

Quality Assurance Implementation in the Graduate Education Policy 2023: A Qualitative Exploration of Barriers, Institutional Execution, and Outcomes in Pakistani Higher Education

Muhammad Majid Hameed

PhD Scholar, Department of Educational Training, Faculty of Education
The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan, majidhameed5764@gmail.com

Dr. Muhammad Shakir

Associate Professor, Department of Educational Training, Faculty of Education
The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan, muhammad.shakir@iub.edu.pk

Dr. Muhammad Sajid

State Care officer, National College of Business Administration & Economics (NCBA&E)
Bahawalpur Campus, muhammadsajid7374@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is based on a doctoral study that explored the quality assurance (QA) protocols that have been integrated in the implementation of Pakistan's Graduate Education Policy 2023 (GEP-2023). Through qualitative nature of the study, the data was gathered on issues of implementation, institutionalisation of execution and outcomes of the policy in the context of higher education in Pakistan. The evidence was gathered from eight public and private universities in Southern Punjab which were purposefully selected having active Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) and Directorates of Advanced Studies and Research (DASR/ASRB) and Offices of Research, Innovation and Commercialization (ORIC). Purposeful sampling of the stakeholders was carried out which included 60 QEC Directors, DASR/ORIC officials, supervisors, faculty members, chairpersons / HODs and MS/MPhil/PhD scholars. Data was gathered via semi-structured interviews and documentary and observational approach to analyse the institutional records which were then analysed thematically in MAXQDA using open, axial and selective coding. The analysis showed that GEP-2023 had improved some of the aspects of QA practice like transparency in admission, research supervision, plagiarism checking, monitoring of research-ethics, external evaluation, norms of publication, grievance handling and role-play of the institutional QECs and DASR/ASRB offices. In the meantime, participants indicated that there were still implementation problems, including funding, lack of faculty, inexistent institutional capacities, institutional delays, lack of research facilities, pressure to publish and differences in enforcement between departments and universities. The paper concludes that, whilst GEP-2023 has been a good starting point to shift the culture of quality assurance of graduates, it will need to be further invested and monitored, professional learning will be needed, institutional leadership will need to be in place and supported, as well as student supports and policy requirements.

Keywords: Graduate Education Policy 2023, Quality assurance, Higher education, Pakistan, Quality Enhancement Cell, Research supervision, Institutional compliance, Qualitative research.

1. Introduction

Research productivity, academic excellence, professional specialisation and development of the nation are set high in the graduate education. The expectation that universities would be producing competent researchers and professionals to promote innovation and socio-economic development has also been heavily leveraged on by structured quality-assurance systems for that purpose, as well as by research governance and institutional accountability systems, in recent years. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan has unveiled the Graduate Education Policy 2023 (GEP-2023) that aims to establish a framework and introduce quality in the field of MS/M Phil and PhD education in Pakistan via admission criteria, curriculum/coursework, Research Supervision, dissertation quality, criteria for publications, plagiarism checking, external evaluation, grievance management and institutional compliance. The aim of the doctorate research in detail and culminated in this paper was to enhance the research culture, integrity, transparency and accountability in Pakistani Universities.

Though the Policy is quite detailed, its implementation in practice is dependent on the institutional practice and the one constant concern found in the thesis is the disconnection between the policy and its manifestation on ground particularly in the institutions with limited resources, underdeveloped monitoring system, deficient infrastructure and limited faculty. This paper is a specific and publishable study on three aspects of the reform that relate to each other: first, the difficulties universities had implementing the quality-assurance requirements of GEP-2023; second, the institutional structures through which the quality-assurance requirements of GEP-2023 were implemented; and third, the outcomes of the implementation that the participants identified. Like the qualitative nature of this research, this paper is not intended to offer any quantitative or numerical evidence but the claims are based on stakeholder interviews, the accompanying documentary observation and the thematic analysis of these.

This research and research questions are stated below:

The objective of the thesis is identification of issues and barriers to effective implementation of GEP-2023, institutional execution and outcomes which are objectives in relation to the thesis. In this paper, an attempt is made to respond to the following three questions:

Research question	Focus
RQ1	What major barriers affected the implementation of GEP-2023 quality assurance initiatives?
RQ2	How were quality assurance initiatives executed institutionally

	across the selected higher education institutions (HEIs)?
RQ3	What outcomes were associated with GEP-2023 implementation for graduate education quality?

3. Methodology

This paper uses Secondary qualitative derivation approach in obtaining the views from the data of the thesis, based on the nature of the design of the original research which is exploratory and evaluative type. The inquiry was interpretivist as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2022), Denzin and Lincoln (2023) and Lincoln and Guba (2022) for Qualitative and Naturalistic inquiry in education and the voices of all stakeholders were prioritised.

Population included multi-sectoral stakeholders (students, faculty and administrative) from public and private universities of Southern Punjab of Pakistan including Multan, Bahawalpur, Dera Ghazi Khan and Rahim Yar Khan that are actively involved in the implementation of GEP-2023 in these universities. 8 Universities were purposively sampled as they were having active QECs and the various stakeholder groups were purposively sampled such as: DASR/ASRB officials, ORIC Directors, Chairpersons/HODs, supervisors, faculty members, MS/MPhil and PhD scholars. It was decided that a purposive sampling approach was suitable as the research needed individuals who had firsthand experience of policy implementation, supervisory, monitoring or research training (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2022).

The data was collected from two sources of qualitative data which were complementary. Most of the tools used were semi structured interview schedule with open-ended questions on awareness about GEP-2023, institutional readiness for GEP, admission, curriculum mapping, supervision of research, comprehensive examination, quality of dissertation, research ethics, external evaluation, publication requirement, time limit of completion of degree, adherence to No Objection Certificate (NOC), role of quality-assurance bodies, research culture, grievance handling, and suggested changes. This was supplemented with a documentary field-observation review of the institutional records and policies as a descriptive tool to complement and/or support the themes of the interview and not for scoring or to provide numbers. Content validation of two instruments was carried out by experts and refinement of instruments was carried out before being administered.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interviews and included the following steps: Open Coding, Axial Coding and Selective Coding that takes the raw data to categories and then major themes. In the above there are three research questions which are these themes grouped around.

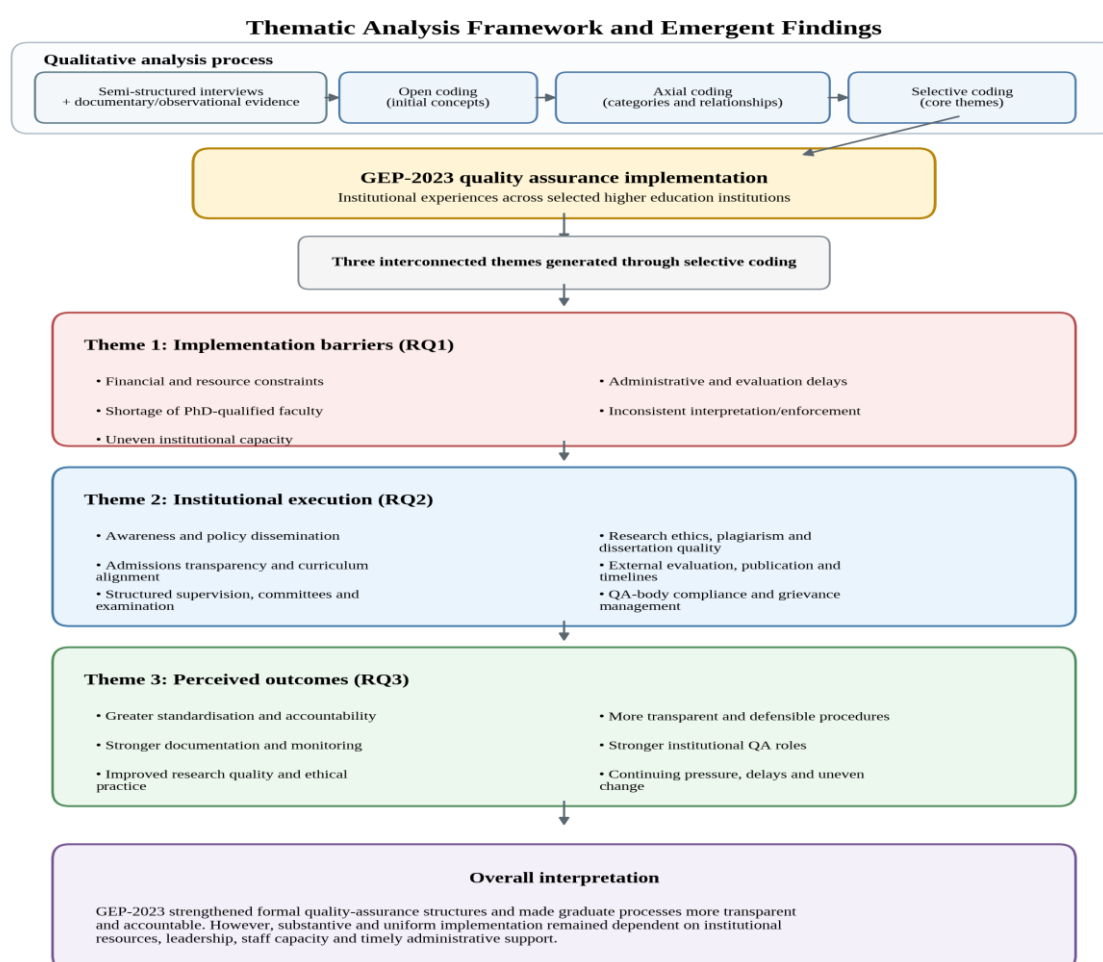
People throughout have been referred to by 'respondent' or 'university', their names have not been mentioned (unless there have been ethical considerations when collecting the data) and confidentiality and anonymity have been maintained, apart from when the themes have been repeated.

4. Findings

Thematic analysis resulted in a single description of experiences of GEP-2023 in the selected institutions, and was summarised into three sets of barriers to the implementation of the policy (RQ1); the process of quality assurance in the institutions (RQ2); and the outcomes that the participants attributed to the policy (RQ3).

The coding process, emergent themes, and integrative interpretation are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Thematic analysis framework and emergent findings for GEP-2023 quality assurance implementation



Source: Developed from the study's interview, documentary and observational themes.

The barriers to the achievement of GEP-2023 (RQ1) are identified.

The most basic obstacle to all stakeholder groups with regard to implementation was financial barriers. The laboratories, digital libraries, the plagiarism detecting system and research support facilities were needed to be upgraded but some of the institutions were unable to provide the required resources to upgrade.

"The policy expectations regarding quality assurance and supervision were very high, but some institutions lacked sufficient financial and human resources for complete implementation."

Many of the issues with funding were the non-availability of PhD faculty to supervise a graduate student, particularly in specialist or new areas. Participants explained the many recruitment issues including foundational issues related to the time it takes to hire faculty and budgeting issues, and how these resulted in increased workload for supervisors that were available for the HECs.

However, there were a number of departments which did not have enough PhD faculty members to be able to supervise graduate students. This presented a problem particularly in specialist and new fields where universities were unable to find any faculty member who had previous experience in the field to supervise the graduate students.

An imbalance of institutional capacities was the third challenge that was common. It was observed that WELL DEVELOPED QEC system were easily adaptable to GEP-2023, and on the other hand, in small Universities and/or newer Universities, not having organized QEC systems, no digital library and/or having no labs, adaptation of GEP-2023 was found to be difficult.

The larger public universities experienced faculty members, developed laboratories, organized quality assurance institutes, and utilized a digital library which could be more easily managed; the smaller, and especially the newer universities faced time constraints in meeting the various quality assurance demands.

Lastly, administrative delay and interpretation of the provisions in policies was pointed out as an obstacle as such. Also the publication times and turn around of external evaluators were often mentioned as were NOC and/or dissertation approval time and sometimes similarity thresholds, admission criteria or comprehensive-examination standards of the different departments/institutions, which also varied in strictness, causing confusion among those who transferred between departments/institutions.

4.2 Institutionalizing quality assurance activities (RQ2)

The general overall feedback about the level of implementation of GEP-2023 was felt at various different levels of implementation at the institutional level.

Awareness and dissemination in institution. All the potential of creating awareness among the administrators and senior faculty members was moderate to good level primarily due to guidance provided by HEC and

orientation of the institute whereas low level of awareness was noticed in case of junior faculty members as well as students which took a step up gradually as they go forward in research process.

The Quality Enhancement Cell along with the office of the Director of Academic and Student Affairs (DASR) held meetings to formally introduce "The Graduate Education Policy 2023" to the faculty members, supervisors and administrative staff and make them aware of changes in Graduate education in our university with regard to admission, supervision, plagiarism control, publication requirement and dissertation evaluation.

Transparency of admissions and linking of curriculum. More clearly defined and publicised entry requirements, merit formulae and admission processes were evident at universities, while efforts were being made to continually update the graduate curriculum to meet National Qualification Framework (NQF) levels 7 and 8. There was variation in terms of implementation – some departments were doing the merit procedure, others had the ability to be flexible in certain cases and some of the topics covered was more theoretical than what was planned in policy research.

Supervision of research, membership of committees and examination. The cap on the number of supervisees that a faculty member can supervise in GEP-2023 was widely welcomed as a way to potentially enhance the quality of supervision and it was evident that more structured and better documented supervisory committees and comprehensive-examination procedures exist. However, supervision on a day-to-day basis remained largely in the hands of the individual supervisors and some of the participants reported that a research degree did not imply a good mentoring skills.

The limitation on the number of supervising students a faculty could supervise, led to better supervision as some faculties were supervising too many students at a time, this affected the communication, quality of feedback received and the progression of the dissertation.

Ethics of research and quality of dissertation. Mandatory pre-defence requirement of awareness sessions of Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines, awareness sessions on authorship ethics and responsible research conduct and mandatory checking for plagiarism using the similarity-detection software were introduced. Dissertation evaluation was reported to be more rigorous with focused assessment on methodology and originality and relevance to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); however, there were still a few challenges, where students were not trained enough in developing methodology and academic writing for dissertation.

Limits on time spent for external evaluation, publication and degree. It was observed that the system of keeping open defense along with independent evaluators aided the credibility and transparency of dissertation assessment and the formal requirement of sending dissertations to HEC recognized journals led to more in-depth research. Simultaneously the participants were perpetually connecting with the long

timeframe of reading and reviewing journals as well as the time delay of the external-evaluation report and expiry of the degree and registration.

Compliance management – comply with the NOC, the function of the quality-assurance bodies. Increased internal control of the statutory and NOC requirements, the outcome of which could impact the programme recognition process if the requirements are not followed, were reported by universities. As an example, QECs, DASR/ASRB offices and ORIC were said to be much more active as a result of GEP-2023, in coordinating supervision monitoring, curriculum review and plagiarism compliance, and institutional reporting, but effectiveness is still largely dependent on institutional leadership and resourcing.

Grievance management. Formal complaint procedures, appeals systems were more visible and accessible, and students believed that all complaints made to the institution related to any individual supervisor and/or academic could be dealt with. However, there also seemed to be some level of confusion surrounding them and some reported they have been able to handle the misbehavior/complaint informally because of "the face of the institution".

This section shows the findings from the implementation of GEP-2023 (RQ3).

The general feeling of the participants was that the GEP-2023 is a positive and long over-due reform. Increased institutional standardization and increased institutional accountability were the most consistent responses for departments which had not been very formalized or consistent, and participants said these departments had a more organized and defensible institutional culture, and would have to document admissions, supervision/evaluation, and compliance.

“Prior to GEP-2023, all work was being done informal and after GEP-2023, all the departments were instructed to record their work (academic and research) according to guidelines set by HEC which brought clarity in the process of Graduate education management.”

The second was the supervisors' and administrators' feeling of an impact on research quality with reports that they felt focus and emphasis on methodological rigor, originality, ethical behaviors in research and publications were pushing the education and research in Pakistan close towards international standards.

Third, respondents cited an improvement in how fair and transparent specific policies are, including those of admissions, dissertation evaluation, comprehensive examinations and grievance procedures, even when they are does not always occur at all schools.

At the same time the participants identified some drawbacks for the policy: some mentioned stress factors related to the policy including pressure to publish papers, stress of supervision, longer registration time and time stress of not being certain of an administrative decision for the graduate students. This suggests that the outcomes of GEP-2023 have been more of a ‘stopgap’ in relation to QAP and have been less successful with regards to transformation.

5. Discussion

The results demonstrated that the GEP-2023 is indeed a policy tool to be leveraged in the standardization and improvement of the overall quality of the graduate education (as presented in the general literature on quality in HE). Increased definitive processes and more policy requirements embedded in the curriculum, improvements in research supervision, enhanced approach to detection of plagiarism, more formal expectations and requirements for publications and stronger quality assurance (QECs, DASR or ASRB units and ORIC). This is in keeping with Brennan and Shah (2022) who say that institutional quality-assurance mechanisms have been created to increase the accountability and consistency of the academic governance process and also in keeping with the findings of Martin and Stella (2023) that external quality-assurance mechanisms can help improve institutional credibility if applied across the institutional governance process. In addition, the perspective of Harvey and Green (2022) is upheld, that quality standards that are clearly defined can help create a common point of reference for institutions to organize academic practice.

The qualitative data indicates, however, that even having a policy (e.g. a checklist on hand and on display) or setting up committees and documenting and signing off on a procedure does not guarantee a policy will be implemented. Firstly, the capacity and personnel needed for quality assurance systems should be adequate, as Elassy (2023) has pointed out, and there should be institutional-level support and commitment for them. This manifested in these findings the smaller and less resourced institutions in this study were more likely to report faculty shortages as a barrier to their participation in these GEP-2023 processes, were less likely to have supervision capacity, were less likely to have robust research supervision, and nominally completed the same GEP-2023 processes as larger universities. This aligns with the findings obtained from Farrukh (2024) who provided an analysis on the challenges of quality assurance (QA) in higher education system in Pakistan, in which difference in the availability of the resources faces by higher education institutions (HEIs) was included as one of the challenge to uniformity of policy implementation.

The major problem that has come from this study can be summed up in three words, ‘resource asymmetry’ which include lack of labs, digital library, research grants, publication support for faculty and lack of faculty in general and its impact on the quality of supervision and the ratio of faculty to students. Besides these restriction there are administrative restriction as far as the evaluation of the dissertation is concerned, as well as verification of the publications and external evaluation and time of completion. The results point towards CHE's (Council for Higher Education Accreditation) claim that only accreditation and quality-assurance regimes that have sufficient capacity of the institutions, can be effective, and towards the thesis that such regimes not only can be useful as a regulatory tool, but they also can be helpful as a capacity building developmental support.

Overall, the discussion reaches the conclusion that although GEP-2023 has been successful in setting up the formal structure of a formal graduate quality-assurance system in Pakistan, its substantive success (in terms

of consistent and quality supervision, ethical research work and timely completion of degrees) depends on the resourcing and capacity-gaps between institutions identified in this study.

6. Conclusion

This is the research where qualitative research can be concluded from research methodology which was used in the research. The key phases of the graduate education, including admission, supervision, research ethics, dissertation evaluation, publications requirement, institutional monitoring and grievance have clear expectations and guidelines regarding the quality-assurance aspects of GEP-2023. The policy has enabled the Universities to record, formal and sensitise the stakeholders as to what they must expect from academic integrity and accountability. In the interim, financial constraints, lack of trained faculty, research facilities, pressure of publication, lack of immediate responses to researchers from the administration and inconsistencies in implementation, are some of the other serious handicaps to full and even implementation. Therefore, policy, as such, cannot be viewed as the final lens through which to examine these reforms, but as the first step and should include continual support for institutions, including through monitoring, faculty training and leadership, to ensure that success is scaled up across all universities, and not just in the most well-endowed.

7. Recommendations

Stakeholder	Actionable recommendation
HEC	Develop a stronger national monitoring framework, provide targeted funding for research infrastructure at under-resourced institutions, and create uniform reporting templates and implementation guidance for GEP-2023 compliance.
Universities	Strengthen QEC-DASR-department coordination, digitise graduate workflow and record-keeping, support publication costs for graduate scholars, and reduce administrative delays in dissertation evaluation and NOC processing.
QECs and ASRBs/DASR	Conduct regular internal audits, track supervision and dissertation timelines proactively, and use documentary and interview-based evidence for continuous, corrective institutional action.
Faculty and supervisors	Attend regular training on supervision practice, research ethics, publication standards and student mentoring, and adopt structured, more frequent communication with supervisees.
Graduate students	Receive structured orientation on GEP-2023 requirements at the start of their programme, covering plagiarism rules, publication pathways, grievance processes and realistic research timelines.

References

- Altbach, P. G., & de Wit, H. (2023). *The challenge to higher education internationalization in the twenty-first century*. *International Higher Education*, 114, 6-8.
- Brennan, J., & Shah, T. (2022). *Managing quality in higher education: An international perspective on institutional assessment and change*. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 76(4), 681-697.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2022). *Research methods in education (9th ed.)*. Routledge.
- Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). (2023). *Principles of transparency and best practice in scholarly publishing*. COPE.
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). (2023). *Accreditation and quality assurance in higher education*. CHEA.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2022). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (5th ed.)*. SAGE Publications.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2023). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research (6th ed.)*. SAGE Publications.
- Elassy, N. (2023). *The concepts of quality, quality assurance and quality enhancement*. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 31(2), 175-190.
- Farrukh, M. (2024). *Challenges of quality assurance in higher education institutions of Pakistan*. *Pakistan Journal of Education*, 41(2), 88-104.
- Hameed, M. M. (2026). *Analysis of quality assurance initiatives taken to implement Graduate Education Policy 2023 in Pakistan [Doctoral thesis, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur]*.
- Harvey, L., & Green, D. (2022). *Defining quality in higher education*. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 47(5), 737-750.
- Higher Education Commission Pakistan. (2023). *Graduate Education Policy 2023*. HEC Pakistan.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2022). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Martin, M., & Stella, A. (2023). *External quality assurance in higher education: Making choices*. UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning.
- UNESCO. (2023). *Higher education global trends and quality assurance*. UNESCO.