member of IQAU,
“Most of our faculty members used to have lecture notes; nevertheless, Now, we require them to utilize recent textbooks which benefit students.”

Aside from the gradual improvements in the quality of teaching and learning materials, several participants expressed optimism in quality assurance for stimulating faculty engagement in scholarship and quality of services. The Dean of a College described that “academic activities and student learning” are highly emphasized in the accreditation framework. That being the case, she maintained, “Our leadership team that involves the Dean of the College and Department Chairs reflect on the past experiences and apply new ways to ensure the quality of teaching and learning for students, and to improve the academic capacity of faculty members.” In her recollection, the accreditation process nurtured “positive change” at the university. She thought an increased awareness about the process assisted the faculty members to embody quality education as “a value” as they have “realized that they can solve a lot of problems on their own, and the process taught them how to identify the problems.” The Dean further explained that they mobilized existing resources to establish an Advising Center and purchase projectors and Smart Televisions for their classes. This example underlines retrospection and enactment as important characteristics of sensemaking/sensegiving in implementing quality assurance in higher education. The Dean stressed that accreditation was the force behind their efforts to establish these facilities to serve students in a better way. These examples show the concrete effects of QAA in practice.

Unlike the experience at teaching universities, many participants indicated that accreditation paved the way for student engagement and governance at research universities. A member of IQAU described that although higher education by-laws
encourage including students in university decisions, which was neglected by nearly all universities. However, he explained that their university not only recognizes student governance as a formal body, but they also include students in university decisions. Nevertheless, he accentuated that “having students sit on the same board with faculty members is a new experience to us.” Moreover, the Dean of a College explained, “We supported the idea to establish a Student Union at the institution level, student boards at the college and department levels; however, some senior faculty members disregarded our decision to let student representatives sit in the College academic council.” Other participants, like the Dean of a College, provided the context and said that quality assurance “requires universities and colleges to have student unions to communicate about students’ needs. Now, all colleges have student boards, and a Student Union at the institutional level.” The Dean elaborated that having student bodies assist them to “ask students’ views about curriculum content and pedagogy.” In essence, the Dean admitted that they are “at the beginning of the process and may have some flaws” in their work. However, he concurred that they “have a good start at the college and university level.”

Participants also touched on the socio-emotional aspect of student engagement in university decisions. According to the Dean of a College, engaging students in decision-making, chiefly empowers students and reminds faculty members and the administration about student expectations. “Students feel that they have the right to say something, the right to vote and that they can be involved in the teaching and learning process,” She professed. The Dean of another College also discussed an experience when she suggested having student representatives in college committees and one of her colleagues reacted negatively. She said, “My colleague screamed at me, ‘you are putting these students over
our shoulders!’.” She went on to explain that senior faculty members have minimum tolerance for involving students in formal issues. The experience of the Dean reflects how previous experiences shaped the senior faculty members’ understanding of their roles relative to students.

While a majority of participants supported the implementation of quality assurance at their institution, for some participants, like a senior manager, “Quality assurance and accreditation primarily focus on administrative processes such as documenting activities and less on quality of services.” He explained, “I know a few universities that are way underqualified in comparison to ours. However, they were assigned higher scores because their paperwork was complete.” The senior manager critiqued accreditation for simplifying the “evaluation of quality on the basis of writing good reports” instead of assessing “what is going on in reality.” The same concern was raised by another senior manager who criticized the distribution of scores for each of the 11 accreditation criteria as being “unrealistic”. He said using a generic mechanism to assign scores to physical infrastructure and non-physical stuff seems impractical. “The process takes us years to be able to secure funding to build classroom spaces or laboratories, whereas, creating a research committee takes a few minutes,” the senior manager urged, “peer reviewers should assess beyond the paperwork.” The criticisms in the examples suggest the need for improvement in accreditation framework and indicators used to evaluate quality.

Other participants from research universities agreed that the current quality assurance policy is a good start; however, they suggested further development. The Dean of a College, for example, maintained, “When our university was preparing for
accreditation, all college and departments worked tirelessly. The Deans provided training to their constituents on quality assurance and accreditation.” However, he argued that “quality will improve only when the university provides enough tools and equipment.” Some participants, like a peer reviewer, highlighted some revisions in the policy and stated that the revisions were made to align the accreditation standards with the expectations of the Asia Pacific Quality Network. Correspondingly, he acknowledged the work of the national QAA Commission for providing an interpretation of the standards which has simplified their work but, he suggested more work is needed to make it accessible to individuals at the institutional and program levels. Likewise, a member of the QAA Commission elaborated, “We developed a guidebook for quality assurance to help universities about the structure of work and responsibilities.”

Effects of Peer Review on Quality

Many participants at teaching and research universities considered their experience with peer reviewers informative and genuine. They often referred to their past experiences to explain progress in peer reviewing visits, according to many, substantial improvement occurred in peer reviewers' competencies. Given the uniqueness of the experience at teaching and research universities, below I discuss them separately.

Peer Review Experience at Teaching Universities

To start with teaching universities, participants indicated that peer review visits have improved in many ways. The Dean of a College explained his experience, “Previously, peer reviewers did not perform a thorough evaluation; however, they were well informed in the recent visits. They closely reviewed our documents and scored
them.” Similarly, the Dean of another College from the same university discussed the broader context:

I had different experiences with peer reviewers in the past three years. Initially, they were less competent as they did not know much about accreditation. They even had a problem interpreting the standards. Over time, they developed a good understanding of the accreditation criteria and things to look for as evidence. For example, at one point earlier, peer reviewers asked whether we had a ‘tracking document’ for quality assurance and accreditation activities, but they did not know of its use. They were not concerned about its use nor whether we had the right format. They were simply guided by their checklist (Dean of a College, Teaching University).

However, the Dean thought that peer reviewers acted more professionally during the last visits. This finding confirms previous research that boundary spanners (peer reviewers in this case) “must be adept at breaking down boundaries between themselves and recipients to listen empathetically and build trust” (Williams, 2002, p. 111). Similarly, the Dean of another college said, “I did not know any of them [peer reviewers], but I found them, genuine individuals. They met with each of us separately and insisted that we tell them the truth – nothing more or less.” Commending on their evaluation, the Dean felt respected as the peer reviewers were “nonjudgmental” when they met with them. “They rather focused on observable evidence,” he explained. However, he critiqued former peer reviewers as “biased” because “they had personal problems with the leadership of our university, therefore, they assigned a lower score to our university which was way below
the requirement for phase one of accreditation.” He went on speculating that “perhaps, we did not provide them souvenirs like other universities.”

Referring to the experience of participants at teaching universities, representatives of donor projects cautioned about accepting gifts and souvenirs as an ethical issue in peer-reviewing. An international expert on QAA who represented a donor agency maintained that in the beginning, “peer reviewers used to carry a lot of baggage with them that might have colored a lot of their reviews… that was the first peer review experience that they have ever had.” While recognizing the cultural component of giving gifts and souvenirs, the international expert suggested specific training for peer reviewers to avoid accepting any gifts from the host universities. To avoid similar issues, another donor representative maintained that he advised MoHE to ask USAID or the World Bank to pay for peer reviewers’ expenses. He explained, “They had to stay in someplace and we did not want the universities to pay for their housing and food because … that would become some sort of bribery,” he continued, “You buy them with wonderful food and nice accommodations. Pretty soon they are your buddies, and they would not say anything bad about you.” The examples shared by the representatives of donors supported participants’ observations at teaching universities as they reflected on the experience.

**Peer Review Experience at Research Universities**

Unlike the experience at teaching universities, participants at research universities critiqued the way peer reviewers handled their evaluations. For instance, one of the vice-chancellors argued that accreditation in Afghanistan has not earned international recognition yet. Acknowledging some shortcomings in peer review assessment, a
member of IQAU blamed the university leadership for failing to attend to the expectations of peer reviewers. She illuminated that peer reviewers wanted to meet with the Chancellor to explain their expectations; however, “the Chancellor refused to meet with them.” According to her, “Peer reviewers were very upset”, therefore they assigned no score to the Chancellor’s office for treating them poorly. She was dissatisfied with the way institution leaders handled peer reviewers. She thought mistreating the peer reviewer negatively affected their university in achieving accreditation. The problem at this research university has roots in poor sensemaking and sensegiving since the Chancellor had not participated in any events or workshops on QAA, and the IQAU members failed to give sense of the importance of the issue.

Given that representatives of donor-funded projects worked with both teaching and research universities, some of them were critical of QAAD for recruiting most of the peer reviewers from Kabul based universities. One representative said “among the peer reviewers, one of the things I noticed was a tremendous bias. There was that constant Kabul-based, Kabul-centric mindset, and when they went out beyond Kabul, they would say, oh, they cannot be any good.” He thought the situation slightly improved when the Higher Education Development Project (HEDP) stepped in to assist in the recruitment of peer reviewers from both teaching and research universities. For this participant who gained experience from different countries recruiting peer reviewers solely from public universities exacerbates the problem with biases against private universities. He recalled an experience when peer reviewers commented on the quality of private universities in Afghanistan as “less than any public institution of higher education.”
Experiences of External Stakeholders

Peer Reviewers

Although participants from research and teaching universities expressed diverse reactions to peer reviewers’ evaluations, peer reviewers justified their visits to universities as dual-purpose: to assess and guide. This resembles the boundary roles put forward by Aldrich and Herker (1977) describing that boundary spanners “serve a dual function in information transmittal, acting as both filters and facilitators” (p. 218). For instance, one of the peer reviewers reported that teaching universities need to carry out at least twice as much work as research universities do to achieve phase three (complete) accreditation. While referring to “experience” as a foundation for growth, the peer reviewer argued, “Most of the universities [teaching ones] do not accomplish phase one or phase two of accreditation on their own. They make improvements based on peer reviewers’ recommendations.” For him when a university is under review for phase three of accreditation, “peer reviewers do not want to see any problems associated with lack of infrastructure, lab equipment, library, etc. They all should be in place to complete phase three of accreditation.” Similarly, a member of the QAA Commission confirmed that their expectations for universities increase as they complete each phase of accreditation. According to a peer reviewer who visited several teaching universities, “Our observations suggest that if the newly established universities are able to complete phase two of accreditation, in fact, they are very successful.”

Noting that only four peer reviewers participated in this study, they all noticed an improvement in the policy and growth in perceptions of stakeholders at the institutional and national levels. For a peer reviewer, among the changes that occurred over the past
few years, extending peer-reviewing visits from three to five days was a major step to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the peer-review process. He said the experience showed that three days was not enough to see everything at a university because the process involved meeting with faculty members, staff, administrators, and students. He went on to describe the substances of their visits as follows:

Our team evaluates self-assessment reports and visits universities. Given the scores for each phase, if a university achieves the minimum requirement, it will be able to move on to the next phase. However, if they fail to achieve a score of 51, they should go back and work on their issues and resubmit a new self-assessment report. We also assess infrastructure, facilities, and services that are offered to students (Peer Reviewer).

To this participant, the policy does not correlate with the size of an institution; therefore, they sometimes work extended hours in the evening to complete the assessment of a university.

Peer reviewers also talked about data collection strategies and ways that they assess an institution. According to one of them, peer reviewers use document analysis, in-person interviews, and observations to collect data. Below is a glimpse of their visit to the university.

During the first three days, we meet with the university Chancellor, Vice-Chancellors, Deans of Colleges, Department Heads, administrative staff, and students. We also meet with various committees that operate within a university – ranging from 8-12 committees. The last two days are devoted to observing the physical infrastructure. We are interested in seeing how things are in practice,
how utilities and facilities are used, whether they are useful, who uses them, and to what extent students use them. If they are not working, we want to know what the problems are. We lay out the problems and ask the universities to address them.

While this quote clearly outlines the breadth and depth of peer review visits to a university, another participant who also served as a peer reviewer talked about ways that a peer review team communicates their findings with university stakeholders. He said, “We start and finish our visits by meeting with the leadership of a university. In our final meeting, we tell them what we observed; what was the situation like at their university; and what should they do to succeed in this process.” For the peer reviewer, some universities “have a hard time interpreting accreditation standards”; therefore, peer reviewers provide recommendations on how to address the problems in the short and long run. The peer reviewer stressed, “When we see a huge problem at a university, we guide the leadership on how to address it, even though we are not required to do so.” This example clearly complements previous research on how peer reviewers as boundary spanners synthesize information to communicate solutions (Aldrich & Herker, 1977) as an ongoing need for sensegiving and sensemaking of accreditation.

Similar to the experiences of key informants at research and teaching universities, peer reviewers underscored a shift in the ways universities perceive them. A senior peer reviewer reported, “When we visited a university in our early years, university leaders and faculty members used to perceive us as inspectors.” Justifying peer reviewers’ work as evaluators who assess a university based on the accreditation criteria and the university’s self-assessment report, he insisted “peer reviewers are trained to be neutral –
they should pay attention to values and standards – not to inspect.” Moreover, the peer reviewers talked about resistance at some universities where faculty members and/or the leadership undermined their work for being “useless administrative paperwork” and not “a long-term process for improvement,” said a peer reviewer.

However, peer reviewers noted a positive shift in perceptions of stakeholders at the institution and national levels. He said, “When the commitment at the Directorate [QAAD] increased as they developed guidelines and amendments to the policy, both public and private universities realized the importance of accreditation.” Among other changes, he mentioned a quadruple increase in the number of peer reviewers which was made possible with the technical and financial support of the Higher Education Project funded by the World Bank. “Now that the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate recruited and trained 35 peer reviewers,” he argued, “we have an upper hand in keeping up with the schedule.” Nevertheless, he was cautious that the number of peer reviewers might drop because some people would leave to pursue graduate programs overseas.

**QAAD Officials**

The participants from QAAD – members of the QAA Commission, senior officials, and peer reviewers – consistently stated that they use the same accreditation standards for teaching and research universities irrespective of their history, size, and capacity. Nonetheless, peer reviewers and senior officials at QAAD expressed varied perspectives when they commented on their expectations for teaching and/or research universities. According to a peer reviewer, “The policy and standards are designed in a way that does not relate to the history or age of a university. Some new universities have
done a lot more than the older ones. We focus on the creativity of a university.” The peer reviewer emphasized the number of efforts given to QAA at both teaching and research universities. He further elaborated,

Some of the new universities surpassed the older universities. We also have universities that tried less and have not been able to reach their goals. However, we cannot blame them. They are not free in terms of using their budget. Their budget is tied to the Ministry [MoHE], and they have to wait for the Ministry’s approval. They do not have a separate emergency budget [endowment] to pay for expenses associated with accreditation. They depend on the Ministry of Higher Education to provide their development budget to build infrastructure and other aspects so that they meet the accreditation standards. Once these expectations are met, universities can complete phase two of accreditation.

While this quote primarily discusses ways that lack of financial autonomy deprives public universities, it underscores the physical infrastructure and other capacities that are scarce at teaching universities. Nevertheless, a senior official from QAAD was explicit about expectations for research and teaching universities as he explained,

There is no doubt that large urban [research] universities have better capacity compared to small provincial [teaching] universities. We do not have equal expectations. However, we are hoping that provincial universities make improvements and catch up to the extent that they satisfy quality standards in the same way as the large [research] universities – be able to compete at the national and regional levels. Currently, our expectations are low for small provincial universities. We understand that they do not have enough personnel and capacity
as opposed to the large urban universities. They cannot get there in a day.

However, we expect them to improve in the future and implement the standards. In this example, the QAAD official expresses distinguished expectations for teaching vs. research universities due to their current capacities; however, he pushes stakeholders at teaching universities to work harder to compete with research universities.

Peer reviewers also reflected on the role of multilateral organizations in providing technical and financial support to establish a QAA system in Afghanistan. Among the others, participants emphasized donors’ support for providing in-person training and capacity development for peer reviewers. For one of the peer reviewers, international training, participating in “real life” peer review visits and training facilitated by the Malaysian Qualification Network, assisted them to experience both theory and practice in another setting beyond Afghanistan. Echoing the value of international training and capacity building, a member of a development project representative explained that due to limited experience and capacity in QAA in Afghanistan, they made connections with regional QAA networks. He elaborated, “We assisted the Ministry [MoHE] and a few public universities to subscribe as intermediate members of the Asia Pacific Quality Network [APQN]. The subscription helped us connect with the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) which agreed to provide internship for the peer reviewers.” The participant thought making connections with the regional and international QAA networks would “improve internal capacity in Afghanistan”. He added that “peer reviewers practically experienced how to conduct peer-reviewing in Malaysia. They accompanied the Malaysian peer reviewers during their internship.” Peer reviewers’
hands-on experience with QAA under the supervision of MQA corresponds to Maitlis’s (2005) guided sensemaking/sensegiving form.

Participants from QAAD also talked about the interests and involvement of development projects concerning site selection and the peer review process. A member of the QAA Commission argued that QAAD, QAA Commission, in particular, is the primary authority to identify universities for peer-reviewing and to select peer reviewers. However, she maintained that one of the development projects “used to interfere in selecting peer reviewers and universities” to be reviewed. While she was appreciative of the financial and logistical support provided by these projects, she contended that the QAA Commission knows the “peer reviewers well” and can select those “who are fit for the context”.

**External Donors Representative**

Representatives of donor projects were skeptical about the capacity and work ethics of the supporting staff at QAAD. A senior representative of a donor agency described that “the staff are not professionals” because “the head of the three branches are administrative staff instead of academics.” He thought the existing structure contributes to a “conflict of interest as the staff have some relations with the universities. Occasionnally, they attempt to manipulate the peer reviewer selection.” Critiquing the existing structure of staffing at QAAD, he recommended that the heads of the three branches (QAA manager for public universities, QAA manager for private universities, and QAA manager for teaching improvement) needed to” be academics – someone who understands what is meant by quality.”
However, representatives of donor-funded projects emphasized their partnership with MoHE, QAAD in particular as engaging and productive. They mentioned that they recruit short-term and long-term staff to support QAAD to achieve its goals. For instance, one of the representatives mentioned that their project objectives align with the QAAD annual plans as they provide some budget and capacity building programs. However, he raised concerns about the selection of QAA Commission members. He said the Higher Education Law has restricted the selection of Commission members to have “professor or associate professor titles. However, none of the current board members have Ph.D. degrees even though they are professors.” He urged, “We are planning to change the process for choosing board [Commission] members by making it a competitive process.”

Although, in theory, the development projects are supposed to provide technical and sometimes financial support to MoHE, QAAD in particular, the recent quote reveals obvious interference of some donor-funded projects in the internal politics of MoHE.

**Effects of Self-assessment on Quality**

Many participants described self-assessment at the institution and college levels as a prominent feature of internal quality assurance across teaching and research universities. While participants expressed consistent experience at research universities, for many informants at teaching universities the frequency of self-assessment varied. For instance, several participants at a teaching university indicated that they have strong management at the college and department levels, whereas the senior leadership in charge of QAA manages the process poorly. The Dean of a College described his experience as follows:
The office of the Vice-Chancellor failed to combine the activities of all colleges in one document. Instead, they submitted the self-assessment report of one college as the self-assessment report of the entire university… of course, the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate were unhappy. Unfortunately, the efforts of all individuals were abandoned by improper data management and analysis at the Vice-Chancellor’s office.

Nevertheless, some participants, like the Dean of the College of Economics, maintained that conducting self-assessment and faculty evaluations are treated as “an end themselves” because most of the teaching universities lack enough personnel to process survey results and provide feedback to faculty members about their instruction. Echoing the problem with limited personnel, the Dean of another College at a teaching university stated that they added more on faculty members’ plates by assigning them to serve on various committees to provide immediate feedback to faculty members concerning reviewing course syllabi, survey results, and recommendations to improve instruction.

Although several participants described the internal quality assessment as redundant and unnecessary, for some participants including the Dean of a College, the process has improved in many ways. To begin with, the Dean described that they customized the self-assessment questionnaires “to match the expectation and context of the university.” In the same way, the Dean of another College elaborated on their university’s effort to establish an internal quality assurance system that involves “reviewing learning materials, curricula, course syllabi, faculty members’ instruction, teaching improvement, and personal development plans.” Lastly, participants, especially those in senior leadership positions and members of IQAUs emphasized that their internal
quality assurance involves not only the academic aspects but also the quality of administrative services, access to facilities, and the quality of infrastructure. However, the examples provided regarding the quality of services were contradictory. As an illustration, a member of IQAU stated that they have not established an efficient system to process administrative tasks. According to him, the process often takes more than a week to issue an official transcript to students and graduates.

At research universities, participants described their engagement with accreditation beyond curriculum review and course evaluation. A member of IQAU, for instance, maintained that their IQAU provides training for QAA committees at colleges, communicates updated materials, provides interpretations of accreditation standards, and conducts self-assessment regularly. One of these universities even incorporated an internal peer review process – IQAU members were assigned in groups of two or three individuals to assess quality at each college (Field Observation, June 22, 2019). A member of IQAU articulated, “Although our university was accredited recently and it is valid for five years, we have organized an internal quality review process to sustain the existing outcomes and make further improvement.” Further, she added that the internal assessment of quality prepares them for regional and global accreditation. Underscoring the value of internal assessment, the Dean of a College argued, “Being accredited does not mean we are all set. Quality assurance is an ongoing process. Our colleges and departments should update their documents regularly.”

Participants also talked about the role of internal quality assurance committees at the college and department levels. For several deans, like the Dean of a College, the quality assurance committee at their college “emphasizes revision of curriculum,
preparation of course syllabi, and teaching improvement plan.” Moreover, he explained that they encourage faculty members to integrate students’ feedback from course evaluation in their courses. Similarly, another Dean of a College acknowledged that QAA has increased more supervision of faculty members “to make sure they follow the rules and document their activities.” Nevertheless, he cautioned that supervision may not solve all the problems unless “the needs of colleges, departments, and faculty members are met.” For the Dean, while faculty members have a significant role in quality improvement, the university leadership and MoHE are responsible to provide the resource and facilities so that the faculty can concentrate on their teaching. These participants demonstrated a comprehensive grasp of how quality assurance works, which shows strong sensemaking and sensegiving of QAA.

Admitting that quality assurance constitutes an important part of their responsibilities, several participants stated that they developed specific strategies to implement QAA. Namely, a member of IQAU reported, “We have developed a formative evaluation plan for the colleges. The plan outlines when faculty assessment should occur when department assessment occurs, and when the college should assess their departments and faculty members.” Building on the need for ongoing assessment as a way to improve quality, the IQAU member observed, “When we review faculty members’ work, we consider their strengths and weaknesses. Then we inform the Department Chair to meet with the faculty members to improve the shortcomings.”

All things considered, the findings show that participants emphasized internal quality assurance across the institution, college, and program levels at research universities while participants at teaching universities described their engagement
primarily at the institutional level. In other words, given participants’ experiences, IQAUs at teaching universities have the central role in conducting self-assessment and course evaluation while quality assurance committees at the college and department levels are less engaged. Nevertheless, participants from both teaching and research universities shared a common experience in developing working committees: such as curriculum review, research, and others to work along with the quality assurance committees to ensure policies are enforced and the university is in compliance with the accreditation standards.

**Collecting Evidence and Documenting Activities**

Apart from a rigorous assessment of teaching, research, services, and infrastructure, the quality assurance and accreditation process require higher education institutions and programs to present evidence to support their self-assessment reports. In Afghanistan, QAAD developed a booklet that outlines accreditation expectations and guidelines for providing proof. Since documenting events and activities is a new experience in Afghanistan, there has been some pushback and resistance among senior faculty and staff members. The subsequent paragraphs discuss participants' reactions to document activities.

Documenting activities and collecting evidence were noted as prominent aspects of accreditation for many participants at research and teaching universities. While they mentioned that collecting evidence for quality assurance and accreditation varied depending on the phases of accreditation, several participants thought documenting activities holds individuals and institutions accountable for their services. For participants at teaching universities, like the Dean of a College, collecting evidence includes “self-
assessment at the individual, Department, College, and Institutional levels, faculty’s
teaching evaluation, assessment of curriculum, and assessment of Department Chairs,
College Deans, Vice-Chancellors and working committees.” Similarly, the Dean of
another College from a teaching university added that quality assurance has persuaded
the administrative and procurement staff to provide evidence for their engagement in
quality assurance as well. An emphasis on collecting evidence was influential for many
of these participants to the extent that the Dean of a College credited documenting
activities as a clear path toward accreditation. The Dean explained, “We did not
document our activities in the past. Nevertheless, the Vice-Chancellor insisted on
collecting evidence for every activity.” For this participant, collecting evidence assisted
their university to keep track of improvement in accreditation phases.

Collecting evidence, for many participants at research universities, was described
as extensive. For instance, the Dean of a College maintained that they submitted 12
packages along with the institutional self-assessment report when their university was
evaluated for phase three (full) of accreditation. A member of IQAU from another
research university further illustrated that the academic council at their university asked
them to prepare “supporting documents for all 49 sub-standards.” For instance, he said
that if a college or a department signs a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with an
organization outside the university, the paperwork should be included as evidence for
accreditation. Correspondingly, the Dean of a College went on to provide the rationale
for documenting activities:

When a faculty member claims that he had an applied/practical lesson, we ask if
she/he has any pieces of evidence. There should be records both in the syllabus
and when students visit a place; they should take pictures as evidence to show that something happened. Or, if a faculty member claims that he/she incorporated creativity in his/her instruction, there needs to be some evidence that supports the claim.

While this example provides a clear justification for collecting evidence, some participants observed that not all faculty members support it. The Dean of a College explained the reason, noting “as the Dean, I have to follow the policy and deal with faculty members. The faculty members claim that they are responsible to deliver their lessons, not to take pictures. This is the challenge.” Further, the Dean reported that faculty members refer to their students as evidence, instead of providing reports or pictures.

Some senior leaders at research universities also expressed a mixed perspective in relation to collecting evidence. While some underscored the significance of collecting evidence essential in the accreditation process, for some it meant “more paperwork”. For example, one of the Vice-Chancellors described his experience, stating, “We did not use to document our activities in the past. Now, documenting is very important. This means more paperwork. The quality assurance and accreditation processes do not offer much other than paperwork.” For the Vice-Chancellor, quality is evaluated based on how universities organize their documents, rather than how they deliver the service. Similarly, another Vice-Chancellor with years of experience in QAA, summarized his experience as follows:

In general, quality assurance and accreditation have not earned international experience. It is a start. In other countries, universities undergo ranking, but we
don’t have a ranking system. As many problems exist in our lives, we also have problems in this sector [QAA]. We still do not have a transparent process for accreditation. Apparently, we have 11 standards, 49 sub-standards, and a checklist to prepare a self-assessment report. However, it is just on the paper, not focused on action – we still see accreditation as a work in progress because it is not standardized and has flaws.

Even though many participants supported accreditation for documenting activities and collecting observable evidence, for some participants the process created additional administrative paperwork. This observation is spelled out further by a member of IQAU at a research university:

Based on the checklist for supporting documents, we have to provide documentation for 65 items. Seven of these are related to faculty members: biography, academic folders, course syllabi, improvement plan, action plan, and assessment of faculty teaching. Each faculty has a folder. Another 17 documents are related to the departments – to be prepared by the Department Chairs. Deans of colleges are responsible to prepare 20 documents, and the Chancellor’s office should prepare 26 documents (Member of IQAU, Research University).

Some of these participants thought that providing documentation for all of the items on the checklist seem overwhelming, especially for those individuals and institutions that did not have such a routine in place. This particularly supports the views of those who opposed emphasizing more on documenting instead of changing things in practice. Since collecting evidence is important in tracking progress on quality improvement at teaching and research universities, the findings suggest that universities in Afghanistan should
develop a mechanism to keep records and evidence as a routine. Overall, “accreditation, in a simple form, evaluates the ability of a university” to develop a series of documents “to tell a story,” and support it with evidence, said an international advisor to MoHE.

**The Role of University Leaders in Managing Quality**

For many participants, the involvement of the university leaders such as the Chancellor, Vice-Chancellors, and Deans of Colleges in managing quality assurance surfaced as a prominent factor in sensemaking and sensegiving of quality assurance and making progress towards accreditation. Although the engagement of university leaders in QAA varied from one institution to another, some universities made more progress toward accreditation when the institution leaders supported the process. As follow, I discuss the participants’ experiences at teaching and research universities separately.

**Experience at Teaching Universities**

The Dean of a College underscored the creativity of their Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs who cultivated a sense of motivation among faculty members, organized programs and activities, and supported IQAU members to navigate QAA processes and outcomes. He said, “The leadership supports the quality assurance effort at our institution. However, there are delays in the finance and procurement departments. For example, when we make any requests, they do not procure them promptly.” One of the Vice-Chancellors corroborated the observation and emphasized that “the leadership has a significant role in increasing awareness and mobilizing faculty and staff members to buy into quality assurance and accreditation.” He maintained that access to basic resources is essential because quality improvement “depends on our ability and capacity to make good use of facilities and to internalize the process … especially when there is
no incentive for faculty members to implement accreditation.” The Vice-Chancellor thought university leaders have some leverage to give sense to employees about quality assurance and encourage them to participate in QAA in circumstances of limited resources.

While many participants from teaching universities complained about the lack of support from their leadership team, they criticized MoHE for neglecting their needs. For instance, the Dean of a College complained, “Unfortunately, the leadership does not do anything to improve quality at our institution. I have submitted several proposals to the administration to procure lab equipment for our college; however, I have not seen any response from them.” Correspondingly, a member of IQAU reported, “We need more work to move towards student-centered instruction. Right now, we do not have adequate materials for the students to do a lab experiment, and the Ministry [MoHE] always ignores our proposals for lab equipment.” Further, the Dean asserted that their institutional leaders have failed to establish a strong relationship with officials at MoHE. Therefore, according to him, “The Ministry of Higher Education has a negative view of our university. They do not support our university the way they support other universities. Their lack of support has negatively influenced our faculty members and students.” These participants suggested that although chancellors and vice-chancellors are the primary respondents to address the needs of public universities, in the context of Afghanistan, given the central governance and control of resources, MoHE has an equal responsibility to ensure public universities have access to relevant resources.

The participants also talked about the limitations of teaching universities which are beyond the capacity of the institutional leaders. The Dean of a College described that
they have regular meetings with the university leaders who provide them with guidance and support. However, he urged, “Our needs exceed the current capacity of finance and procurement departments at the university.” She argued that their university cannot make any progress when the institutional leader chooses a conventional approach – to manage the current status. According to her, the Chancellor of the university should move beyond his comfort zone, and build connections with local businesses and international donors to attract resources. Another participant who served as a Vice-Chancellor acknowledged the problem with a limited budget and said, “We have a lot of needs, but our budget is very thin.” For these participants, although the allocation of resources is prejudiced at the national level – favoring some universities over others, institutional leaders should go beyond MoHE, and raise funding from other sources. Overall, the findings suggest that institutional leaders follow a traditional leadership approach to manage quality at teaching universities. In other words, according to participants, teaching universities will prosper in quality assurance when university leaders establish a broad network of financial support and mobilize the existing resources well.

**Experience at Research Universities**

Similar to the experience of participants at teaching universities, participants at research universities referred to the central governance system of higher education in Afghanistan as a major problem at the national level. While they had some hopes because research universities were granted partial autonomy in the area of finance, participants like the Dean of a College thought the process would take months or years to be implemented. He said, “In theory, our university was granted financial autonomy; however, in practice, we have not seen any movement.” The Dean argued that “financial
and academic autonomy would help our university make progress. When we are independent, we can generate revenue through workshops, research, and other services.” Since quality assurance requires resource mobilization at the institutional and program levels, the Dean thought their university was prepared to spend the budget based on their strategic plan. In other words, the Dean confirmed that their university has strong leaders with adequate capacity to act autonomously.

Some participants credited the university leadership – the Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs – for their efforts to push QAA activities forward. The Dean of a College stated, “The Vice-Chancellor often reminded us that quality assurance increases the prestige of our university at the national and global level. More importantly, he managed the process very successfully.” Further, the Dean elaborated that the Vice-Chancellor personally facilitated the needs assessment and strategic planning. The Dean of another College also acknowledged their Vice-Chancellor for inspiring hard work and dedication. He said, “He [the Vice-Chancellor] keeps track of all activities. He makes sure that Deans, Department Chairs, and various committees have plans and implement them. He reviews and follows up with them regularly, otherwise, things will remain just on paper.”

At the college level, participants emphasized improvement in teaching and learning experience as the main outcome of quality assurance. The Dean of a College described the role of college leadership, stating “the leadership team that includes me, the Department Chairs, and the quality assurance committee, try to find ways to provide high-quality teaching and learning experience for our students.” Further, she stated that their efforts go beyond students, “We also invest in our faculty members to complete
graduate degree programs and be engaged in academia to stay up to date.” According to the Dean, team effort is critical in quality improvement. “Quality assurance is not subject to one person, it entails everybody’s commitment,” she emphasized. Similarly, another Dean from a different research university acknowledged the leadership support for implementing quality assurance, and argued, “We cannot blame the leadership alone. Quality assurance is a collective effort. For example, if the faculty members participate but the administrative staff holds them back, or if the Department Chairs do not do their jobs well, the process will paralyze.” This example defines quality assurance as a community effort and underscores the role of university leadership in mobilizing the efforts.

Acknowledging the importance of proper leadership and management in implementing quality assurance and accreditation, some participants talked about ways that internal politics and poor management affect the processes and outcomes. According to a member of IQAU, “Previously, there was a lack of agreement between our committee [IQAU] and the Chancellor’s office. The Chancellor not only undervalued our work, but he also thought we were overseeing his work.” To this participant, interference of the Chancellor in the appointment of IQAU members disrupted the process and resulted in reputation damage to their university. She explained that the Chancellor replaced experienced faculty members with junior ones who had minimum exposure to QAA. Reflecting on the pressure from the leadership, she maintained they even “decided to abandon” their service at IQAU. “We were very demotivated due to the poor treatment by the Chancellor. However, we resisted. This university is my second home, I have worked here for over three decades,” the IQAU member highlighted. Given the
experience of participants at research universities, the findings underscore the important role of leadership in managing quality. More specifically, the findings suggest a lack of sensemaking and sensegiving as a leadership issue, which created a poor relationship between IQAU members and the university leader at one university.

The Role of Foreign Donor-Funded Projects

Experience at Public Teaching and Research Universities

Participants from research and teaching universities acknowledged the importance of external donor-funded projects in establishing and implementing QAA in Afghanistan. While they described the engagement of donor-funded development projects through the British Council, USAID, and the World Bank in technical areas such as policy development and capacity building, these projects also provided financial and logistic support. A member of IQAU from a research university reported that HEDP (funded through the World Bank) renovated the quality assurance office and provided them with furniture and equipment. She also acknowledged the work of the British Council and noted, “British Council provided us training in the area of annual program review and periodic program review. Now, I am a certified national trainer.” Similarly, a member of IQAU from a teaching university outlined, “British Council did not provide any financial support; instead, they funded capacity building workshops inside Afghanistan and overseas such as India and Dubai.” Another participant, the Dean of a College from a research university observed, “In general, the World Bank and USAID were engaged in developing policies including quality assurance and accreditation. They provided awareness workshops. During my tenure at the Ministry of Higher Education, I witnessed USWDP’s [USAID funded project] activities in many ways.”
Many participants noted that the government in Afghanistan had not allocated any budget for implementing quality assurance at the national and institutional levels, therefore, according to them, universities and QAAD depended on donor-funded projects to implement QAA. For instance, the Dean of a College from a teaching university stated, “USWDP used to pay the costs associated with external [peer] reviews, but later HEDP covered these costs.” Noting that development projects worked at the national and institutional levels, a Vice-Chancellor from a teaching university defined his experience as somewhat satisfying, as he illustrated, “HEDP provided us a room with equipment. However, in terms of capacity building, their efforts are limited because they only train one or two individuals [a cascade training mode] and that is not enough.” A member of IQAU from a teaching university also added that “development projects do not have a serious role at the university level. They are more involved with the Directorate [QAAD]. Their support is very general, and not in consultation with our university. They have their own goals which may not be the same as our needs.” Nevertheless, a peer reviewer described the role of development projects as substantially significant in training peer reviewers, institutional leaders, and Quality Assurance Managers. He said that some projects only provided capacity development opportunities while others did a combination of training and logistical support. Overall, participants’ comments show that donor-funded projects had extensive engagement with research universities since they started the QAA process earlier than the teaching universities. That being the case, research universities received more technical and logistical support than teaching ones.
Experience of Foreign Donors’ Project Representatives

Considering that foreign donors’ support was instrumental in establishing a quality assurance and accreditation system in Afghanistan, participants who represented these agencies reflected on the management of QAA at the national and institutional levels. For some participants, like a former senior advisor to MoHE, the biggest motivation behind QAA was the Minister and the Deputy Minister for Academic Affairs. He said, “They had some contacts with the process in the international meetings they went to, and most of the countries like India and Pakistan had accreditation. They had also seen accreditation in a number of other places. ... that was frankly key to get started.” Supporting the sentiment, other donor representatives noted the quality of their partnership with QAAD and ways that their joint efforts helped public universities improve. A donor representative described that they have stationed one full-time staff at QAAD who serves as a liaison between the donor-funded project, QAAD, and public universities. According to him, the leadership of QAAD “tries to be more cooperative and do something for the improvement of the whole system. However, the supporting staff at the Directorate [QAAD] are not only underqualified, but they also interfere in the process that affects the entire system negatively.” More specifically, the donor representative contended that some administrative staff have relationships with public and private universities which “causes a conflict of interest when these universities are under review.” According to this participant, employees at QAAD need training on neutrality and data processing to be able to handle confidential data.

Representatives of donors also criticized the way MoHE and universities handle QAA. A senior representative who worked with the national QAA Commission explained
that MoHE had problems managing the Commission. He said that “the leadership turnover played a significant damaging effect on quality assurance at many levels from the Minister on down.” Further, he elaborated, “I came to a meeting there were three brand new people. They [MoHE] got rid of Commission members who were above 55 years old.” In his experience, the situation was “very chaotic on the board [QAA Commission]. We kept having to retrain what their role was.” While this example shows how the rotation of the Commission members affected the workflow at the national level, another donor representative critiqued the way a research university managed the quality assurance process. He described that one of the research universities had “this huge committee of 40-50 people to work on quality assurance. You could just tell nothing was happening because they did not know how to do it.” The participant referred to quality assurance as a management exercise – to enable people to do something, not to lecture them. However, he realized some improvements when one of the universities assigned a dedicated person in charge. For this donor representative, the QAA manager “literally went out to each department and provided the information they needed. ... They got one person who paid attention and made sure it is one voice. So, it seemed to me that was the most successful technique there.”

These participants also critiqued the public system for appointing academics to leadership positions. One participant said, “Nearly all of the faculty members in management positions such as the Deans and Department Chairs do not have any management knowledge or experience; therefore, they cannot manage them well. In addition to the management of QAA, some representatives of donors criticized the leadership of public universities. One such case was described by a senior representative,
“The internal management is weak at public universities. They cannot control their faculty members. Most of them teach at private universities.” These quotes from representatives of development projects identify substantial gaps in managing quality at public universities.

Although the representatives of the donors claimed that they coordinated with each other to support higher education, particularly the quality assurance and accreditation efforts, field observations and interview responses suggest the other way. For instance, according to an official from QAAD, British Council used to support quality assurance by training peer reviewers and developing policy documents for QAAD. However, once USWDP and HEDP were involved in QAA, according to the QAAD official, British Council started a partnership with the Department of Academic Planning to establish an accreditation framework for Academic Program Review (ARP).

On a similar note, a former manager at USWDP reported that both USAID and the World Bank invested in QAA development. However, since both USWDP and HEDP focused on QAA, according to the informant, one could see a lot of duplications, which eventually resulted in MoHE interference, abandoning USWDP to focus on a different issue such as institutional autonomy and research. Apart from duplications, a peer reviewer and an official from HEDP noted a mismatch between the peer reviewers’ checklist for review, and the universities' self-assessment reports. They explained that initially, British Council trained peer reviewers and created “a score card” (checklist) that was used as indicators. However, since universities adopted a US accreditation model, peer reviewers often had a challenge or disagreement in interpreting the benchmarks. Overall, participants agreed that a lack of coordination between the donor-funded
projects, coupled with poor leadership at MoHE, created a lot of confusion at the national and institutional levels in implementing QAA.

In subsequent paragraphs, I briefly present the work of three foreign donors-funded development projects including – the British Council, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank.

**British Council.** A representative of the British Council described their involvement in QAA since the early stages in 2012 when the MoHE requested them to support the establishment of a national QAA system. In their capacity, the British Council started working with QAAD and six research universities and later expanded their work to 12 public universities and five private universities. British Council implemented its programs through partnerships – Partners for Academic Learning (PAL). According to the representative of the project, the focus of PAL has evolved over time. She explained:

In 2011, we started a project titled Partners for Academic Learning [(PAL)] which supported nine universities. We trained College Deans and Department Chairs on higher education leadership for a week, and then we distributed the 25 trainees into several groups based on their topic of interest. We recruited professors from England who served as their mentors for a year. Then, The Ministry of Higher Education requested us to work on quality assurance. In PAL2, we helped the Directorate of Quality Assurance and Accreditation and six universities. In PAL3, our work expanded to 12 public universities, and in PAL4 we supported six universities to achieve the status of Centers of Excellence. Currently, our work
focuses on PAL5 which focuses on academic program review which is a step further in quality assurance.

According to the representative of the British Council, MoHE requested them to assist the Ministry with academic program review (APR) as MoHE officials learned that around 190 programs were offered by the universities, and in some cases, two or three similar programs had different titles. The British Council representative not only assisted in developing policies for APR but also stated that they helped with the establishment of the National Committee for Program Review (NCPR) in the Department of Academic Planning which is separate from QAAD. The representative explained that their partnership with the Department of Academic Planning resulted in “introducing new procedures such as annual program review, periodic program review, new program development, and suspension or merger of programs. We trained a group of faculty members as the National Trainers who should be able to implement these processes and/or train their colleagues in these areas.”

When the representative of the British Council was asked what criteria they used to select the universities, the representative responded that the British Council and MoHE are both involved in the process. The representative explained, “The criteria are based on the location and capacity of universities. In some universities, the capacity is very low. We cannot work with universities with low capacity.” Since the capacity of teaching universities are quite lower than the research universities, one can assume that research universities were the primary beneficiaries of the British Council programs on quality assurance and accreditation.
The Higher Education Development Program (HEDP). Like the British Council, the World Bank also supports quality assurance through the Higher Education Development Project (HEDP). The representatives of HEDP described that they support both internal and external QAA programs. According to a representative, “Our main activities are establishing internal quality assurance units at public universities and training external reviewers inside Afghanistan and in Malaysia.” They described that they incorporated QAA as a major component in their project in 2016, and since then, they have established 18 IQAUs (mainly logistical support) in different public universities. Another representative added that they support IQAUs as a way “to improve internal capacity at each university.” Underscoring the limited exposure to QAA in Afghanistan, the representatives of HEDP alluded that they assisted MoHE and selected universities to become intermediate members of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) through which they signed a memorandum of understanding with the Malaysian Qualification Agency to train peer reviewers.

These representatives also described their work with QAAD as well integrated. One of them described, “We have a full-time officer at the directorate [QAAD] which bridges the two organizations. The officer reports to us and the Director of quality assurance. His placement at the directorate [QAAD] is very helpful for us to follow up and expedite the process.” Apart from providing logistic support and paying for accommodation and stipend of peer reviewers, a representative of HEDP stated, “We develop annual plans for the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate and help them implement it.” While HEDP representatives claimed that they work with QAAD as “a team and face no challenges,” during the field observation, the investigator noticed
some misalignment between a representative of HEDP and QAAD Commission and staff members.

**The University Support and Workforce Development Program (USWDP).**

USAID has been actively involved in the development of the higher education system in Afghanistan since 2006. USAID supported quality assurance and accreditation through the Higher Education Project (HEP) and USWDP. While HEP and USWDP primarily provided technical support such as developing QAA policy, accreditation framework, and training of local stakeholders, they also covered some costs associated with study tours overseas, peer review visits, and honoraria for QAA National Commission and members of IQAUs at selected research universities.

A former employee of USWDP explained that he worked with faculty members from Afghanistan universities to develop an institutional QAA system. According to him, the task force for QAA agreed to follow a US QAA model that is based on national standards. He thought using a British model would not serve university contexts in Afghanistan because in Britain “institutions set their own standards. So, people who do the site visits, judge whether they met their standards.” He went on to explain that if universities set low standards and they meet them, they are accredited. He thought if universities set standards in Britain, “that may be fine because there are all kinds of pressure for high quality. But it does not work in developing countries where you have not set those standards.”
Summary. While the donor representatives claimed that their work was in coordination with MoHE and other donors, the field observations and interviews with MoHE officials and peer reviewers suggest the opposite. According to representatives of HEDP, the criteria in peer review score cards do not match the accreditation framework since the former was adopted from a UK accreditation model and the latter from a US accreditation model. A senior peer reviewer supported the observation and said that they often have to come up with their own interpretation of what the checklist (score card) asks and what evidence they need to check off the criteria. These examples clearly shed light on the lack of coordination between the donor-funded projects and the poor capacity at the national level to synthesize the peer review score cards with the accreditation framework.
CHAPTER 8
CHALLENGES FACING RESEARCH AND TEACHING UNIVERSITIES IN IMPLEMENTING ACCREDITATION

The participants in the study consistently stated that QAA involves a campus-wide assessment uncovering a university’s areas of strength, weakness, and opportunity. While the strengths are considered a bonus when a university undergoes accreditation, the challenges require immediate and long-term attention so that the university meets the accreditation standards. However, participants stated that public universities in Afghanistan have substantial challenges that influence their ability to provide quality education. Based on participants’ responses, restrictions for the appointment of Commission members in higher education bylaws, expectations of accreditation standards, and the organizational structure of QAAD were the challenges at the national level. However, at the institutional level, participants listed the challenges as lack of autonomy, limited budget, scarce resources, poor coordination between academic and administrative divisions, lack of awareness, and security threats. In the subsequent sections, I discuss these challenges briefly at the national level and in more detail at the institutional level.

Challenges Facing the National System in Implementing QAA

For many participants such as donor representatives, QAAD officials, and peer reviewers, a different set of issues influence the implementation of QAA in public and private universities. One senior official representing a donor agency argued that QAAD “has problems structure-wise. The heads of three branches [quality assurance manager for public universities, quality assurance manager for private universities, and quality assurance manager for teaching and learning] are administrative positions [not academic
He stated that these managers have not received adequate training to manage QAA at the national level. Similarly, another representative of a donor challenged the higher education law for the assignment of the QAA Commission. He illustrated, “The only problem we face is the rotation of Commission members. They are supposed to work for three years. We encourage them to apply again so that new members can benefit from their experience…, new members will not know the processes unless they are trained.” More specifically, an official from QAAD explained that per Afghanistan’s higher education bylaws, serving in leadership and commissions are restricted to three years with the option of a one-time renewal. Therefore, he stated that the turnover happens quite often.

In addition, a foreign donor representative critiqued the higher education law for restricting membership to QAA Commission to be at least an associate professor or full professor. As a result, according to the donor representative, new scholars who hold Ph.D. degrees from well-respected universities do not qualify since they do not meet the academic rank criteria. He also went on to explain that the ones who qualify for the QAA Commission, nearly all of them lack academic credentials such as Ph.D. degrees. Although this arrangement seemed an internal issue within the higher education structure, none of the participants from teaching or research universities raised them as a concern. On the contrary, donor representatives, who provide capacity development programs and work directly with QAAD staff and QAA Commission, repeatedly critiqued the higher education law for restricting membership to the QAA Commission based on academic rank.
While donor representative critiques reveal problems with staff capacity and frequent rotation of QAA Commission members and directors, participants noted problems with the application of the existing accreditation framework at public universities. For participants like a peer reviewer, “Even now, of the 11 standards, some of them are not applicable to public universities. There is a need to further discuss the problem.” He urged, “The standards that are less applicable to public universities need to be revised.” The problems highlighted at the national level suggest a revisit of the current framework, organizational structure, and bylaws to strengthen the quality assurance system in Afghanistan.

Officials at QAAD were also concerned that implementing QAA in the absence of adequate financial resources seems cumbersome at the national and institutional levels. A senior official elaborated, “One of the challenges is financial problems because peer reviewers resist traveling to remote provinces as we pay them little money.” He added, “We do not have a specific budget for our operations. We rely on the Ministry of Higher Education's budget. We cannot charge fees as far as the Directorate [QAAD] is part of the Ministry.” Suggesting that insufficient funding is a substantial challenge, this quote restates the problem with a central governance system and lack of institutional autonomy. In other words, officials at MoHE, QAAD in particular, commented that lack of funding not only interrupts QAAD plans but remains a distressing issue for all public universities when they attempt to improve quality. For instance, a member of the QAA Commission reported that while they emphasize the need for universities to meet the accreditation standards, most public “universities complain about inadequate lab equipment and absence of funding sources to purchase new materials to teach students to run
experiments.” This quote reaffirms the need for further funding for public higher education institutions in Afghanistan.

Similar to the budget, the small organizational structure seemed an issue of concern at QAAD. An office manager reported that their work at QAAD seems beyond the capacity of the existing personnel. He added they need “a bigger structure to be able to oversee 169 public and private higher education institutions.” This quote indicates that lack of adequate personnel seems a significant challenge for QAAD to oversee the implementation of QAA at the national level.

**Challenges Facing Public Universities in Implementing QAA**

**Lack of Autonomy**

Public universities are considered stable institutions in Afghanistan since they are solely funded by the government. However, they are at a disadvantage when needing to make financial and administrative decisions due to the highly centralized governance system. Specifically, participants talked about the lack of autonomy as a significant challenge for public universities when they implement quality assurance and accreditation. Given that QAA requires universities to reallocate limited resources and equip libraries and laboratories with basic equipment and infrastructure, the Dean of a College from a research university described the process as “long and complex”. He said, “We have made requests for lab equipment three times since last year, and the university processed it to higher levels; yet, we have not heard anything…, agriculture is a scientific area and having a laboratory is necessary for us.” While this quote shows a clear example of bureaucracies when universities are not in charge of making decisions, a member of the IQAU from a teaching university, explained that lack of institutional autonomy
dragged some individuals from their university in a legal case for several years simply because the university accepted a donation of some agriculture seeds from an international organization and distributed the harvest to university employees.

Further, participants noted that due to lack of institutional autonomy, and financial autonomy, in particular, their university has no control over how and where to spend their budgets. According to a Vice-Chancellor from a teaching university, when the academic division of the university needs to implement awareness programs, for example, “print banners and materials for quality assurance training”, the administration division denies their request because they are not authorized to use the budget for this purpose. In other words, participants expressed the budget is distributed through fixed line items and there is less flexibility to spend it for programs and activities outside the parameters. The problem was echoed by a peer reviewer as well when he said that public universities cannot be blamed for not making improvements because they “are not free in terms of using their budgets. Their budgets are tied to the Ministry of Higher Education. They have to wait for the Ministry to provide the budget and authorize their expenses.”

Some participants urged that public universities should be granted institutional autonomy to improve quality. The Dean of a College from a research university argued that “financial and academic autonomy would help universities develop. Financial autonomy allows colleges and departments to generate income through research, training, and consultancies.” Reflecting on his experiences, he indicated, “Now, there is an endless bureaucracy in procurement. When I was appointed as the Dean, I requested a new set of furniture for my office. Two years passed, yet I have not seen any progress.” Since financial and administrative decisions are centrally controlled, participants from teaching
and research universities thought public universities have no alternative but to put up with the bureaucratic process when they develop plans to address their shortcomings.

While most of the participants emphasized financial autonomy as a way to address quality-related concerns, the Dean of a College at a teaching university cautioned about poor capacity and lack of an oversight system to ensure transparency. He said, “We need a good management and audit system before we can exercise financial autonomy. Corruption is prevailing in Afghanistan; therefore, we need the right structures in place before allocating money to universities.” This quote underscores contextual circumstances that require careful planning if public universities are to be allowed to make financial decisions. In sum, based on participants’ experiences at teaching and research universities, a lack of institutional autonomy hinders their efforts to improve quality.

**Budgetary Restrictions**

Many participants noted that access to the budget is restricted to a few individuals in the finance and procurement division of public universities. Other stakeholders such as vice-chancellors and deans of colleges barely know how and where the university budget is spent. The informants from both research and teaching universities complained that the finance and procurement division of the university usually turns down their requests for laboratory equipment, library facilities, office furniture, and other academic-related resources that are important in quality improvement. The Dean of a College from a teaching university described his experience, stating “I do not know anything about the university or the college budget. In the past three years, I made several formal requests from the procurement department to provide basic equipment such as computers and..."
printers for my departments; however, nothing happened.” Likewise, the Dean of a College from a research university echoed a similar concern, explaining “the problem is, when we request anything from the university, they respond that they cannot purchase them from the operating budget. They say we cannot purchase IT equipment because they are not included in the budget.” These examples clearly show a disconnection between academic units and finance and procurement divisions and at large the problem with lack of autonomy.

Participants also criticized their universities for the lack of transparency about the use of the budget. The experience at teaching and research universities was consistent as participants from both categories of universities constantly stated that academic units are not informed and consulted about the university budget, while the finance and procurement divisions decide where and how to use the budget. The following quote captures their concerns:

Unfortunately, colleges and departments do not have access to the budget. We do not know how much budget we have and where it is used, except for salary and students’ housing and food stipends. I think the budget distribution does not occur per each college, and even if it does, we do not know about it. We do not know how much money we have for research, library, infrastructure, and publications.

(Dean of a College, Research University).

While striking, this quote suggests that support for quality improvement remains an illusion or unobtainable when academic and procurement divisions work in isolation. Additionally, IQAU members from research universities talked about preparing self-assessment reports at the institutional level, and their challenge in collecting information
about financial resources from their own institutions. A member of IQAU at a research university summarized her experience as follows:

We have problems with the finance department. They do not participate in our meetings. They do not disclose the budget to us. We do not interfere with the budget; however, we need to know whether our budget has an improving or a declining status. Last year, I was able to access a copy of our university budget from the past years. When I compared the budget for the past three consecutive years, it was static…, I was curious to know why the budget remained the same since we created new departments and recruited new faculty members and staff. I prepared a report explaining the problem to the Vice-Chancellor for Finance and others. I asked them why the budget had not increased, but instead, it declined. Does this mean we laid off people or consolidated any colleges? I discussed the issue with each administrative staff. The information I received was that no senior representatives of [our university] attended the budget distribution meetings at the Ministry of Higher Education. They only sent the university cashier, not someone from the leadership. According to the cashier, other universities send their deans or vice-chancellors, while our university sent him. He said when he complains that the budget is not enough, other participants shut him up. It means that other universities negotiate their budgets, while our university receives a budget that hardly covers operations. As a result, we are unable to pay faculty members for the evening shift classes (Member of IQAU, Research University).

This example sheds light on internal issues and bureaucratic processes affecting budgetary decisions in a centralized higher education system.
Since quality improvement depends on the availability of resources to fulfill areas of need, according to some participants, universities do not have an independent budget for academic programs aside from paying faculty. That being the case, the Dean of a College from a research university reported that they have no option but to rely on a “weak and complex procurement process that takes months and years” before they see any results. Likewise, the Dean of a College from another research university added that “a lack of [enough] budget is a big challenge as some of the quality assurance activities need money. The accreditation framework requires colleges to have research labs or research centers, but there is no explanation about the budget and resources to build one”. Given that inadequate budget and central governance are a shared concern for teaching and research universities, a senior manager from a teaching university framed the problem as follows:

The Ministry of Higher Education does not seem explicit in the allocation of funding for academic activities including quality assurance, research, and others. We need a budget for signing a memorandum of understanding, study tours for academics and students, and other activities. A lack of autonomy and a lack of budget to improve quality challenges the notion of quality assurance and accreditation.

When the budget for higher education is restricted and public universities are not allowed by the higher education law to generate income, implementing QAA “has limited impact on actual quality because [universities] do not have adequate resources,” said the Dean of College from a teaching university. By the same token, a Vice-Chancellor at another teaching university argued that although some universities were able to print advertising
materials such as banners and mission statements, nearly all other QAA related activities were covered without any budget, or they paid the costs from their own pockets. These examples suggest a reconfiguration of national and institutional budgets with a focus on quality assurance and accreditation.

In short, the limited budget surfaced as a substantial challenge across public teaching and research universities. The data presented show no significant differences between teaching and research universities. More importantly, limited funding for higher education emerged as a significant finding that resonated with public HEIs and QAAD. As participants from teaching and research universities considered how limited budget influenced their practices relative to implementing QAA, they had varying experiences regarding resources, discussed below.

**Lack of Resources**

Participants from both research and teaching universities reported that the lack of adequate resources hampers quality assurance at their universities. To begin with teaching universities, the Dean of a College stated, “Some of the colleges in our university do not have adequate space for classrooms and discussions. Our [the university’s] main campus does not have basic needs such as running water and dependable electricity. The area around the classroom and office buildings has not been leveled.” Similarly, another Dean from the same university mentioned that “four colleges at our university do not have adequate classrooms and office spaces. If we do not have a place for teaching,” he emphasized, “how can we implement the curriculum?”

In addition, some other participants from teaching universities critiqued the accreditation framework for failing to account for the context of universities. According
to the Dean of a College, “The quality assurance directorate should pay attention to the resource context of a university when they assess them. If they compare our university with others, we definitely lack very basic resources. Our university cannot be compared with well-resourced universities.” Confirming this statement, one of the Vice-Chancellors at a teaching university pointed out, “Some of the expectations of accreditation do not exist in our universities. For example, one of the accreditation standards asks for a well-equipped library, an IT system, and a small size student and faculty ratio, but our universities barely have these.” Assessing the condition of resources at his institution, the Dean of a College framed accreditation as rhetoric. He said, “We have the plans, but they are not implemented. We do not have the relevant resources to implement them. We made several requests in the past few years, asking the university to purchase basic equipment for us, yet they did not happen.” These examples illustrate that lack of resources challenges quality improvement and implementation of accreditation at teaching universities.

The informants from teaching universities also complained about not having enough faculty members and administrative staff positions in their Tashkeel (human resource allocation). They argued that quality assurance is just a symbolic fad when their university lacks enough faculty members to teach the classes. One of the vice-chancellors from a teaching university highlighted, “on the one hand, the Ministry of Higher Education requires all universities to allow faculty members to complete graduate degrees [most of which occur outside the country], on the other hand, we have to implement the curricula.” He went on to explain that some departments only have one or two faculty members present since the rest of them are studying abroad. “The situation
causes a huge gap because the faculty members teach at various departments,” he exclaimed.

In addition, participants at teaching universities expressed concern that a lack of personnel puts the existing faculty members under a lot of pressure to teach more classes while they have limited time to prepare and carry out research. The Dean of a College described, “Our faculty members are overloaded because they are teaching four to five subjects each. Preparing for five courses requires a lot of time.” Comparing the faculty members’ workload between his university and a research university, he observed that “[one research] university implements the Information Technology curricula in three departments with 31 faculty members. On the contrary, we implement the same curricula in two departments with only eight faculty members. This is a huge difference.” Given that shortage of faculty members and administrative personnel seemed a significant challenge at teaching universities, the Dean of a College assessed the “lack of enough faculty members and inadequate budget as a weakness” for their university. The same problem surfaced even at a teaching university that completed two phases of accreditation. The Dean of a College summarized the concern as he pointed out:

Having resources is an important element of quality assurance. Although we received some resources to complete the candidacy phase two of accreditation, we do not have enough faculty members to be able to pass phase three [full accreditation]. The Ministry of Higher Education needs to provide us with the right resources so that we pass phase three. They have the authority to allocate resources for us. We do not have enough teachers and adequate facilities for teaching and learning.
This example clearly shows the limits of teaching universities when it comes to the availability of resources and their chance for growth. Some participants also added that a shortage of personnel forces them to even carry out the burden of administrative duties on their own. According to the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs at a teaching university, “Our tashkeel [allocation of human resource] is very limited in academic and administrative areas. I do not have an administrative assistant for my office. I have to complete administrative paperwork on my own.”

Although participants from research universities generally did not mention the lack of basic resources as an issue of concern for quality improvement, they were consistent that inadequate technologies and laboratory equipment negatively affect the quality of teaching and learning. The Dean of a College urged that “the Ministry of Higher Education should provide adequate facilities so that the quality assurance be effective. Our classes should be equipped with projectors and TV screens. One or two projectors are not enough for our college.” The Dean also commented on the quality of teaching and learning, as he said:

The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate expects faculty members to observe student-centered instruction, e.g., group activities. It is easier to do so with a class consisting of 20–30 students. However, when the class size is above 50 students in a limited space, the faculty members find it very hard or impossible to implement new methods, including group activities.

Highlighting the issues that challenge quality, this quote exemplifies a pattern in research universities. Other informants from the research universities also noted the problem of inadequate resources in the science and engineering domains. A member of IQAU stated
that students are expected to conduct experiments or work on projects, nonetheless, the university lacks adequate laboratory equipment. These participants critiqued the accreditation for emphasizing assessment and collecting evidence while their universities have limited means to assist students’ access to basic resources to apply their learning.

The Dean of a College further described the problem, as:

We have two departments in our college, and each has a separate lab. However, the number of equipment is limited. For example, we have around 400 students in the Department of Information Technology, but our lab has 35-40 computers. The lab is limited because there is one desktop for 10 students. We need networking facilities, cybersecurity, and other equipment to do our job. The Ministry of Higher Education should provide the right facilities to help us implement the accreditation standards. Our university has a research center where only books are stored. Our college needs IT facilities to teach experiments and run projects (Dean of a college, Research University).

Unlike the experience at teaching universities, this quote shows that participants at research universities have access to some basic resources; however, they are concerned about advanced technologies and equipment. The investigator’s field observations and informal conversation with faculty members also indicate that a majority of undergraduate students lack their own computers given the economic conditions in the country; therefore, students primarily rely on university resources. Furthermore, discussing her experience with accreditation, the Dean of a College articulated, “We had some problems at the beginning of the accreditation process. Namely, we did not have classrooms equipped with projectors and TV screens. The process took us two years to
procure basic equipment for the classrooms.” Further, she explained that their university had to overcome some needs as they started implementing accreditation. “We understand that we do not have all of our needs to achieve our goal, but we continue to improve the process,” she said.

For participants at teaching universities, the shortage of fundamental resources such as electricity, water, laboratories, and classroom spaces was noted as a significant challenge while informants from research universities had access to basic resources, but they suffered from insufficient laboratory equipment, library facilities, office spaces, and access to modern technology (e.g., computers, Internet, projectors, and others) that affect quality.

**Lack of Coordination**

Participants from both research and teaching universities highlighted a disconnection between the academic, finance, and administrative divisions at their universities. Although a majority of these participants had managerial roles and were involved in strategic decisions, nearly all of them lacked an understanding of the university budget and had no control over the allocation of resources. A senior manager from a teaching university evaluated the situation stating, “In theory, the finance department should receive the information from the academic units such as the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs’ office, college deans, and department heads to request the university budget. However, at our university, such coordination does not exist.” When communication is absent between the academic and the finance units, according to the Dean of a College from a teaching university, faculty members’ salaries and students’ housing and food stipends are often delayed at their university. For this participant, poor
communication and coordination have caused “the students to receive their stipends quarterly [instead of every month] …, and faculty members have not received their salaries for the evening shift classes for eight months.” Echoing the experience, the Dean of a College from a research university admitted that the finance and procurement divisions usually refuse their requests, reasoning those certain items such as IT facilities cannot be purchased with the operating budget. Failing to collaborate with the academic units and plan earlier, the finance and procurement divisions often realize that they underspent the budget by the end of the fiscal year, said a member of IQAU from a research university. She elaborated, “When the colleges request anything from the finance unit, they hardly respond to them. However, at the end of the year, the finance is in a rush to spend the money, as they have not spent it throughout the year.”

Aside from the lack of communication, participants criticized the finance and procurement units for untimely responses to immediate needs. The Dean of a College from a research university talked about an experience when their college needed a replacement for a water pump because the bathrooms were short of water. He said, “Had I left the issue to the maintenance and operations, the process would have taken months. Therefore, I paid for it from my own pocket and saved the day. The university has a long process for fixing these issues.” Moreover, members of IQAU from teaching and research universities recalled several occasions when they had to pay for promotional materials for quality assurance and accreditation when the procurement unit refused to provide them. For instance, a senior manager from a teaching university stated, “Our university has not allocated any budget for quality assurance. We carried out all activities without any budget, or we paid for the expenses from our own pockets.”
While the quality assurance and accreditation protocols require the participation of all units including the academic, finance, and procurement, participants were anxious about the negligence of the finance and procurement units. A senior manager from a research university contended, “We have some problems with the administrative and finance units. The internal quality assurance unit often complains that they do not receive a complete report from the finance and administrative departments.” Although the problem of limited participation of the finance and administrative units in QAA was noted in both teaching and research universities, a few participants noticed some improvements in the present year in comparison to previous years. According to the Dean of a College at a teaching university, “In the past, people used to think that quality assurance only deals with academics such as teaching and curriculum; therefore, there was less participation from the administrative and finance divisions. They not only disregarded our request for resources, but they used the excuse that the Ministry of Higher Education has not provided any budget for these activities.” Nonetheless, he observed that the finance and procurement divisions respond to their request for information when they conduct self-assessment. Like the experience at teaching universities, a member of IQAU from a research university expressed a similar experience, as he noted:

In the past, neither the tashkeel [allocation of human resources] nor the budget was disclosed to our quality assurance unit. When we inquired about the designated departments, they used to respond that these are confidential information. Fortunately, now, there is a mechanism to assess the budget and
expenses, and [more importantly,] the leadership of the university supports the quality assurance process.

In short, the findings show that the problem with poor coordination seems identical at both public teaching and research universities in Afghanistan. This suggests that institution-wide sensemaking and sensegiving of QAA is necessary to improve the relationship between the academic units and procurement and finance divisions. Below, I discuss how limited awareness (lack of sensemaking and sensegiving) affects the university community.

**Limited Awareness**

Most participants in this study expressed concerns regarding limited awareness caused by poor sensemaking and sensegiving at the institutional and program levels, especially, those from teaching universities. Stakeholders at teaching universities conformed to accreditation expectations without engaging in meaning-making to analyze policy implications for their work, program level, and institution-wide activities noted a member of IQAU. Further, he explained that the awareness level is very poor among faculty members and administrative staff because “not everyone has a good understanding of quality and accreditation processes.” Thus, the Dean of a College critiqued the management team at their university for failing to provide awareness workshops for faculty members and administrative staff. He continued to talk about their university’s enthusiasm to apply for accreditation, and the leadership team’s failure to initiate continuous awareness workshops, except occasional workshops that according to him “were not enough or too general.”
A member of senior leadership at a teaching university, the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs, also talked about the partial understanding of QAA at their university because the former leaders had limited expertise to provide workshops for all employees. However, he promised “to organize awareness workshops for the university leadership and faculty members” because the awareness is limited. Realizing that commitment of university leadership facilitates the process across the institution, a Vice-Chancellor from another teaching university observed some improvement among faculty members in their university. He said, “In the past, faculty members did not have enough information. They were unaware of the accreditation processes.” He added that the institutional leaders should emphasize increasing awareness, otherwise, “the faculty members would tell you that quality assurance means filling papers, taking pictures, and writing reports.”

However, the lack of awareness did not seem like an issue of concern at research universities where “a lot of work has been done to increase awareness over the past years, only a few people were unaware,” said the Dean of a College from a research university. Further, she argued, “I doubt if faculty members are unaware of accreditation processes.” A donor representative who closely worked with QAAD to facilitate QAA workshops at teaching research universities stated, “Quality assurance and accreditation are not well-publicized. Some universities, for instance, the small provincial ones [teaching universities], do not know the importance of this process. They have not been able to meet the minimum qualification for accreditation, which is a grade C [candidacy level-one].” The examples discussed above suggest that the issue of awareness seems an important challenge at teaching universities, while participants at research universities seemed satisfied with the level of awareness at their universities.
**Faculty Resistance to QAA**

Most participants from research universities repeatedly commented on faculty members’ resistance to engaging in QAA. Although research universities are further along in the accreditation process in contrast to teaching universities, faculty members’ resistance to engaging in QAA constitutes a significant management issue that challenges the implementation of QAA at these universities. A member of IQAU stated that “a large percentage of faculty members do not take quality assurance processes seriously. They do not believe in volunteer work. They expect to be paid, and when there is no payment, they think that they are overburdened.” Narrowing down her point, she said, “The faculty members who are more experienced assume that they are perfect. They do not engage in quality assurance as much as the junior faculty members do – mainly because the process requires more patience and the senior faculty members lack patience.” Another member of IQAU acknowledged a similar pattern explaining:

Unfortunately, holding faculty members accountable has always been hard. They did not have any plans for teaching for a long time. Even if they did, their plans might have been very basic and locally managed from the department to the college and from there to the university. This is why the process is somewhat difficult for them. In particular, senior faculty members are the ones who are less motivated and find the work difficult. They perceive quality assurance and accreditation as administrative paperwork [bureaucracy]. They usually advise us to pay attention to equipping laboratories and college facilities instead of focusing on documentation (Member of IQAU, Research University).
Since QAA encourages community-wide effort, the Dean of a College from a research university argued that engagement of all parties including academic and non-academic staff is necessary. However, he complained that senior faculty members are often reluctant to submit their reports to the QAA committee at their college. The resistance of faculty members, senior faculty in particular, also influenced the motivation of IQAUs. According to a member of IQAU, “They [senior faculty members] treat quality assurance very superficially. Their lack of support for the process has forced me multiple times to present my resignation to the Dean of our college.”

While research universities were the first institutions where QAA was pilot-tested and implemented, participants from these universities argued that faculty members’ perceptions of QAA have not changed as much. A member of IQAU, for instance, articulated, “We started the quality assurance and accreditation several years ago; however, we have not reached a point where we can say we did enough. Some faculty members have not accepted all the important things that were caused by quality assurance and accreditation.” She elaborated that her meetings with the heads of departments barely go anywhere because they reject quality assurance and accreditation as useful mechanisms to improve quality. “Most of them believe that quality assurance focuses on administrative paperwork,” she said. On a similar point, another participant discussed that IQAU members do not have any executive roles. Therefore, when faculty members [their colleagues] avoid participating in the process such as submitting monthly reports, attending meetings, filling questionnaires, and others, IQAU members have no alternatives but to submit their resignations. A member of IQAU stated, “Some faculty members often tell me why we are playing with papers. They even tell me to report them
to senior management for not engaging in the process.” While these quotes present faculty resistance to QAA, they also suggest poor sensemaking and sensegiving.

In addition, other participants from the research universities maintained that implementing accreditation requires faculty members to document their activities. Nevertheless, most faculty members do not adhere to it. “They claim that they are doing their jobs and there is no need to take pictures as evidence,” the Dean of a College said. Another Dean recalled his experience when a senior faculty member disregarded his request to attend his class for monitoring. He underscored resistance of senior faculty members as an obstacle to implementing quality assurance as he described:

We visited some classes to observe faculty members' teaching. Nonetheless, some senior faculty members resisted. For example, one faculty member forced us [IQAU representatives] out of his class, undermining quality assurance efforts. I explained to him that here are some questionnaires that students evaluate your teaching. He responded, “Who are the students to evaluate my teaching?”

While this example reveals the commitment of IQAU members to bring the QAA experience to the classroom level, the resistance of faculty members seems a barrier to the process.

Participants at QAAD also highlighted the resistance of faculty members at research universities as a challenge. According to a senior official, “Many faculty members devalue quality assurance as a useful initiative. They used to say that quality assurance is a foreign experience that is imposed on us.” However, a few participants noted some improvement in the way senior faculty members perceive QAA. The Dean of a College maintained that “senior faculty members used to feel discomfort when [IQAU]
members assessed their classes. However, their views have shifted since we made quality assurance a requirement for faculty promotion.” Overall, the observations of participants from research universities denote that the resistance of faculty members to engaging in quality assurance and accreditation has not faded away, which suggests the need for extended sensegiving of the value of QAA at these universities. The data also show limited or no resistance of faculty members to QAA at teaching universities suggesting the age and seniority of faculty members are highly likely a factor in this process.

**Security Threats**

Security threats have been prominent factors affecting the quality of teaching and learning and implementation of curriculum at provincial universities, primarily teaching universities situated in rural areas. Although security threats were inevitable at both teaching and research universities, participants from teaching universities repeatedly referred to university closure and delayed schedules. For instance, the Dean of a College explained, “When we plan to have a site visit or study tour for our students, either they cannot find transportation means or they fear security threats if they participate. This is one reason that causes a flaw in our plan.” Participants also talked about university closure for weeks due to security threats and highlighted problems with the transportation of students to university campuses. A senior manager reported, “We cannot start the classes on time because students are not in their classes on time due to the distance of the university and limited transportation means.” He emphasized that the lack of appropriate means of transportation exacerbates the problem, especially for female students who avoid riding a taxi independently given the societal restrictions.
While participants from research universities recalled several security threats that interfered with teaching and learning and individuals’ emotions, research universities have not been closed for a significant time to hamper curriculum implementation. For participants at research universities, their locations at the center of the cities persuade the government to ensure security across the campus. Nonetheless, security threats were emphasized as significant when informants from QAAD and donor representatives discussed their experiences. For instance, a senior official from QAAD observed, “Our peer review team can hardly travel to universities in insecure areas. We only rely on remote communication.” On a similar note, a member of the QAA Commission confirmed that peer reviewers are often hesitant to travel to some provinces due to security threats. While security threats challenge the university population in provincial universities, a majority of which are teaching universities, a representative of a donor agency stated that they try to organize capacity building programs outside of Afghanistan. She admitted the security concerns as the main cause and said “we organize most of our programs in other countries when they involve international experts. We bring participants from Afghanistan to be trained given security reasons within Afghanistan.” The quotes from these participants underscore security threats as a negative factor affecting the quality of teaching and learning and supervision at public universities.

Summary

The descriptions of the problem at teaching and research universities indicate that some challenges are unique to a specific category of universities. For instance, the findings show a pattern that participants at research universities highlighted resistance of
faculty members as a major problem in implementing QAA; whereas, informants at
teaching universities pointed out poor security and university distance from urban areas
as a challenge. However, participants from both teaching and research consistently
complained about the lack of coordination between academic and non-academic units,
and more importantly, lack of transparency in procurement and finance divisions.
Overall, the challenges indicate that quality improvement remains a long-term challenge
for public universities in Afghanistan. Given the seriousness of the issue at teaching
universities, higher education authorities need to consider some interventions to improve
the status quo.
CHAPTER 9
DISCUSSION

This study examined the experiences of key informants at public teaching and research universities, officials at the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate (QAAD), and representatives of foreign donor-funded projects about implementing quality assurance and accreditation in Afghanistan. Using a qualitative multi-case study design, I conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions exploring participants' lived experiences. Further, I conducted document analysis and field observations to triangulate the data. Sensemaking and sensegiving were used as the analytic lens to make sense of the data by analyzing individual cases, making comparisons, and drawing conclusions. The data informed how sensemaking and sensegiving of accreditation occur at teaching and research universities; what are the stakeholders’ experiences like; and what challenges universities face while implementing accreditation.

Three major themes were generated from the data that inform the research questions:

- **Quality Assurance and Accreditation as Organizational Sensemaking and Sensegiving**
- **Effects of QAA on Teaching and Research Universities**
- **Challenges Facing Teaching and Research Universities in Implementing Accreditation**

**Quality Assurance and Accreditation as Organizational Sensemaking and Sensegiving**

The data suggest that stakeholders at teaching and research universities take a series of actions, processes, and steps into account to make sense of QAA and enact them
in a meaningful way in their context. Both research and teaching universities follow a top-down sensegiving approach to implement the policy. The findings show that at the national level, QAAD uses a cascade model such as the training of trainers (ToT) to raise awareness at the institutional level. Although several participants, especially officials from the QAAD, reported that the top-down awareness programs helped institutionalize accreditation, participants' experiences at teaching and research universities varied. The results suggest that aside from structured sensemaking/sensegiving opportunities, some university stakeholders made informal contacts and frequent engagement with the national QAA Commission, which helped their universities outperform other universities that only relied on conventional approaches. In other words, direct engagement with policy makers assisted policy implementers at public research universities clarify expectations and create more opportunities for the university community to make sense of QAA.

Another important finding indicates that the research universities created a localized bottom-up approach to make quality assurance and accreditation more meaningful to the constituents. Many participants asserted that research universities had established internal policies and procedures to hold individuals and groups accountable for implementing accreditation. For instance, some research universities require colleges, departments, and even individual faculty members to have strategic and/or action plans to improve quality. One of the research universities even allocated a specific budget to be spent on capacity-building opportunities to prepare the faculty and staff members to achieve national accreditation. Previous research also supports that integrating quality
assurance goes beyond generic awareness workshops; it involves the commitment of leaders and the engagement of other stakeholders (Dewi et al., 2021).

However, the data suggest a somewhat different experience at teaching universities. To begin with, the level of understanding among key informants and institutional leaders was limited, which highly affected why some participants perceived QAA as an administrative protocol rather than an institutional effort to improve quality. Participants also stated that institutional leaders in most teaching universities lacked any motivation and commitment to defining QAA at the institutional and program levels. The data reveal that teaching universities relied mostly on top-down mandates with limited input from institutional leaders and stakeholders. For instance, some participants reported that engagement with quality assurance occurred sporadically, leading to a surface-level understanding of the policy. That being the case, the findings identified the need for further training to enable institution leaders at teaching universities to engage in QAA to embrace alternative sensegiving strategies to make the quality assurance experience more meaningful to faculty and staff members. This finding confirms the current research (Dewi et al., 2021; Kraft et al., 2018), indicating that sensemaking and sensegiving need evolves as stakeholders make their way through different phases of change – quality assurance and accreditation in this context.

The data indicate that although research universities have utilized both structured and informal opportunities to raise stakeholders' awareness about accreditation, sensemaking, and sensegiving of accreditation have not reached the entire community. The evidence shows that neither teaching nor research universities have successfully gotten stakeholders to own the process and act accordingly. In other words, a majority of
the primary stakeholders, such as faculty members and staff, who are in direct contact with students and curricula, continue to perceive accreditation as a foreign-born imported policy with limited input from the local context. That being the case, the findings show that at lower levels, individuals partially engage with quality; faculty members, for example, mostly design their syllabi according to a generic template to fulfill the requirements irrespective of the actual implementation of the curriculum. Nevertheless, the burden of accreditation work is left to institutional quality assurance units (IQAUs) which are responsible to complete self-assessment report/s and facilitate peer review visits. The finding echoes previous research that only a small group usually carries out accreditation with some input from other community members (Blanco Ramírez & Luu, 2018). The data also suggest that a lack of organized/frequent sensemaking and sensegiving efforts at teaching universities has led to information gaps and ambiguities, which has affected the sensemaking of primary stakeholders.

The findings revealed that implementing accreditation requires universities to establish a number of committees such as quality assurance, research, curriculum, gender, and others to support the process. Many respondents asserted that faculty members are often assigned to serve on one or more committees to improve the status quo and to produce data for accreditation. Doing so, according to participants, has increased faculty members' responsibilities while they are exhausted with too many subjects to teach and numerous students to advise. The data from both teaching and research universities indicate that universities lack enough faculty members and administrative staff to implement institutional accreditation. Further, the data indicate that because the awareness is limited and faculty members receive no incentive for their services, they
often resist engaging in QAA. Previous research echoes this finding, indicating that faculty members resist engaging in accreditation as they perceive it as an added burden to their routine, disrupting their primary responsibility – teaching and research (Blanco Ramírez & Luu, 2018; Havilton, 2009).

Further, the results show that not every faculty and staff member has bought into accreditation as a meaningful process to improve quality. Given that the sensegiving and sensemaking of the quality assurance policy and accreditation framework were poorly managed at some universities, not everyone has a good grasp of them, contributing to faculty resistance. The data suggest that dealing with resistance becomes challenging when the policy implementers, IQAU members, lack executive authority to enforce accreditation. Briefly, most IQAU members were junior faculty members at research universities who could not influence the senior faculty members to implement accreditation. Hence, the findings indicate that overcoming faculty resistance to engage in accreditation requires a long-term commitment and intensive sensemaking and sensegiving at the institutional level.

The findings also make clear the extensive efforts and resources allocated to implement accreditation, including frequent workshops and organizational assessments at both types of universities. However, participants’ responses suggest that university stakeholders are concerned that the process is exhaustive concerning the time and labor needed to satisfy expectations. Although accreditation had strong visibility at research universities, IQAU members (policy implementers) frequently complained about resistance and pushback from the faculty members. Moreover, the data reveal that accreditation has become a lengthy process extending over several years, which is also
likely a discouraging factor leading to community resistance. While previous research reported faculty resistance as a significant challenge (Blanco Ramirez & Luu, 2018; Morales Hernandez, 2012; Mussawy & Rossman, 2021), the findings reveal that implementing accreditation in Afghanistan has become too lengthy and discourages stakeholder engagement to a certain extent.

In addition, the results indicate a flaw in the system because of the duration of the accreditation process. Nearly all university stakeholders reported three to four peer review visits since their universities registered for accreditation. Since most of these universities were in the candidacy stages, they expected 2-3 additional rounds of self-assessment and peer review visits before achieving full accreditation. While many universities started implementing accreditation in 2012/13, only 20 percent have succeeded in achieving accreditation by 2021. Since public teaching universities, in particular, could not meet the accreditation requirements, the findings suggest that the accreditation standards are too high for the teaching universities to achieve in a period of 1-3 years. For them, accreditation has become a lengthy process entailing over five years. Therefore, the data suggest revisiting the accreditation standards to match the current context of universities with a focus on reducing the duration of accreditation for teaching universities on the one hand and focus on improvement plans on the other.

The data also provide new insight into how sensemaking/sensegiving help increases awareness about QAA; however, sensemaking/sensegiving fails to account for the time interval, especially if the same process occurs repeatedly. Simply put, the findings suggest that sensemaking/sensegiving has been informative in introducing QAA. Nevertheless, since the capacity of most universities, especially teaching universities, is
limited, achieving full accreditation takes several years. The data suggest that the problems are two-fold at public universities. On the one hand, not all faculty members have a solid understanding of QAA, which alienates them from the process to a certain degree. On the other hand, satisfying accreditation expectations takes universities multiple years which exhausts employees and resources, especially in teaching universities where resources are scarce.

While implementing accreditation is unique in each university, the results show that institution leaders as insiders and peer reviewers as inter and intra institution agents have significant roles in giving sense to stakeholders and reinterpreting accreditation as universities make progress. For instance, all universities held awareness workshops to train large groups of people (active sensegiving) and printed banners and guidelines (passive sensegiving). In institutions where the university leaders enacted the policy by leading the self-assessment process, the rest of the community members were inspired and encouraged to engage in accreditation. This finding confirms previous research by highlighting that a leader's commitment is central to implementing quality assurance (Arif et al., 2018). This trend was evident in both teaching and research universities. Although Kabul-based universities were further along in the process, the data show that the engagement of institutional leaders made a huge difference at teaching universities.

Public universities in Afghanistan have implemented accreditation for the past 8-10 years. However, participants mentioned that there was a disconnect between quality assurance and quality improvement. The findings highlight that many institutional leaders have failed to explain how quality assurance activities would improve quality. For instance, several participants noted that universities often neglected the importance of
explaining why certain expectations were embedded in faculty members' portfolios, why students should evaluate faculty teaching, and how the information feeds into the system for improvement. Current research confirms that accreditation will not achieve its purpose when university leaders are negligent about communicating the meaningfulness of the activities to faculty members (Haviland, 2009). Simply put, the findings show that universities exacerbate the problem with faculty resistance by failing to establish a transparent process and provide relevant resources that faculty members need to implement accreditation.

Given that implementing accreditation causes disruptions in a university's routine, the results of this study underscore the role of institutional leaders in managing the process. Participants of the study highlighted ways that the institution leaders bracketed (separated) accreditation standards into meaningful components. More importantly, the findings clarify that institutions where the leaders were actively involved in organizing processes, tracking progress, assessing outcomes, and providing feedback, made significant development in implementing accreditation. Noting that the experience was somewhat different across the universities, resource mobilization (even when limited) and accessibility of the leaders were the essential features that created a sense of motivation for the rest of the community to engage in quality assurance and accreditation. More precisely, the data suggest that although the centralized governance system limits institution leaders' ability to influence QAA, some leaders cultivated other drivers such as internal competition, ranking, and prestige to motivate stakeholder engagement. Previous research supports innovative approaches that institutional leaders use to make the
experience meaningful to the employees (Casimiro Zavale, 2021; Kraft et al., 2018; Weenink et al., 2021).

In addition, the data show that adapting quality assurance and accreditation in Afghanistan entailed a participatory process at the national level, engaging all members of the QAA Commission to reflect on the framework and policies. The literature on sensemaking/sensegiving also supports that when participants engage in exploring a phenomenon discursively, sensemaking/sensegiving becomes participatory – a *guided form* (Maitlis, 2005). The findings reveal that both sense-givers (international advisors) and sense-makers (faculty members from selected research universities) shared the platform to reflect on, deconstruct and make meaning of quality assurance and accreditation.

However, based on the results, participants' engagement at public research and teaching universities varied. Each university had a unique approach to addressing QAA depending on their context and the commitment of the institutional leaders. For example, research universities had reached a sophisticated level to orchestrate internal mechanisms, including an internal peer review process, unlike some teaching universities where accreditation was treated as a secondary activity. More specifically, the data highlight that for some teaching universities implementing accreditation is highly cumbersome since they lack adequate human and material resources to carry out the process. These universities struggled just to carry out their normal teaching responsibilities and to sustain the status quo.

Based on institutional strategies to implement accreditation, the findings suggest that research universities have gained adequate progress by establishing a semi-structured
system within the institution to monitor the quality of education regularly. Given that QAA introduces a package that goes beyond the policy and accreditation framework, research universities established a series of internal policies and bylaws to implement accreditation at the institution level. Teaching universities, on the contrary, were selective in implementing the policy as they carried out symbolic actions such as creating committees, designating offices, holding general awareness programs, and conducting self-assessment. However, participants in teaching universities expressed no tangible change in teaching and learning experience in practice. In short, the data suggest that although both teaching and research universities implemented the same policy, given contextual circumstances, research universities are more advanced in internalizing the experience at the community and individual levels. In contrast, implementing QAA at teaching universities remains at the surface level.

The data suggest that having a capable structure with adequate expertise is necessary for implementing accreditation at the national and institutional levels. However, the findings show that the national quality assurance agency, QAAD, was understaffed and lacked sufficient expertise to oversee the quality assurance system. Many participants stated that when universities submit their self-assessment reports (SARs) there is a long delay since QAAD is usually backlogged due to a shortage of staff members. While on-the-job training by the donor-funded projects helped QAAD with technical expertise, the small staffing structure deprived QAAD of the capacity to provide timely feedback on universities' SARs. In a nutshell, the findings reveal that lack of funding and budget limitations have further worsened the problem as QAAD could not get local funding to hire new staff and provide per diem for peer reviewers. Therefore,
QAAD depended primarily on donor-funded projects to coordinate peer-review visits and professional development programs.

Developing tools and instruments to assess quality emerged as an essential finding of this research. Comments from participants indicate that although QAAD has developed numerous policies, regulations, and toolkits to guide universities to implement QAA, some universities went further and established their own internal mechanisms to advance the process. Research universities, for example, created a specific protocol that requires each faculty member to record their engagement with quality assurance as part of the academic promotion process. While a similar expectation existed at teaching universities, the finding suggests that institutional leaders rarely enforced them. That being the case, institutionalizing quality assurance and accreditation at public teaching and research universities lacked a systemic approach to hold individuals and groups accountable for enforcing the policy.

While, in theory, all universities are supposed to establish structures and sub-structures to implement QAA at the institutional, college, and program levels, the dissertation findings show that only research universities have successfully operationalized such systems. In fact, the results indicate that creating interconnected structures has helped research universities reach "a large audience" as opposed to teaching universities where quality assurance activities are limited to institutional quality assurance units alone. The findings suggest that establishing networks and support structures within universities is practical in addressing quality concerns promptly. They are also crucial in establishing a rigorous system, which should sustain the quality in the long run.
Like research universities, teaching universities have followed the QAAD guidelines to establish internal structures to facilitate quality assurance. However, the data indicate that they failed to create a functioning system to operationalize the structures. Participants emphasized that faculty and staff members rarely engage in accreditation which puts pressure on institution leaders and internal quality assurance units to carry out the process. The findings suggest that most institutional leaders at teaching universities have limited training to manage QAA in a way that involves all stakeholders at the university. Previous research confirms that institutional leaders have a critical role in assuring quality and engaging university stakeholders (Setiawati, 2016).

In addition, the discussion with participants revealed the limitations of using cascade models as the only awareness approach to introduce complex constructs such as quality assurance in higher education. Participants from teaching universities maintained that only a few people received training on QAA from their universities. The rest of the community had only a surface-level exposure to the policy. The results suggest that the knowledge gap caused by poor sensegiving/sensemaking made the teaching universities less effective in implementing QAA. This finding was particularly evident in the case of most institutional leaders at teaching universities who could not develop innovative ways to institutionalize QAA. This result challenges Weick's (1995) argument for enaction - suggesting actions precede thinking in making sense of uncertainty. The data show that stakeholder awareness is key in operationalizing quality assurance practices.
The data also suggest that participants' understanding of accreditation has evolved as their engagement increases. Participants reported that accreditation was understood as conducting the institutional assessment during the initial years, followed by developing strategic and action plans. More recently, accreditation has focused on the achievements of universities. However, the findings identified a gap between participants' interpretation of accreditation and how it translates into quality improvement. Many participants claimed that they were aware of the accreditation processes, but many of them were unable to see the connections between accreditation and quality improvement. As a demonstration, one participant indicated that their university established partnerships with local high schools and public organizations, satisfying one of the accreditation requirements. Nevertheless, he could not explain the rationale why establishing partnerships was important and how it related to quality. While the findings suggest substantial improvement in quality assurance awareness compared to previous research (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018), further sensemaking and sensegiving are needed to implement QAA at the institutional and program levels. Acknowledging that QAA is a complex process that involves both internal and external stakeholders, the subsequent paragraphs discuss the role of peer reviewers as external stakeholders in sensemaking and sensegiving.

Peer review visits, also known as external quality assurance, are required for all universities undergoing accreditation. The results indicate that peer review visits significantly shape how individuals make sense of quality assurance and accreditation experience. The data show that peer review visits are informative as university stakeholders learn more about the QAA process when peer reviewers rigorously assess
SARs and authenticate evidence. The external reviewers help the universities learn about their strengths and weaknesses that affect quality. University stakeholders also stated that their conversations with peer reviewers improved their meaning-making of the processes and outcomes. Current research confirms that the collegial nature of peer review “underpins the creation of routines and operating procedures that build common syntax and semantics which eventually result in a common basis of sense-making” (Schotter et al., 2017). What was learned was that peer review assessment assists university stakeholders to pay attention to areas that are meaningful from an outsider's lens, which helps them have a better sense of the process as they prepare for the next phases of accreditation.

In addition, the data show that factors such as lack of expertise among peer reviewers, over-reliance on subjective judgment, and an emphasis on administrative protocols produced a negative interpretation of accreditation. Many participants criticized some peer reviewers for focusing on the quality of reports and documentation instead of assessing performance and achievements. According to some, peer reviewers only followed a narrowly defined checklist; instead of conducting a thorough analysis of institution-wide efforts to improve quality. For example, participants highlighted the caveat that peer reviewers use the same scale to measure concrete and abstract variables. When peer reviewers use the same numeric system, e.g., "a score of 1-7," to judge a university's library vs. a research committee, stakeholders perceive accreditation as a trivial exercise. The data suggest that making a judgment based on a checklist undermines the goal of accreditation as a comprehensive process to improve quality. The current focus is on the number of meetings, reports, and documentation. In short, the
findings suggest that presently the use of administrative indicators overshadows the quality improvement aspect of accreditation at teaching and research universities.

The data from this research underscore the role of external stakeholders in the sensemaking and sensegiving of QAA in public teaching and research universities. Most of the participants describe their experiences with peer reviewers as informative. The findings highlight that peer reviewers have gained adequate knowledge and skills to assess universities professionally. While earlier research emphasizes personal traits of boundary spanner and organizational roles (Williams, 2002), the findings of this research add the notion of professionalism as the basis for building trust and legitimacy which complements the work of the works of Pettus and Severson (2006) and Vincenzo et al. (2003). As participants reflected on their experiences, they noted that capacity-building opportunities have helped peer reviewers carry out their duties more professionally. For instance, in comparing a series of peer reviewer visits, respondents asserted that the new cohorts were better equipped with professional knowledge and skills in assessing universities. This finding confirms Stamper and Johlke’s (2003) argument that organizational support for boundary spanners, in this case professional development opportunities, not only help peer reviewers gain more knowledge and skills but also help them understand that their work is valued. Based on this observation, the findings suggest that external quality assurance (peer review) has gained legitimacy among internal stakeholders as they did not complain about peer reviewer biases. Since professional development training sessions were the work of donor-funded projects, the findings underscore the impact of foreign aid on higher education development in Afghanistan.
Furthermore, the results indicate that peer reviewers' anecdotes, meetings, and observations influenced stakeholder experiences at public teaching and research universities. Peer reviewers were perceived as evaluators, mentors, and inspectors. Respondents maintained that peer reviewers provided indirect sensegiving when they realized that university stakeholders were unfamiliar with the accreditation process. This finding concurs with current research suggesting that boundary spanning “may encompass knowledge transfer and exchange” (Prysor & Henley, 2018, p. 2213). Additionally, the findings illustrate Williams’s (2002) observation that boundary spanners “engage with others and deploy effective relational and interpersonal competencies” (p. 110). Nevertheless, since the same accreditation framework is used to assess both teaching and research universities, the findings uncovered an irony in setting expectations for teaching universities. Peer reviewers and QAAD officials agreed that the capacity of teaching universities was much lower than the research universities, which led them to have lower expectations for teaching universities. Nonetheless, they used the same benchmarks to assess teaching universities and did not make any adjustments to the accreditation standards to meet the context.

Another factor tied to peer review experience was the use of a numeric system to quantify quality. Since quality does not have a fixed meaning, independent of the context, the data suggest that using a numeric system to measure quality created frustration and ambiguity. This important issue surfaced when peer reviewers and QAAD officials commented on the subjective nature of quality assessment. The evidence suggests that peer reviewers' interpretation differed from team to team, which affected the scores they assigned to a given university based on accreditation standards.
A similar problem was found concerning collecting documents as evidence to authenticate self-assessment reports. The Dean of a college bragged about creating 17 "huge" binders to report their college's activities over a year. While the findings support the importance of documenting as an essential component of accreditation, efforts likely differ in how internal and external quality assurance units understand the requirement for documentation. In other words, the responses show that some university stakeholders and peer reviewers seem lost in the weeds that have little to do with quality improvement. Peer reviewers, for example, relied on a checklist to check off whether or not a university put together the right documents. While respondents confirmed the need for collecting evidence, the underlying assumption was that accreditation measures the ability to write reports and the documents attached to them. The data suggest that peer reviewers pay less attention to learning outcomes and the impact of a university on the community. Instead, they focus on easily measured variables.

**Participant Experiences at Research and Teaching Universities**

The findings suggest that internal and external quality assurance processes shape stakeholders' understanding of accreditation. The evidence from this study indicates that stakeholders at the national and institutional levels agree that accreditation has increased a sense of accountability among faculty members and institutional leaders. Respondents acknowledged that accreditation served as a trigger to improve abstract (soft) areas such as revisiting institutional strategic plans, curriculum materials, teaching pedagogy, course syllabi, and teaching evaluations. Before implementing accreditation, respondents noted that learning materials were outdated, course syllabi were less common, and students had no textbooks; instead, instructors relied solely on providing students with copies of their
lecture notes. The data indicate that accreditation has pushed the universities to provide capacity building opportunities for faculty members to receive training in the areas of student-centered instruction, outcome-based learning, curriculum development, and course revision.

In line with capacity-building opportunities for the faculty members, the data suggest that public universities have developed a number of protocols to engage students and faculty members in university decisions. With the direction from accreditation, research universities have established a student governance structure and initiated a process to help students run elections. In contrast, the findings show that an organized structure for student governance does not exist at teaching universities. Since student engagement and governance, and faculty development fall under the umbrella of academic quality (Harvey & Green, 1993), the data suggest that accreditation has motivated some improvement in teaching, learning, and student experiences.

However, the findings also surfaced a sense of skepticism among faculty and staff members concerning the impact of accreditation on practice. While the data suggest that respondents were familiar with what accreditation does, they were uncertain whether the existing processes improved quality. They perceived quality primarily from a resource lens and understood that their universities lacked adequate libraries, laboratories, and technological infrastructure. The findings highlighted that because public funding for higher education is scarce and no immediate solution exists to address the issue of physical resources, university stakeholders doubted accreditation was a remedy for their ongoing problems. In other words, the educational resources were highlighted as a mismatch between accreditation expectations and institutional capacity at both types of
universities. Although the accreditation framework was adapted to match the higher education context in Afghanistan, the findings suggest that most universities fall short in satisfying the accreditation standards. This problem was mainly manifested in participants' experience at teaching universities as they criticized the criteria for being too generic. In short, the finding highlights the allocation of resources as a significant prerequisite in implementing accreditation. This finding is consistent with the current literature (Belimane & Chahed, 2021; Weenink et al., 2021).

Building on previous research (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018), the results of this study suggest that the university community perceives internal quality assurance units as legitimate bodies to carry out internal evaluations. The way internal quality assurance units and institutional leaders handle accreditation internally informs the meaning-making and experiences of stakeholders at the institution and college levels. The findings indicate that the internal quality assessment has increased faculty supervision and responsibility concerning teaching, curriculum, and research activities. Most respondents stated that before the accreditation was introduced, having a course syllabus, teaching improvement plan, and individual development plan was not part of faculty members' portfolios. Faculty members were only required to abide by the existing bylaws and enjoyed their duties with minimum supervision. However, the data show that accreditation has introduced new responsibilities for faculty members and has also mandated institutional leaders to oversee the process closely. As an example, most research universities have implemented strict measures requiring faculty members to report their engagement with QAA and use that information as part of faculty members' academic evaluation.
Although many respondents reported improvements in teaching and learning experiences, the results should be treated with caution, given that faculty engagement with QAA was quite diverse. In other words, some universities organized efficient ways to engage faculty members and followed up with them while others only relied on official protocols. The results show that research universities incorporated an efficient way to regularly conduct internal reviews to assess the quality and collect information for internal and external purposes. However, most teaching universities had difficulty summarizing the quality assurance efforts at the college and institution levels. As a demonstration, some respondents stressed that their university lacked professional staff who could analyze self-assessment reports from the colleges to produce the institutional self-assessment report.

Consistent with previous research (Mussawy & Rossman, 2021), the findings confirm that collecting evidence is a significant requirement that helps peer reviewers and QAAD evaluate quality at universities. However, many respondents noted that faculty members oppose documenting activities and perceive the requirements as part of a larger bureaucracy. Although participants recognized the importance of collecting data as necessary in implementing accreditation, they argued that accreditation only focuses on writing reports and documenting without direct influence on resources and services. According to some participants at teaching universities, implementing accreditation produces no tangible change in practice.

In addition, the data revealed a sense of hesitation among university stakeholders, particularly faculty members, to document activities and collect evidence. The reluctance was rooted in the change introduced with implementing accreditation – requiring faculty
members to collect evidence or document actions that were not part of faculty members' responsibility. Further to this problem was a lack of an adequate data management system to produce data promptly to satisfy accreditation. In fact, the results indicate that producing summarized data takes weeks and months, and since most universities are short of staff, they delegate the responsibility to faculty members.

The Challenges of Implementing QAA at Public Universities

The findings suggest that understanding contextual factors is important in understanding the problems faced by higher education quality assurance in Afghanistan. The data revealed that the lack of access to sufficient financial resources hampers the implementation of accreditation at the national and institutional levels. Stakeholders serving at the national level maintained that no specific budget was allocated to implement accreditation. The underlying challenge based on the findings was that implementing accreditation requires sufficient financial and logistic support, which is somehow difficult to provide at the national and institutional levels. Overall, the findings suggest that implementing accreditation would have been nearly impossible had international donors such as USAID and the World Bank not provided financial and logistic support. Nonetheless, the funding from the donor-funded projects entailed some pressure such as the selection of peer reviewers and sites, which caused discomfort among the national QAA Commission regarding the ownership of the process.

The findings also highlighted that poor management at the national level resulted in the turnover of staff and leadership with QAAD. The results suggest that the investment in building the capacity of QAAD leaders and commission members was wasted due to rapid change in staff members, causing a knowledge gap and lack of
expertise at the national level, which affects accreditation negatively. The data suggest that further capacity-building opportunities are needed for the new members serving QAA at the national level. In other words, the data indicate that MoHE has failed to manage the rotation of the QAA Commission into smaller cohorts to ensure an overlap of expertise among the members. Although these changes occur at the national level, the data suggest that they often affect the experience at the universities: decisions about self-assessment reports and peer review site visits are often backlogged due to the turnover of Commission members and QAAD leadership.

Similar to the experience at the national level, the findings revealed that higher education governance (or lack of institutional autonomy) causes problems in implementing accreditation at the institution level. Given that only the government funds public higher education, and MoHE continues to control essential decisions, the data suggest that university stakeholders, who serve as policy implementers, are often confused about their role in using accreditation to improve quality. Most respondents noted that implementing accreditation has financial implications. However, university stakeholders have little or no control over financial resources and budgetary decisions. Therefore, the data suggest that university leaders and other key stakeholders need to have more financial and administrative autonomy as a prerequisite for accreditation implementation. In other words, a lack of autonomy challenges the ability of public universities to implement accreditation properly. The finding, therefore, suggests that requiring universities to implement accreditation is challenging when universities are not granted the autonomy, or the resources needed to improve the status quo.
Another significant challenge tied to the centralized higher education governance system is poor coordination between academic and administrative units, affecting how accreditation is implemented at public universities. The data suggest that academic and administrative units operate in silos and as a result, none of these units communicate or are accountable to each other. More importantly, respondents stated that financial resources and budgetary information have historically been kept secret from the academic units. The findings reveal that college faculty members and even deans are often unaware of financial resources and decisions. This disconnection between the administrative and academic units is substantial and hinders the implementation of accreditation.

In line with poor coordination, the data uncovered a lack of communication between the academic and administrative units within public universities. University leaders emphasized that academic units are rarely consulted when budgetary plans and decisions are made at the institutional level. Respondents mentioned that the financial units bypass the academic units regarding budgetary planning and decisions. Since accreditation requires an institutional self-assessment, all teams are required to provide data. However, the data revealed that since faculty members sit on internal quality assurance boards, the administrative units are hesitant to share financial information. Hence, most universities suffer from poor communication between academic and administrative departments which negatively affects implementing accreditation.

Previous research established the relationship between the implementation of accreditation and resource allocation in higher education settings (Blanco Ramirez & Luu, 2018; Pham, 2021). The current findings provide new insights into how university stakeholders make sense of financial, human, and material resources concerning
implementing quality assurance and accreditation. The data suggest that both teaching and research universities suffer from a lack of resources including access to electricity, shortage of faculty and staff members, classroom and office spaces, and lack of libraries and laboratory infrastructure. More precisely, the data show that teaching universities had neither enough faculty members to teach the courses nor an adequate budget to hire adjunct faculty members.

While access to basic resources was not a significant area of concern for research universities, the findings revealed that they did have some challenges with faculty resistance, overcrowded classes, and insufficient lab equipment. The lab equipment in most of these universities was too basic to satisfy the teaching and learning experience needed for the program of study. For example, one of the computer science programs at a research university did not have the relevant hardware and software resources that were essential for faculty members and students to complete projects. Hence, the results revealed that both teaching and research universities faced challenges in providing essential resources influencing students learning experience. Table 3 provides a concise summary of similarities and differences between teaching and research universities in implementing accreditation.

Table 3 Summary of Findings at Teaching and Research Universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas Analyzed</th>
<th>Teaching Universities</th>
<th>Research Universities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensegiving/sensemaking approach</td>
<td>One way – senior levels</td>
<td>Interconnected structures from top to bottom level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness programs</td>
<td>Occasional – targeted the leadership</td>
<td>Frequent – community wide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mostly vertical – structured</td>
<td>Vertical, horizontal, and bottom-up</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Structured and unstructured</td>
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</table>
Finally, the last challenge in implementing accreditation found in this research was the opposition of the university stakeholders to accreditation. While some participants referred to added responsibilities and accountability mechanisms as important factors why faculty members opposed the process, several others thought lack of resources was an indicator. For example, according to some participants, MoHE is well aware of the situation at each university, and they believe that MoHE officials have failed to address financial and resource problems affecting public universities. Several participants suggested that accreditation itself does not improve quality unless sufficient resources are provided. Therefore, individuals opposing the process indicated that universities should not be blamed for failing to meet the expectations since they are not in control of resources. While acknowledging the importance of resources, the data suggest that accreditation emphasizes a sense of stakeholder accountability, which is likely the factor why many individuals oppose the process.
CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of key informants in implementing quality assurance and accreditation at Afghanistan's public teaching and research universities. I used a qualitative multi-case study approach to examine participant experiences. Sensemaking and sensegiving were used as the analytic lens to study how participants made meaning of quality assurance and accreditation. In addition, I investigated how the sensemaking/sensegiving experience has changed over time, the likelihood of stakeholder engagement at two types of institutions, and the key challenges in implementing QAA at national and institutional levels. The primary data were collected from five universities (two research and three teaching universities), the national quality assurance and accreditation directorate, and three foreign donor-funded projects. While the analysis primarily focused on similarities and differences between teaching and research universities in implementing accreditation, it also explored the overall management of QAA at the national level.

Sensemaking and Sensegiving of Accreditation

The research found some commonalities and important differences in sensemaking and sensegiving of accreditation at public teaching and research universities. The sensemaking and sensegiving of quality assurance and accreditation at research universities have reached a sophisticated level of understanding supported by mechanisms and structures that reach a large audience. Factors leading to this outcome were the development of structures and processes that served as a network to circulate information and decisions both vertically and horizontally. The two research universities
were similar in establishing interconnected systems such as committees and sub-committees focused on different quality dimensions, eventually feeding into institutional decision-making. For instance, in terms of structures, Research University 2 established quality assurance committees at the institutional, college, and department levels that had representatives in the institutional academic council (the highest decision-making authority) and in each department. Creating such an interconnected network allowed the university to efficiently disseminate essential decisions and keep stakeholders at different levels informed.

In addition, to sustain the implementation of quality assurance and accreditation processes, the research universities established internal mechanisms and procedures that make sense to the university stakeholders. While the sensemaking and sensegiving approaches varied, each research university developed a unique method to engage with accreditation at the institutional, college, and department levels. For example, one of the research universities not only provided regular workshops for faculty and staff members but also developed an internal process to conduct annual peer reviews within the institution to ensure that all colleges and programs were upholding quality standards. Thus, the findings suggest that research universities have reached advanced sensemaking and sensegiving level, allowing university stakeholders to utilize QAA concepts and processes in their routines. Such a level of engagement corresponds to Maitlis's (2005) *guided* sensemaking/sensegiving form and Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991) *energizing* phase - leading to community-level engagement.

While the experience at teaching universities was somewhat mixed, the research suggests that sensemaking and sensegiving of accreditation were at the early stages. Only
a small group of stakeholders, primarily the leadership teams and the institutional quality assurance committees, most of whom also served as deans, carried out the work needed for annual self-assessment, teacher evaluation, and planning to address accreditation issues. Most of the community members, including faculty members, were selective in implementing the policy. Briefly, the findings suggest that most faculty members agreed to provide course syllabi to the students, observe formative and summative assessments, and encourage teaching evaluations. However, not all faculty members had the time or interest to create teaching development plans, while the institutions did not have the capacity or resources to analyze the teaching evaluations and share them with faculty members. More importantly, the teaching universities lacked a consistent mechanism to enforce policies and hold individuals accountable when they failed to implement accreditation holistically. In other words, sensemaking and sensegiving of accreditation seemed sporadic and inconsistent, corresponding to the *envisioning phase* (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), which focused primarily on its use for administrative purposes.

Unlike the experience at research universities, at teaching universities sensemaking and sensegiving of quality assurance and accreditation occurred only occasionally and usually targeted leadership. Awareness opportunities were less likely to be available for the rest of the community, especially the faculty and staff members in charge of curriculum and operations. For instance, some participants consistently reported that none of their faculty members received any form of training to implement accreditation. They only recalled one or two seminars organized for the senior leadership and deans of colleges. Thus, there was a lack of systematic awareness programs to engage faculty and staff members in the sensemaking and sensegiving of QAA at
teaching universities. This suggests the need for teaching universities to establish both horizontal (peer-to-peer) and vertical (top-down) sensemaking and sensegiving opportunities to institutionalize QAA at all levels in the university.

While the National Quality Assurance Agency, QAAD, emphasized establishing identical structures and processes to introduce a guided sensegiving/sensemaking form at both teaching and research universities to implement quality assurance and accreditation, I found that maintaining such systems is beyond the capacity of teaching universities. Because most teaching universities were under-resourced and understaffed, they could not assign individuals to serve on various committees, including QAA. For instance, some participants maintained that they could not analyze teaching evaluations to provide feedback to faculty due to staff shortages. Participants also noted that, for many, completing the evaluation forms became an end in itself. On a similar note, a lack of awareness and limited expertise in accreditation disadvantaged teaching universities in developing a bottom-up approach to make accreditation more meaningful and manageable. Given these contextual circumstances, teaching universities are less able to implement the same accreditation processes as research universities.

In addition, due to poor sensemaking and sensegiving, I discovered a disconnect between implementing the accreditation process and quality improvement at both types of universities. Acknowledging some incremental improvement in organizational culture focusing on academic quality, several respondents complained that primary stakeholders such as faculty members had not recognized accreditation as a valuable mechanism for improving quality. They either resisted implementing it at the individual level or engaged superficially in the process. Two factors likely contributed to the partial engagement of
primary stakeholders. First, achieving accreditation in Afghanistan takes multiple years, which exhausts personnel and resources. The lengthy process particularly hurts teaching universities where human and material resources are scarce.

Second, in order to match the QAA process to the context of higher education in Afghanistan, policymakers have adopted a unique approach by dividing the accreditation process into three different stages: (a) candidacy level one, (b) candidacy level two, and (c) full accreditation. Unfortunately, the process has become redundant, especially since two-thirds of the universities had to repeat each stage at least twice, leading to the process taking five or more years. In brief, Afghanistan’s adaptation of accreditation has failed to take the varying contexts and resources of different universities into account.

The challenge of making connections between accreditation and quality improvement surfaced as a significant responsibility of institutional leaders at the two types of universities. While most institutional leaders failed to communicate the purpose of accreditation, a few were able to manage the process in meaningful ways in their contexts. Apart from supporting active and passive sensemaking and sensegiving approaches, selected leaders demonstrated the ability to successfully mobilize institutional resources and devote the time and effort needed to lead the process one step at a time. Participants from both teaching and research universities noted that these ‘idea champions’ adopted a holistic approach by diving into the problem, breaking down the accreditation standards into manageable pieces, providing a rationale, assigning responsibilities, and tracking progress. What stood out to the participants was their leaders' active engagement – participating in the entirety of the accreditation process – in contrast to other universities where the leaders delegated responsibilities and rarely
supervised the process and outcomes. In short, establishing a relationship between accreditation and quality improvement would take more than generic workshops; it requires institutional leaders to play a significant role in motivating stakeholders to buy into the process.

Similar to the role of institutional leaders, peer reviewers played an instrumental role in the sensemaking and sensegiving of accreditation at both research and teaching universities. Training opportunities, coupled with the recruitment of a diverse group of peer reviewers representing both types of universities, improved peer reviewers' professional skills and perceived legitimacy. Although some disagreed with the peer reviewers' approach, several participants complemented peer reviewers for assessing their universities professionally. The benefits of the peer review experience were two-fold. First, faculty from some teaching and research universities were introduced to QAAD to serve as peer reviewers at the national level. Almost all these peer reviewers were also assigned to serve on the institutional quality assurance units. As such, the peer reviewers brought knowledge and experience from other universities to their own universities, which influenced the sensemaking of accreditation at the institutional level. Current research also confirms the dual roles of boundary spanners (peer reviewers) in modern organizations including higher education institutions (Prysor & Henley, 2018; Schotter et al., 2017).

Second, peer reviewers also influenced the meaning-making at institutions undergoing accreditation. Since implementing accreditation was a new experience in universities in Afghanistan, peer reviewers had a significant role in interpreting the meaning of quality standards and assessing the progress of universities using those
standards. For many participants, the experience with peer reviewers acted as episodes of direct and indirect sensemaking and sensegiving. Simply put, as peer reviewers interacted with individuals and groups, asked questions, and requested evidence, university stakeholders made more sense of the processes. Consistent with previous research, for example, Williams (2002), boundary spanners, peer reviewers in particular, “need to be knowledgeable in one area of expertise to act as a kind of passport of legitimacy for engaging with from organizations” (p. 119). In other words, they have a dual role of sensemakers and sensegivers.

Establishing an internal quality assurance and accreditation unit/committee (IQAU) resulted in an increased sense of accountability among faculty members and institutional leaders. Participants reported knowing about the existence of such a structure at both types of universities. However, ways that IQAU members' engagement influenced stakeholders' commitment varied. Participants reported that IQAUs not only facilitated regular workshops and capacity development opportunities for faculty members in student-centered pedagogies, course design, and syllabi development, but they also established mechanisms to supervise the implementation processes. In fact, some research universities created a system that nurtured faculty members' engagement in accreditation and held them accountable for implementing it. Thus, IQAUs had a vital role in helping research universities attain national accreditation.

In contrast, the experience at teaching universities suggests that IQAUs operated on an ad hoc basis – mainly to address formal requests such as completing annual self-assessment reports. But they lacked a long-term strategy to encourage faculty members to embrace quality assurance and accreditation in practice and to be held accountable for
implementing it. Despite duplicating similar structures as research universities and organizing occasional training opportunities, quality assurance was loosely defined at teaching universities. Senior leaders and IQAUs adopted more relaxed measures to implement accreditation. In short, although both types of universities faced challenges in enforcing the policy, the experience at teaching universities interacted with other problems rooted in insufficient resources and lack of capacity.

Lastly, there were differences in feelings about the purpose of documenting and collecting evidence for accreditation. An agreement existed that collecting evidence was essential in presenting a case for a university undergoing accreditation. However, since the process was reiterated almost every year and the volume of data for each accreditation phase was cumbersome, many participants became frustrated and resistant to providing documentation. There are likely two reasons why these universities viewed collecting evidence negatively. First, the accreditation process, peer review, in particular, emphasized easily measured quantitative variables such as enrollment rate, faculty-student ratio, and the number of meetings and partnerships, to name a few, instead of qualitative constructs including learning outcomes, employment skills, and socio-cultural competence. Second, participants at both teaching and research universities consistently noted that the experience was new due to the lack of a previously existing formal evaluation process in the higher education system. Producing data to satisfy accreditation expectations seemed overwhelming for many universities. Given that most universities underwent the accreditation process at least once a year with no tangible change occurring in practice, participants partly viewed accreditation as just an increase in administrative bureaucracy. Thus, I infer that stakeholders' assumptions about
documenting will only change when they lead to a change in practice, focusing on student learning.

**Accreditation Challenges at the National and Institutional Levels**

Despite substantial developments in establishing a national accreditation system and institutionalizing it at public and private universities, this study uncovered some challenges in implementing the system at the national and institutional levels. Generally, a lack of financial and material resources was highlighted as a shared problem at both levels. However, other challenges were unique to the context of each institution. For instance, staff turnover seems to have been a significant problem at the national level. The turnover specifically affected QAAD senior leadership and the National QAA Commission members, which significantly challenged their ability to oversee the implementation of quality assurance and accreditation at the national level. While staff turnover has often been political, investments in training and capacity development were often lost. Since the experience is relatively new in Afghanistan, frequent QAAD leadership and QAA Commission staff changes negatively affected the system and its day-to-day operations.

The study also found that the national quality assurance and accreditation system is often overwhelmed due to the high volume of work and staff shortages. The data indicate that the capacity of the national QAAD was too small to manage the implementation of accreditation at 169 public and private higher education institutions. According to a senior official, since only a few professional staff positions were designated for overseeing accreditation, their staff were overwhelmed with the load of
work. In other words, due to the limited capacity of QAAD to oversee quality assurance and accreditation nationally, staff burnout was inevitable.

A similar challenge occurred with the amount of staff time available. The National QAA Commission members, selected from a pool of full-time senior faculty members, were only required to work 2 – 4 hours a week given their academic commitments at their universities. Since the Commission is the only authority able to make decisions about QAA policies, the accreditation status of universities, and other related issues at the national level, this suggests a serious limitation in the system affecting the quality of work. In brief, the national quality assurance system has limitations concerning the number of professional staff and the Commission members' availability to work on accreditation.

At the institutional level, challenges affecting the implementation of accreditation were centered on lack of resources, lack of autonomy, and poor coordination between academic and administrative units. Both public research and teaching universities suffered from a lack of adequate resources to ensure quality. Since implementing accreditation required financial and material resources, almost all participants complained about a lack of funding to fulfill the expectations. While the needs varied between teaching to research universities, both types of universities lacked the resources needed to meet the accreditation standards. Teaching universities were struggling with basic resources such as water, electricity, asphalted roads, enough faculty members, and facilities. In contrast, the resource needs at research universities were more advanced as participants complained about the lack of up-to-date library books, journal subscriptions, IT facilities, and lab equipment, to name a few.
Lack of autonomy, primarily financial and administrative autonomy, was highlighted as another substantial challenge in implementing accreditation. Institutional leaders at both types of universities were under pressure due to the financial and material demands from various colleges and departments as they prepared for the national accreditation. However, institutional leaders had no control over financial decisions or staff appointments, given regulatory obstacles. Simply put, participants indicated that most decisions are made centrally by MoHE. Since university budgets come with line items, institutions are limited in making adjustments needed to implement accreditation. As such, a majority of the public universities struggle to simply sustain their daily operations. In sum, unless public universities have financial and administrative autonomy, the effectiveness of implementing accreditation will be limited.

Lastly, implementing accreditation becomes meaningful when university academic and administrative units work in harmony. Although accreditation was hampered at both teaching and research universities due to a lack of coordination between the academic and administrative divisions, implementing accreditation pressured the two units to communicate and share information. More importantly, accreditation required both academic and financial departments to share information about the university budget and expenses, course offerings, and workload, which were typically restricted to senior administrators. Public universities still have problems maintaining student services due to poor coordination and/or lack of a modern management system. For example, several participants expressed that issuing student transcripts took multiple days or even weeks. That being the case, despite incremental changes in academic
quality, poor coordination between the academic and administrative units negatively affected students' experience at both research and teaching universities.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, I offer a number of recommendations to improve the quality assurance and accreditation policy and practice at the national and institutional levels. These recommendations primarily address issues and challenges that universities and the national quality assurance and accreditation system face in implementing quality assurance and accreditation.

Recommendations for Policy

QAA at the national level

- **Expand the Organizational Structure** of QAAD with adequate capacity to oversee the implementation of QAA nationally. Given that QAAD was often backlogged due to organizational capacity and structure, expanding the structure should allow QAAD to implement the policy more efficiently.

- **Establish an Independent Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency** with sufficient budget and authority to oversee QAA nationally. Establishing an independent QAA authority would likely reduce MoHE’s and other organizations’ interference with QAA processes and outcomes. This recommendation is made to eliminate QAAD’s dependency on MoHE and foreign donors. An independent QAA agency should be granted the authority to generate revenue and self-finance to reduce government interference.
• **Designate long-term expert positions** at the QAA agency to avoid knowledge gaps and waste resources. While the higher education bylaws require rotation of directorate and commission appointments every three years, the new independent QAA agency should establish bylaws that allow long-term service and/or overlap of service among the senior managers and QAA commission members to avoid knowledge gaps. Consider long-term solutions by designating full-time expert positions to avoid knowledge gaps and waste resources.

• **Create branch agencies** charged with regional accreditation in five economic-geographical zones to ensure timely response to provincial universities. Such zones could be Balkh, Kunduz, Herat, Nangarhar, and Kandahar to avoid delays in reviewing self-assessment reports and providing feedback to universities in a timely manner.

I also offer the following recommendations to address the challenges that teaching and research universities face in implementing quality assurance and accreditation at the institutional level.

• **Reduce the duration of accreditation** by revisiting accreditation standards and bylaws to allow teaching and research universities to achieve accreditation promptly without exhausting resources. Since the phased approach (dividing accreditation into three stages: candidacy level one, candidacy level two, and full accreditation) was found as one of the reasons why the process took too long for universities to achieve accreditation, I recommend shortening the process. More importantly,
establish a new set of bylaws to allow the accreditation agency the
flexibility to grant conditional accreditation to universities and only
review areas that a university failed to meet the standards instead of
assessing the entire institution over and over. Simply put, when a
university, for example, does not satisfy two of the 11 standards, the next
round of peer review should focus on the two standards as opposed to all
11 standards.

- **Simplify the process** to be more meaningful and achievable by both
teaching and research universities, given that organizational and
programmatic evaluation are new experiences in the history of higher
education in Afghanistan. The sensemaking and sensegiving lens helped to
identify problems associated with participants’ understanding of
accreditation standards and processes. The accreditation process should
focus on standards that match the contextual realities of both teaching and
research universities given their existing resources and capacities.

- **Take institutional capacity into account** by modifying accreditation
standards with inputs from the primary stakeholders at both types of
universities, instead of imposing a Kabul-centric definition of quality. the
modified standards should emphasize continuous improvement by
focusing on where, for example, Teaching University 1 started, how far it
came in the past five years, and where institution wants to be in the nextive years. Simply put, the modified standards should take institutional
capacity and innovation into account while assessing progress on quality.
The finding from this research clearly shows that research universities had an upper hand in implementing accreditation compared to teaching universities. Since the differences are rooted in these universities’ history and contexts, revisiting accreditation standards and bylaws to focus on continuous improvement at both teaching and research universities would be prudent and, perhaps, more equitable. In other words, the accreditation process needs to have differentiated standards and procedures to satisfy realities at both teaching and research universities – Not “one-size-fits-all”.

- **Focus on outcomes**, specifically, learners’ experiences, to assess both quality and improvement. This might allay participants’ skepticism about accreditation outcomes since they did not realize any change in practice.

- **Build a culture of quality** by encouraging institutional leaders to shape the quality culture by promoting good practices and identifying ways to increase accountability among faculty. Acknowledging that collecting evidence and writing reports are important components of accreditation, but creating formal mechanisms to recognize the quality of teaching, learning, and service is a way to put student learning at the center.

- **Diversify funding sources** by revisiting by-laws and policies to grant institutions financial and administrative autonomy. Despite serious efforts and some progress in the previous government to grant financial autonomy to public research universities, the process was not complete when the Taliban took over the country. Granting universities some financial and
administrative autonomy would allow both teaching and research
universities to diversify their funding sources and make administrative
decisions such as the appointment of new staff. Clearly, access to
resources plays a critical role in quality improvement. That being the case,
institutions and policymakers should continue working on institutional
autonomy and alternative funding sources to increase access to resources.

Recommendations for Practice

There were some commonalities and also important differences among teaching
and research universities in implementing accreditation. To improve the practice at the
institutional level, I make the following recommendations.

- **Increase faculty engagement** by differentiating sensegiving approaches
  that make accreditation more meaningful to junior and senior faculty
  members, as these two groups have very different stakes in quality and
  accreditation. Specifically, organizing national conferences on quality
  assurance and accreditation and encouraging senior faculty members to
  serve on the leadership boards to engage them in the process might
  encourage their real participation. This approach could help with faculty
  resistance to implementing quality assurance and accreditation.

- **Increase awareness programs** by establishing a systematic process to
  provide frequent awareness sessions to help faculty, staff, and leadership
  teams make sense of the QAA at teaching universities. Increased
  awareness would likely help faculty and staff to understand the underlying
goals of quality assurance and accreditation and the importance of institutional image to external stakeholders.

- **Diversify awareness programs** by encouraging teaching and research universities to adopt alternative methods to interpret accreditation locally, create mechanisms to engage stakeholders, and establish procedures to enforce the policy. In other words, aside from the top-down policy implementation, institutional leaders need to divide the awareness programs into components meaningful to the context. Since the cascade model was less effective in institutionalizing accreditation, teaching universities, for example, should make accreditation a core priority and encourage all community members to participate in the process.

- **Train institutional leaders to manage QAA** because institutional leaders have an instrumental role in the sensemaking and sensegiving of quality assurance and accreditation. Organizing training opportunities for institutional leaders at both teaching and research universities would help them learn how to work with the institutional quality assurance team to define quality assurance and accreditation that correspond to their institutional contexts and to develop feasible approaches to implement it.

- **Continue professional development for peer reviewers** as it has been successful in helping peer reviewers gain professional skills and earn legitimacy among stakeholders at accrediting universities.

- **Simplify the QAA process** to acknowledge that teaching universities are hard-pressed to merely replicate the structures and processes employed at
research universities. While both teaching and research universities were somewhat successful in implementing accreditation, replicating those structures overstretched the limited resources at teaching universities. Therefore, teaching universities should work with QAAD to establish simplified systems that are feasible and meaningful in their context. The teaching universities need to re-evaluate their capacities and attune their activities to make sense to their communities.

- **Manage limited resources**, especially at teaching universities. Limited resources surfaced as a key challenge for the higher education system in Afghanistan. Since this problem is more severe at teaching universities, it becomes imperative that teaching universities deal with their limited resources as a stark reality. Teaching universities need to adopt a quality assurance and accreditation approach that is feasible to them from a resource standpoint. While both teaching and research universities should adopt innovative ways to use their existing resources efficiently, this is more important at teaching universities. In sum, both types of universities should implement policy-related structures and processes and create a transparent system to hold individuals and sub-units accountable.

- **Provide incentives for serving in internal quality assurance units** (IQAUs) because such teams carried out significant roles in implementing accreditation. While they orchestrated diverse webs to institutionalize QAA and helped their institutions achieve national accreditation, their universities often failed to address their needs. For example, several IQAU
members complained that they had to use their own money to pay for promotional materials for their universities. Thus, establishing honorary and monetary incentives to motivate IQAU members’ engagement in quality assurance and accreditation at both teaching and research universities could be quite effective.

- **Revisit IQAU membership** so that teaching universities engage senior faculty members in IQAU roles to avoid staff burnout. This is in response to the finding that, unlike at research universities, most IQAU members at teaching universities are college deans. That being the case, both teaching and research universities should involve both leaders and faculty members in IQAU committees to share the burden of responsibilities.

- **Designate professional staff to manage QAA** who should be trained in data management and analysis skills so that faculty members can focus on teaching-learning and research. All public universities should hire professional staff (not just administrative clerks) who are in charge of data collection and analysis. Since faculty members were in charge of these activities at the time of the study, they were found less engaged in handling administrative duties, given their academic commitments.

- **Charge an annual subscription accreditation fee**, established at the national level, to charge the accredited universities to maintain a quality assurance process and to reduce pressure on the government. This is because financial resources are scarce and the government has limited funding to support the process. This should particularly address the
problem of lack of funding and no budget to implement accreditation at the national level. The government may suggest different fees based on the institution's size.

- **Allocate a budget line item** specifically to implement quality assurance and accreditation at the institutional level; this could help ensure that public universities have enough resources to implement accreditation. In addition, simplifying the QAA process to be less resource-intensive could help universities to carry out accreditation more. Thus, providing QAAD and public universities with financial resources to provide awareness workshops, train stakeholders, pay per diems for peer reviewers, and ensure institutions have the tools to implement the policy would help move towards full implementation.

- **Create organizational cohesion** by encouraging transparency and accountability and avoiding some academic and administrative departments protecting information. Since academic and administrative divisions play essential roles in student experiences, establishing a transparent system centered on organizational cohesion would encourage collaboration, teamwork, and accountability. More importantly, institutional leaders should commit time and energy to providing regular sensegiving and guidance to increase public awareness and trust-building.
Implications of Recommendations for Future Consideration

National Level

While adopting the US model has helped the country establish a quality assurance and accreditation system, given the evidence from this research and 10 years of experience, MoHE and QAAD should revisit the accreditation standards and make them attuned to the local context of universities. The revision should focus on scrutinizing accreditation standards and peer review checklists with more input from university stakeholders.

This research revealed that implementing accreditation in Afghanistan takes way more time than what is common in other countries. Therefore, QAAD should evaluate the phased accreditation approach and potentially focus on simplifying the process to avoid redundancies affecting time and resources. I recommend that QAAD revisit accreditation policies to allow universities receive accreditation conditionally if they fail to satisfy one or two standards. In other words, the second round of peer review should only focus on one or two standards that a university did not achieve previously as opposed to reviewing all standards.

QAAD’s dependency on MoHE emerged as one of the challenges for implementing QAA in Afghanistan. The government should consider promoting the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Directorate as an independent authority with adequate funding and personnel structure to operate efficiently. More importantly, the new authority should be able to hire permanent professional staff to avoid the knowledge gap and be sustainable in the long run. Establishing an independent quality assurance and
accreditation agency with long-term professional staff will be more sustainable and qualifies regional and international expectations.

**Institutional Level**

This study revealed that implementing accreditation entails a series of decisions, processes, and practices that are not free of cost. Therefore, the universities should request and/or allocate a specific line-item budget for quality assurance and accreditation so that the institution has adequate resources to implement accreditation.

The result of this research also shows that public universities lacked a robust system to collect, manage, analyze, synthesize, and use data as a feedback loop to inform decisions and actions. Universities should designate and/or hire professional staff with assessment and evaluation skills to manage quality assurance and accreditation activities.

**Summary**

Despite the challenges highlighted, implementing accreditation has had considerable success in Afghanistan. Comparing the accreditation experience with neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran, and others in Central Asia, Afghanistan has made tangible progress in establishing a rigorous system. More importantly, all public research universities achieved national accreditation by 2021, and two thirds of public teaching universities achieved candidacy levels for national accreditation.

Given that quality assurance and accreditation was a new experience, sensemaking and sensegiving helped in conceptualizing the processes from the lens of key informants. The first element, sensemaking and sensegiving properties, focused on explicit and implicit patterns of stakeholder engagement in QAA. Similarly, sensemaking and sensegiving forms and phases focused on how sensemaking/sensegiving occurred
overtime and the role of institutional leaders in shaping the meaning making of faculty and staff. In other words, the second element of the theory examined the breadth and depth of how stakeholders made meanings and in turn gave sense to others, and identified the gaps where attention is needed to improve the quality assurance and accreditation experience.

Future Research

Due to limitations of access and security, the sample for this study was the experience at only five selected universities – two research and three teaching. Generalizing from them to other contexts within and without Afghanistan should be done with caution. In addition, the data represent the experience of key informants, some of whom were in positions of authority and/or in charge of implementing accreditation. Their experience may not represent the experiences of ordinary faculty members.

Now that QAA has been widely implemented at public and private universities, future research may look into student experiences to understand the impact of accreditation on learning outcomes. Future research should also focus on the experience of faculty members who are in direct contact with students. More precisely, future research should examine how faculty respond to the quality assurance and accreditation policy and ways in which they integrate desired strategies in their practice. Since implementing accreditation requires institution-wide involvement, future research may look into relationship between organizational culture and implementing accreditation, and the extent to which one influences the other. Lastly, future research should focus on the practicality of modifying the current standards so they are feasible for both teaching and research universities.
REFERENCES


Lomas, L. (2002). Does the development of mass education necessarily mean the end of quality?. *Quality in Higher education, 8*(1), 71-79.


MoHE – Ministry of Higher Education. (2016). Afghanistan national higher education strategic plan. Retrieved September 05, 2020, https://mohe.gov.af/dr/%D9%BE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-1


In 25 years of transformations of higher education systems in post-soviet countries (pp. 229-257). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.


APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

University Participants

The current research examines implementation of accreditation at teaching universities. The primary aim is to investigate key stakeholders’ experiences in relation to accreditation. The secondary goal is to explore factors that contribute to and/or challenge teaching universities in trying to achieve national accreditation. The tertiary goal is to examine perceived processes/functions that occur/occurred to complement accreditation practices.

1. I assume your institution has registered for accreditation, could you please explain when did your institution begin the process?
   a. And what is the current status of your institution in the accreditation cycle?

2. Could you please describe your involvement in terms of implementing accreditation at your institution?

3. Looking back when QAA was introduced for the first time at your institution, how would you describe the past experience?
   a. How did you receive information from MOHE?
   b. What processes did MOHE use?
   c. How did you clarify procedures with MOHE?
   d. How did you share information at your university?
      i. Please provide details on these processes.

4. When your institution embraced the idea to register for (implement) accreditation, what was the experience like?
a. Did you face any challenges or problems? If you did, could describe each?

b. How did you (your institution) respond to it/them?

c. Did your institution do anything specific to engage faculty members and staff in the process?
   i. What specific strategies did they use?

5. How would you describe the experience of implementing QAA now?
   a. How do you learn about the various procedures in the process (e.g., site visit, report preparation)?
   b. How do you convey this information to your colleagues?
   c. What is their participation like now as compared with when the process began?

6. Since the start of implementing QAA, have you observed changes at your university?
   a. Do you infer that these changes are a result of QAA?
   b. Who was/were behind the changes?

7. In your view, has QAA made any improvement in terms of quality? If so, could you describe? If no, could you elaborate on why not?

8. Looking back over the initial months of your appointment at the current position, how did you engage in learning about the QAA policy and processes?
   a. From whom did you learn about it? How?
   b. How did you share what you learned with others?
9. Have you (your institution) set a plan for implementation of QAA?
   a. If so, who were involved in the process?
   b. How did/do you communicate the plan?
   c. If no, were/are there any reasons? Could you explain them?

10. Could you describe what makes your institution strong at implementing QAA?
   a. Could you describe what factors challenge your institution to implement QAA?
   b. In your view, does your institution possess adequate human and material resources to achieve accreditation?

11. How do you describe the role of leadership in successful implementation of QAA?
   a. How would you describe employees’ participation (faculty members and staff)?
   b. How do you describe the roles and responsibilities of administrators, faculty members and staff in relation to accreditation?

12. Does your institution have specific goals to assist in achieving accreditation?
   a. What mechanisms do you use to achieve these goals?
   b. Can you name/explain a few outcomes?

13. What is your overall impression of QAA?

14. Is there anything you would like to add?
Thank you very much for taking the time to share your experience about QAA. If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at any time.

**Officials at QAAD**

The current research examines implementation of accreditation at teaching universities. The primary aim is to investigate key stakeholders’ experiences in relation to accreditation. The secondary goal is to explore factors that contribute to and/or challenge teaching universities in trying to achieve national accreditation. The tertiary goal is to examine perceived processes/functions that occur/occurred to complement accreditation practices.

1. I believe your department Quality Assurance and Accreditation Department (QAAD) is responsible to oversee and approve accreditation to public and private higher education institutions. Could you please briefly describe the major activities of your department in relation to accreditation?
   
   a. Does your department face any challenges or obstacles when observing accreditation?
   
   b. Does your department have adequate funding to pursue accreditation at public universities?

2. I wonder if you could explain your experiences about the performance of teaching universities in relation to accreditation.

   a. Could you elaborate on areas that they perform well?

   b. Do you know if they have any challenges in implementing accreditation?

   If yes, could you please elaborate?
3. What are the expectations of your department (QAAD) for teaching universities?
   a. How do you communicate your expectations to them?
   b. In your view, how do they meet those expectations?
   c. Have you noticed any problems? If so, could you elaborate?

4. What mechanisms do you (your department) use to assess accreditation at teaching universities?
   a. Do teaching universities know about them?
   b. Could you explain the timeline for your evaluation?
   c. How do you communicate the results of your evaluation with teaching universities?

5. Could you please discuss when have teaching universities begun the accreditation process?
   a. What is their progress like?
   b. Based on the information available, none of the teaching universities have been able to complete the full circle of accreditation. Would you please discuss the situation?
   c. In your view, what are some constraints on their way to achieve full accreditation?

6. Looking back when QAA was introduced to universities for the first time, what was the experience like?
   a. How did your department communicate the accreditation process?
   b. What processes did you (your department) use?
   c. How did you clarify procedures with universities?
i. Please provide details on these processes.

7. When your department started disseminating quality assurance and accreditation, what was the experience like?
   a. Did you face any challenges or problems? If you did, could describe each?
   b. Did your department do anything specific to engage universities in the process?
      i. What specific strategies did you use?

8. How would you describe the experience of implementing QAA at teaching universities now?
   a. How do you convey the information to universities?
   b. How do you perceive their participation?

9. In your view, has QAA made any improvement in terms of quality? If so, could you describe? If no, could you elaborate on why not?

10. Could you describe how accreditation is similar or different at teaching vs. research universities?

11. Could you describe your departments’ plans for implementing accreditation?
   a. Do you have any specific plans for teaching universities?
   b. Could you explain if evaluation mechanisms are similar or different to assess teaching and research universities?

12. What is your overall impression of QAA?

13. Is there anything you would like to add?
Focus Group

The current research examines implementation of accreditation at teaching universities. The primary aim is to investigate key stakeholders’ experiences in relation to accreditation. The secondary goal is to explore factors that contribute to and/or challenge teaching universities in trying to achieve national accreditation. The tertiary goal is to examine perceived processes/functions that occur/occurred to complement accreditation practices.

1. Could you please describe the accreditation process at your university?
   a. And what is the current status of your institution in the accreditation cycle?

2. Could you please talk about your roles in terms of implementing accreditation at your institution?
   a. When did you engage in the process?

3. Looking back when QAA was introduced for the first time at your institution, how would you describe the past experience?
   a. How did you receive information from the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE)?
   b. What processes did MOHE use?
   c. How did you clarify procedures with MOHE?
   d. How did you learn about QAA at your university?
      i. Please provide details on these processes.

4. When your institution embraced the idea to register for (implementing) accreditation, what was the experience like?
   a. Did you face any challenges or problems? If you did, could describe each?
   b. How did you (your institution) respond to it/them?
c. Did your institution do anything specific to engage faculty members and staff in the process?
   i. What specific strategies did they use?

5. How would you describe the experience of implementing QAA now?
   a. How do you learn about the various procedures in the process (e.g., site visit, report preparation)?
   b. How do you convey this information to your colleagues?
   c. What is their participation like now as compared with when the process began?
   d. How do you describe your experience in relation to MoHE QAA directorate?
   e. What is your experience of donors who are involved in QAA?

6. Since the start of implementing QAA, have you observed changes at your university?
   a. Do you infer that these changes are a result of QAA?
      i. Who was/were behind the changes?

7. In your view, has QAA made any improvement in terms of quality? If so, could you describe? If no, could you elaborate on why not?

8. Has your institution set a plan for implementation of QAA?
   a. If so, who were involved in the process?
   b. How did/do you communicate the plan?
   c. If no, were/are there any reasons? Could you explain them?

9. Could you describe the strengths and weaknesses of your institution in implementing QAA?
   a. What are your institutions’ strengths?
   b. Could you describe what factors challenge your institution to implement QAA?
   c. In your view, does your institution possess adequate human and material resources to achieve accreditation?

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10. How do you describe the role of leadership in successful implementation of QAA?
   a. How would you describe employees’ participation (faculty members and staff)?

11. How do you describe your roles in implementing QAA at your university?

12. Does your institution have specific goals to assist in achieving accreditation?
   a. What mechanisms do you use to achieve these goals? Can you explain name/explain a few outcomes?

13. What is your overall impression of QAA?

14. Is there anything you would like to add?

Thank you very much for taking the time to share your experience about QAA. If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at any time.

**Donor Representatives**

The current research examines implementation of accreditation at teaching universities. The primary aim is to investigate key stakeholders’ experiences in relation to accreditation. The secondary goal is to explore factors that contribute to and/or challenge teaching universities in trying to achieve national accreditation. The tertiary goal is to examine perceived processes/functions that occur/occurred to complement accreditation practices.

1. Could you please describe the characteristics of your organization/institution involvement in quality assurance and accreditation?
a. What are some specific activities that you do?

b. How do universities and QEAD department respond?

2. What model of QAA does your organization support?

3. Do you consider any differences among public universities in Afghanistan? e.g. on the basis of size, location, capacity?

4. Could you please talk about your experience working with QEAD?
   a. How about your experience working with public universities?
   b. Do you face/have any challenges when you work with MoHE?
   c. Do you face any problems or issues when you work QAA at public universities?
   d. How do you address them?

5. Could you please talk about the scope of your organization’s involvement with public universities?
   a. Do you work with all or selected institutions?
      i. Could you elaborate on characteristics of your work and selection criteria?

6. Based on your experience working with public universities, how do you perceive their progress in achieving full accreditation?
   a. In your view, do they have the capacity to complete accreditation requirements?
   b. Do you see any gap in accreditation policy?
   c. Have you noticed any issues in practice (implementation of accreditation at public universities)?
7. I wonder if you could explain your experiences about the performance of teaching universities in relation to accreditation.
   a. Could you elaborate on areas that they perform well?
   b. Do you know if they have any challenges in implementing accreditation?
      If yes, could you please elaborate?
8. What are/were the expectations of your organization from QEAD/MoHE?
9. What are your expectations from selected universities?
   a. How do you communicate your expectations to them?
   b. In your view, how do they meet those expectations?
   c. Have you noticed any change in the way teaching universities perform QAA activities?
   d. Have you noticed any problems? If so, could you elaborate?
10. In your view, has QAA made any improvement in terms of quality? If so, could you describe? If no, could you elaborate on why not?
11. Could you please talk about similarities and differences of implementing accreditation at teaching vs. research universities?
12. What is your overall impression of QAA?
13. Is there anything you would like to add?
APPENDIX B
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UMassAmherst
Human Research Protection Office

Mass Venture Center
100 Venture Way, Suite 116
Hadley, MA 01035
Telephone: 413-545-3428

Memorandum – Not Human Subjects Research Determination

Date: April 9, 2019

To: Sayed Mussawy, Education

Project Title: Opportunities and Challenges for Teaching Universities to Achieve National Accreditation: A Policy Implementation Analysis

IRB Determination Number: 19-62

The Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) has evaluated the above named project and has made the following determination based on the information provided to our office:

☐ The proposed project does not involve research that obtains information about living individuals [45 CFR 46.102(b)].

☐ The proposed project does not involve intervention or interaction with individuals OR does not use identifiable private information [45 CFR 46.102(f)(1),(2)].

☒ The proposed project does not meet the definition of human subject research under federal regulations [45 CFR 46.102(d)].

Submission of an Application to UMass Amherst IRB is not required.

Note: This determination applies only to the activities described in the submission. If there are changes to the activities described in this submission, please submit a new determination form to the HRPO prior to initiating any changes.

A project determined as “Not Human Subjects Research,” must still be conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Researchers must also comply with all applicable federal, state and local regulations as well as UMass Amherst Policies and procedures which may include obtaining approval of your activities from other institutions or entities.

Please do not hesitate to call us at 413-545-3428 or email humansubjects@cra.umass.edu if you have any questions.

Iris L. Jenkins
Assistant Director
Human Research Protection Office
### APPENDIX C

#### THREE TYPES OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND STUDENT ENROLLMENT IN 2018/2019

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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Herat University</td>
<td>15258</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nangarhar University</td>
<td>13982</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
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<td>Balkh University</td>
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<td>9.8%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Kandahar University</td>
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<td>Takhar University</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Shaikh Zayed University</td>
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<td>Baghlan University</td>
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<td>Urozgan Institute of Higher Education</td>
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<td>Ghor Institute of Higher Education</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Sar-e Pul Institute of Higher Education</td>
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<td>33</td>
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| Grant Total                  | 185141  | 100.0%    |