

## Evaluating the Impact of PSG-2023 on Higher Education Quality in Pakistan: A Thematic Analysis of Faculty and Administrative Perspectives

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### Abstract

The Pakistan Standard Guidelines (PSG-2023), introduced by the Higher Education Commission, represent a major reform aimed at improving academic quality and governance in higher education. This study evaluates the impact of PSG-2023 through a thematic analysis of faculty and administrative perspectives. Semi-structured interviews with academic and administrative leaders across multiple universities were analyzed using open and axial coding. Four key themes emerged. First, Enhanced Academic Quality was observed through structured curriculum alignment with outcome-based education (OBE), student-centered pedagogy, and increased research output. Second, Strengthened Governance and Accountability was achieved via empowered Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), real-time dashboards, and evidence-based planning. Third, Perceptions and Opportunities reflected junior faculty's appreciation of transparent career benchmarks alongside senior faculty's concerns over bureaucratic constraints. Finally, Challenges in Implementation included heavy administrative workload, limited resources, outdated IT infrastructure, and insufficient follow-up training. The findings suggest that while PSG-2023 has advanced curriculum design, research culture, and institutional accountability, its effectiveness is hindered by systemic and contextual barriers. The study contributes to the growing discourse on quality assurance in higher education, with implications for policy refinement and institutional practice in Pakistan and other developing contexts.

**Keywords:** PSG-2023, higher education quality, outcome-based education, governance, Pakistan, thematic analysis

### Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education has emerged as a global priority, with universities increasingly expected to align their teaching, research, and governance structures with internationally recognized benchmarks. In Pakistan, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has historically played a central role in steering reforms aimed at enhancing institutional performance and accountability. The launch of the *Pakistan Standard Guidelines (PSG-2023)* represents one of the most comprehensive and ambitious initiatives in this regard. PSG-2023 introduces an outcome-based framework designed to align Pakistani higher education institutions with global best practices, while simultaneously responding to the country's contextual needs and developmental goals. The framework encompasses multiple dimensions of academic quality, including governance, curriculum design, pedagogy, research productivity, and student support. Unlike earlier models that focused primarily on periodic compliance and accreditation, PSG-2023 emphasizes continuous improvement, outcome-based education (OBE), and evidence-driven decision-making. It mandates regular curriculum reviews, structured faculty development, systematic student feedback mechanisms, and performance-linked research evaluation. Furthermore, the framework strengthens institutional accountability through the formal empowerment of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), the establishment of internal and external review mechanisms, and the integration of data-driven tools such as real-time dashboards and departmental scorecards.

Given the scope and ambition of these reforms, understanding their practical impact on universities is of critical importance. This study examines how PSG-2023 has influenced the quality of higher education across Pakistan by exploring its effects on curriculum alignment, teaching and learning practices, faculty development, research culture, and

institutional governance. Through a thematic analysis of faculty and administrative perspectives, the paper assesses both the opportunities created by PSG-2023 and the challenges that hinder its effective implementation. In doing so, it addresses a key question: has PSG-2023 succeeded in elevating academic standards in Pakistan, or has it revealed structural and systemic issues that require further refinement? By situating PSG-2023 within the broader discourse on higher education reform, this paper contributes to the growing literature on quality assurance in developing contexts. It offers insights not only for policymakers and university leaders in Pakistan but also for international stakeholders seeking to understand how national quality frameworks function in practice.

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the impact of the *Pakistan Standard Guidelines (PSG-2023)* on the quality of higher education in Pakistan. More specifically, the study seeks to analyze how the framework has influenced teaching and learning practices, curriculum design, research productivity, governance mechanisms, and institutional accountability. In addition, it aims to capture the perceptions of both faculty and administrators regarding the opportunities and challenges associated with PSG-2023, thereby offering a balanced understanding of its implementation.





Drawing upon the thematic analysis of interview data from diverse universities, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How has PSG-2023 contributed to enhancing academic quality in Pakistani universities, particularly in terms of curriculum alignment, teaching practices, and research output?
2. In what ways has PSG-2023 reshaped governance and accountability structures, including the role of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), internal quality committees, and evidence-based planning mechanisms?
3. What are the perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding the opportunities, benefits, and limitations of PSG-2023?
4. What practical challenges do institutions face in implementing PSG-2023, and how do these challenges affect its long-term effectiveness?

By addressing these questions, the study not only evaluates the immediate outcomes of PSG-2023 but also identifies the structural and systemic issues that require attention for its sustainable success.

### Thematic Analysis

To align with the stated research objectives and questions, the raw interview data was first broken down into discrete, meaningful units (open coding). These units were then grouped into higher-order categories (axial coding). Finally, overarching themes were synthesized to answer each research objective, supported by representative quotations. The following themes are generated because of analysis of interview responses.

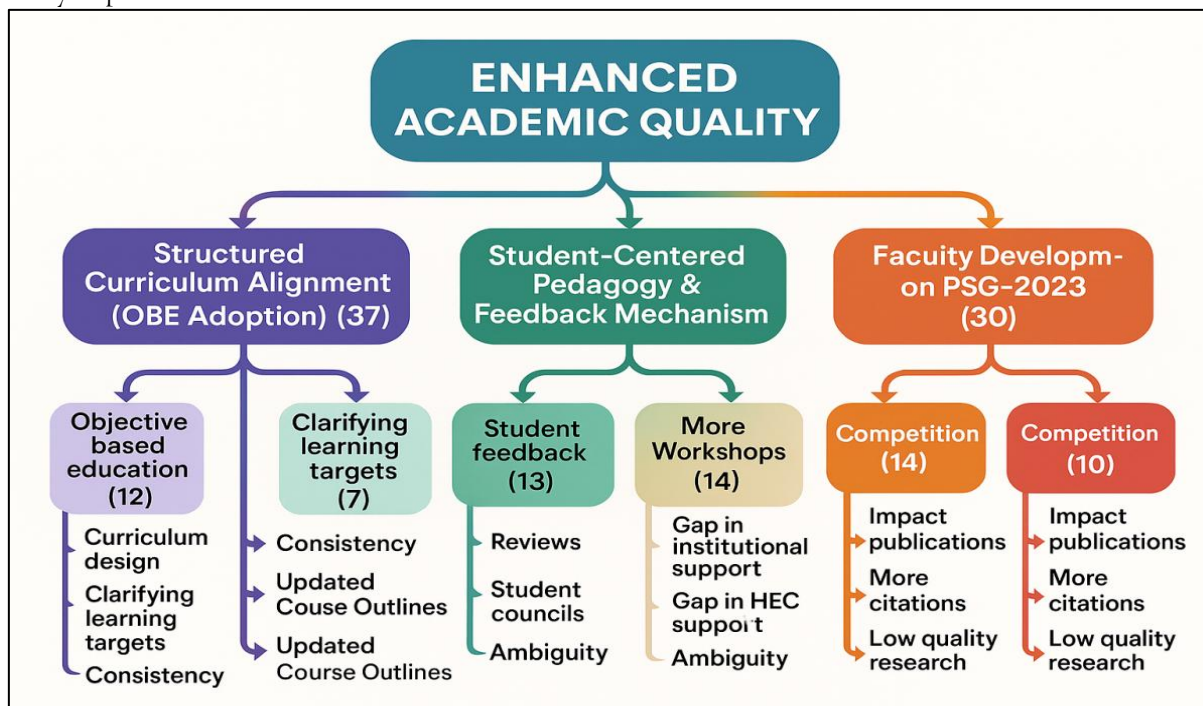
			
<b>Enhanced Academic Quality</b>	<b>Strengthened Governance and Accountability</b>	<b>Perceptions &amp; Opportunities</b>	<b>Challenges in Implementation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structured Curriculum Alignment (OBE Adoption)</li> <li>• Student-Centered Pedagogy &amp; Feedback Mechanism</li> <li>• Faculty Development on PSG-2023</li> <li>• Research Output &amp; Impact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of Real-Time Dashboards &amp; Scorecards</li> <li>• Formalized QA Roles &amp; Committees</li> <li>• Evidence-Based Strategic Planning</li> <li>• External Academic Reviews (Self or by HEC &amp; accreditation bodies)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial Trainings and Communication Gaps</li> <li>• Faculty Opinions</li> <li>• Professional Development</li> <li>• Perceived Benefits to Universities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrative &amp; Workload Pressures</li> <li>• Resource &amp; Funding</li> <li>• Technical &amp; Infrastructure Hurdles</li> <li>• Resistance to Change</li> <li>• Lack of Sustained Follow-Up Training</li> </ul>

*Summary of themes and the sub-themes*

### Theme I-- Enhanced Academic Quality

This theme captures how PSG-2023 has driven significant improvements in teaching, curriculum design, and research standards across higher education institutions. Key developments include the structured alignment of course content with outcome-based education (OBE) principles, requiring faculty to update syllabi quarterly and integrate learning outcomes into rubrics and assessments. Teaching has become more transparent and student-centered, with increased use of feedback mechanisms, flipped classrooms, and learning analytics. Faculty development has expanded

through more frequent training workshops, although follow-up support remains limited. Additionally, mandated research output requirements have led to increased publication activity, though concerns persist in prioritizing quantity over scholarly depth.



#### Theme 1: Enhanced Academic Quality

##### Structured Curriculum Alignment (OBE Adoption)

When PSG-2023 introduced the requirement for outcome-based education, institutions everywhere began moving away from the familiar pattern of annual curriculum updates toward a model that demanded regular, systematic reviews. Faculty members found themselves reconceptualizing curriculum design as an ongoing process. By planning to revisit course outlines every semester, academic heads and senior faculty ensure that each lab course, course topic, course seminar or research study is explicitly linked to a clearly defined learning outcome. This shift not only compels instructors to justify why each component appears in the syllabus but also fosters a culture in which teaching materials are continually refined to reflect emerging best practices and evolving academic standards.

*"Now we are planning to update course outlines quarterly instead of yearly. We are redesigning lab courses to include outcome-based rubrics and checklists and align all courses to PSG learning outcomes; course outline templates... etc."*

(Associate Professor)

Rather than leaving each department to define its own standards in isolation, many institutions now convene regular meetings where faculty from social sciences, management studies, engineering, and the humanities compare notes on course design, assessment strategies, and student feedback mechanisms. These collaborative sessions help identify overlaps and gaps between programs, ensuring a coherent educational experience across the institution.

*"We are having extensive meetings to opt OBE in almost every discipline like social sciences, management sciences, etc."*

(Registrar 3)

##### Student-Centered Pedagogy & Feedback Mechanism

The new framework demanded a pedagogical shift in higher education, emphasizing student-centered learning over traditional, lecture-dominated instruction. Ultimately Institutions no longer viewing students as passive recipients of knowledge but as active participants in the learning process. One of the most significant changes is the formal requirement for collecting structured midterm feedback from students. This approach encourages instructors to make evidence-based adjustments to their teaching strategies before the semester concludes, rather than after final assessments have been completed. It also fosters a more responsive and flexible classroom environment where student input is not only welcomed but structurally embedded into course delivery.

*"Faculty must collect student feedback at midterm and adjust their pedagogical approach before final exams. Peer observations are now mandatory—two per year—so I get continuous input."*

(Associate Professor)



A few faculty members and two of the registrars told us that PSG-2023 also demanded students' council for academic excellence. It was meant to engage students' representatives from a body of students in university management decisions and committee meetings. Registrar further stated that:

*"Lead student representatives (LSR), from SCALE i.e. Student council for academic learning and enhancement are meant to be elected formally. ....there must be some sort of criteria and rules for selecting such student representatives. ....they will be attending our meetings related to QA, give feedbacks and tell us real-time stories or scenarios going in the university. ....This on one hand is a good initiative but on the other hand it is political in nature...."*

(Registrar, 2)

### **Faculty Development on PSG-2023**

The rollout of PSG-2023 has prompted institutions to initiate faculty development programs aimed at familiarizing educators with new quality assurance expectations, particularly those related to outcome-based education (OBE). Some universities have conducted initial workshops and seminars to introduce the framework, its terminology, and implementation guidelines. However, these efforts, while necessary, have often proven to be introductory rather than transformative. The training sessions typically span a day or two, offering broad overviews without providing sustained, hands-on support for faculty navigating complex implementation challenges.

*"We had a two-day 'PSG-2023 Implementation' workshop but no follow-up. I'm partway through an external OBE certificate course, juggling teaching four courses—it's slow progress without on-the-job coaching."*

(Assistant Professor)

Therefore, it indicated a common limitation while formal training exists, its short duration and lack of institutional scaffolding mean that much of the learning burden falls back on individual educators, often already managing heavy workloads. Without ongoing mentorship, peer collaboration, or institutional coaching, faculty struggle to integrate OBE principles into their daily teaching practice in meaningful ways. The absence of follow-up sessions, feedback loops, or reflective forums limits the ability of educators to troubleshoot, adapt, or deepen their understanding of how to align assessment tasks with learning outcomes or how to design rubrics that meet PSG criteria. As a result, the transition to PSG-aligned practices becomes slow, uneven, and often reliant on personal initiative rather than systemic support. This not only delays full-scale adoption but risks creating inconsistencies in quality across departments, depending on how well-supported or resourceful individual instructors are.

The faculty development dimension of PSG-2023 thus reflects a broader tension in policy implementation: the gap between policy awareness and instructional transformation. While awareness-raising workshops may satisfy compliance on paper, real pedagogical change requires long-term investment in professional learning communities, classroom observation cycles, instructional design teams, and mentorship programs. Faculty need not just knowledge of what PSG requires, but guided opportunities to practice and reflect on how to implement these principles within their specific disciplines and course contexts.

### **Research Output & Impact**

The introduction of a mandated minimum publication requirement under PSG-2023 has had a clear and measurable effect on research output across institutions. By formally linking faculty evaluation to publication metrics—such as the number of peer-reviewed papers and the visibility of those papers through citation indices—universities have seen a notable increase in scholarly activity. The policy created an incentive structure where departments that may have previously lacked a strong research culture began actively encouraging faculty to publish.

*"In 2022, our department averaged 0.8 publications per faculty. By 2024, we reached 1.2 publications per year. PSG's requirement pushed us to apply for grants focusing on 'research impact,' leading to policy-relevant studies."*

(Associate Professor)

However, this shift has also generated concern among faculty and administrators about the unintended consequences of metric-driven research evaluation. As institutions increasingly focus on measurable indicators like citation counts or journal impact factors, some researchers feel pressured to prioritize publication volume over the depth or originality of their work. The emphasis on outputs that are easily quantifiable, particularly in Scopus-indexed or Q-category journals—can discourage long-term, exploratory, or interdisciplinary research that may be slower to publish or less likely to appear in citation-heavy outlets.

*"Universities now focus on citation indices made us chase local conferences or low-impact journals. Those who publish 'One' Q4 publication in two years...in this way they would not be appreciated among others having high low-impact publications."*

(Vice-Chancellor I)

**Theme 2 -- Strengthened Governance and Accountability**

This theme highlights how PSG-2023 has reshaped institutional structures by formalizing quality assurance roles and integrating evidence-based decision-making. QECs have moved from advisory to executive functions, and new committees—like Internal Quality Committees (IQC)—have been established to oversee compliance. Strategic planning, including program approvals and budgeting, now requires alignment with PSG-RIPE standards, emphasizing faculty readiness, infrastructure, and relevance. Real-time dashboards and departmental scorecards have introduced continuous monitoring and triggered accountability mechanisms, promoted data-driven governance and fostering a culture of transparency and institutional responsibility.

*Theme 2: Strengthened Governance and Accountability****Creation of Real-Time Dashboards & Scorecards***

The integration of real-time dashboards and performance scorecards represents a significant evolution in how higher education institutions manage quality assurance under PSG-2023. Traditionally, monitoring academic quality and institutional performance relied on static, retrospective reports—often compiled annually and lacking immediacy. PSG-2023 has introduced a data-driven accountability model that enables continuous oversight through live systems capable of tracking critical quality indicators such as student pass rates, faculty teaching evaluations, research outputs, and engagement metrics.

Institutions are now investing in the development of dynamic QA dashboards designed for leadership visibility and prompt action. These tools not only centralize diverse datasets but also provide automated triggers that flag underperformance, allowing for real-time intervention.

*"We are striving to develop and maintain a QA Dashboard where data on teaching evaluations, research outputs, and student metrics are visible to the Deans....VC....any other person authorized.... in real time. We are planning an automated criteria on the dashboard that..... If pass rates fall below 70 %, an automated 'Quality Alert' triggers an intervention."*

(Dean, 2)

In parallel, PSG-2023 has encouraged the implementation of departmental scorecards that provide a standardized view of quality compliance across units. These scorecards are color-coded to reflect performance levels—green for full compliance ( $\geq 90\%$ ), amber for moderate compliance ( $70-89\%$ ), and red for underperformance ( $<70\%$ ).

*"QEC emailed us some of the criteria that each department will receive a quarterly QA scorecard, color-coded: green ( $\geq 90\%$  compliance), amber ( $70-89\%$ ), red ( $<70\%$ ). A red will trigger a mandatory remediation plan."*

(Quality Assurance Coordinator)

This system of visual and easily interpretable metrics introduces both transparency and accountability, ensuring that departments remain aware of their standing and are motivated to maintain or improve performance. The color-coded structure functions as a powerful signaling mechanism that not only identifies problem areas but also creates a shared language of quality across the institution.

These tools also help elevate the role of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) from passive compliance units to active drivers of continuous improvement. Rather than merely collecting documents for accreditation cycles, QECs are now tasked with managing live quality data, generating early warnings, and coordinating responses to red-flagged departments. This shift fosters a culture where quality assurance is not an occasional obligation, but a daily institutional practice embedded in operational workflows.

#### **Formalized QA Roles & Committees**

PSG-2023 has fundamentally redefined the internal architecture of quality assurance in higher education institutions by institutionalizing more formal and empowered QA roles, while embedding strategic decision-making within a rigorous, evidence-based framework. One of the most prominent changes is the transformation of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) from advisory units into executive bodies with decision-making authority. Previously, QECs often functioned as peripheral entities, offering recommendations without real enforcement capacity. PSG-2023 disrupted that model by mandating a proactive, implementation-focused role for these units.

*“PSG-2023 is demanding that QEC should be more than recommending body. It should take decisions and implement policies.”*

*(Registrar I)*

Alongside this shift in role, institutions have established or restructured high-level oversight committees—such as University Quality Boards like IQAE, Implementation Task Forces, and Internal Quality Committees (IQCs)—to monitor PSG compliance in a systematic and evidence-driven manner. These bodies ensure that QA responsibilities are shared across administrative and academic leadership, and that external expertise is integrated into institutional governance.

*“Our University Quality Board named IQC, chaired by the VC and including two external QA experts, meets quarterly to audit PSG compliance. Departments must present documented evidence for each standard.”*

*(Vice-Chancellor, 2)*

#### **Evidence-Based Strategic Planning**

The introduction of PSG-2023 has reinforced the importance of evidence-based strategic planning across higher education institutions, requiring that all major academic and operational decisions be aligned with PSG-RIPE criteria—Relevance, Impact, Preparedness, and Evidence. Unlike previous models, where new academic programs or capital projects might be proposed based on institutional interest or perceived demand, the current framework demands that all such proposals be justified through rigorous, data-driven assessments. This has shifted strategic planning from being an aspirational process to a structured and accountable one, grounded in demonstrable need, institutional capacity, and alignment with national educational priorities. Budgets, program approvals, and launching projects now require explicit PSG-RIPE-PREE alignments.

*“Every new program proposal must include full assessments as per OBE, objectives and scope of program plus.....intended learning outcomes”*

*(Dean, 1)*

Vice-chancellors have similarly stressed the shift toward data-informed decision-making in broader institutional planning. There is growing insistence that proposals for new academic departments, research centers, or even infrastructure projects go through rigorous vetting processes, with cross-functional assessment committees evaluating each component. This includes confirming whether the institution has qualified faculty to deliver the proposed program, whether laboratory and instructional facilities meet PSG benchmarks, and whether there is sufficient research or community engagement support to justify the initiative.

*“Decisions to open new programs—should be made only after verifying faculty credentials, lab facilities, and research support as PSG-RIPE standards...here the role of assessment committees become proactive.....like qualification assessments by HR, and faculty relevance by Relevance Assessment Committee”*

*(Vice-Chancellor, 2)*

#### **External Academic Reviews (Self or by HEC & Accreditation bodies)**

The introduction of PSG-2023 has significantly raised the bar for external academic reviews within Pakistan's higher education landscape, emphasizing credibility, transparency, and alignment with national quality standards.



Institutions are now expected not only to comply with internal reporting processes but also to subject themselves to structured evaluations—either through formal HEC-led reviews or through self-initiated external assessments that follow national guidelines such as PSG-RIPE and PREE (Periodic Review and Evaluation Exercise, formerly SAR). These reviews are no longer optional or symbolic exercises; they are central to demonstrating institutional accountability and academic integrity.

Many universities have begun proactively arranging self-conducted external quality assurance (QA) reviews by inviting recognized QA experts from other institutions or regulatory bodies. These expert-led assessments validate internal PSG reports and ensure compliance with evolving HEC benchmarks.

*“We conducted external QA reviews as ‘self’ i.e. by inviting renowned and expert QA members for our PSG reports such as RIPE and PREE (SAR).”*

*(Vice-Chancellor, 3)*

Despite the value these reviews bring, institutional leaders acknowledge that the process is often demanding, resource-intensive, and at times unclear in its procedures. The operational challenge ranging from interpreting PSG standards to assembling evidence in time—can be significant, particularly for institutions still building QA capacity. Yet the perceived long-term benefits outweigh the short-term burdens.

*“Having an attempt to conduct academic reviews as per PSG-2023 attract stakeholder trust—although these activities are hectic, very difficult to follow, somewhat processes are ambiguous in some matters.... still when a university once go through these...it will be easier for them....while universities will start follow the path of QA in a true manner.”*

*(Vice-Chancellor, 2)*

### Theme 3 -- Perceptions & Opportunities

This theme explores how faculty, management and administration view PSG-2023, revealing both appreciation and skepticism. Junior faculty generally welcomed the clarity it brings to promotions and performance expectations, while senior faculty often viewed it as bureaucratic and restrictive. Many appreciated the structured professional development opportunities, despite finding training courses overly theoretical and lacking follow-up.

Institutions acknowledged the opportunity to develop detailed academic and administrative policies under PSG-2023, though concerns remain about its adaptability and long-term sustainability. Overall, while the framework is seen as a step toward improvement, perceptions vary based on roles, readiness, and institutional context.



Theme 3: Perceptions & Opportunities

#### *Initial trainings and Communication Gaps*

Most institutions experienced a top-down dissemination approach, where policies were primarily circulated via email, often without sufficient orientation or explanatory sessions. This approach resulted in a widespread lack of clarity, especially among faculty and mid-level administrators, who were left to decipher dense policy documents on their own.

*“PSG 2023 guidelines landed in my inbox with no executive summary or face-to-face session. It took four months of departmental meetings to clarify the requirements.”*

*(Registrar)*

While later workshops organized by Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) helped improve comprehension, the impact was mixed. Faculty reactions ranged from appreciation of the framework's potential to skepticism or confusion.

*"After QEC training sessions, our some of the faculty members felt that PSG-2023 may have high impact on quality...others think that it is just a waste of time or another burden for paperwork...some considered it still quite confusing..."*

*(Associate Professor)*

A particularly contentious area was the introduction of new formats for core quality assurance documents, especially the Self-Assessment Report (SAR). While the PSG-2023 framework was introduced centrally by HEC, the specific templates and implementation tools were not standardized. This forced institutions to create or borrow formats based on their own interpretations or the practices of peer universities.

*"The new template of SAR is not given by HEC, rather HEC only gave the manual or policy of PREE... So, experts of various universities developed the template for SAR and some other universities also adopt them..."*

*(Director QEC 4)*

This lack of standardization contributed to confusion and administrative burden, particularly for faculty who were used to previous formats.

*"The new template given by QEC is an extra burden for faculty. We were habitual of filling up the previous template. Although many of the features are the same. Yet it is more detailed now. We don't have many things here...in our department"*

*(Lecturer 5)*

Even QEC members, tasked with facilitating PSG implementation, reported gaps in their own training—especially around the practical rollout of core PSG components like PREE (Program review evaluation and enhancement) and RIPE (review of institutional performance evaluation).

*"The trainings given by HEC is mostly on the standards of both documents i.e. PREE and RIPE. There was always a big gap between the implementation phase of the two in the training. HEC must re-think it. Every university is trying to implement with hit and trial method."*

*(Director QEC 3)*

One of the Vice chancellors said,

*"HEC called Vice chancellors to introduce the new quality assurance framework.....but it is worth noting that our managers are doing it all to implement the frameworks. I am not sure that either we could meet the target or not..."*

*(VC 2)*

*"We need more detailed trainings.....perhaps phase wise.....for these frameworks...In fact HEC needs to be clarified itself first..."*

*(Dean 4)*

### **Faculty opinions**

Junior faculty members, particularly those in the early stages of their careers, tend to view the framework positively. For them, PSG-2023 provides a clear structure and transparency in career progression, including defined key performance indicators (KPIs) related to research output, teaching evaluations, and professional development. These explicit benchmarks help early-career academics navigate institutional expectations more confidently and plan their growth accordingly.

*"Junior colleagues (0–5 years) appreciate knowing exactly what's needed for promotion—PSG KPIs like research targets and faculty development. Senior professors complain it undermines their academic autonomy."*

*(Vice-Chancellor 1)*

On the other hand more senior or tenured faculty often express dissatisfaction with what they perceive as an increasingly bureaucratic environment. For many, the prescriptive nature of PSG-2023 represents a shift away from the academic freedom they once enjoyed. The framework's emphasis on documentation, standardized templates, and externally defined outcomes is seen by some as limiting their autonomy in course design, research focus, and pedagogical style. These faculty members are more likely to view the new requirements as administratively burdensome and as imposing a one-size-fits-all approach to education.

*"Some tenured faculty resist leaving traditional lectures behind—they feel forced to redesign courses with little incentive."*



(Dean 4)

**Professional Development**

Despite some reservations about the depth and practicality of training sessions, many faculty and quality assurance personnel expressed appreciation for the structured professional development opportunities introduced alongside PSG-2023. The initial workshops, often hosted by HEC or institutional QECs, were seen as valuable in introducing the foundational logic behind the framework—particularly in explaining key components like rubrics, outcome mapping, and alignment with RIPE and PREE principles. These sessions served as critical entry points for understanding PSG's rationale and operational tools, especially for those new to quality assurance or outcome-based education.

*"Attending the 2-days HEC workshop clarified why PSG exists. While follow-up coaching is lacking, the initial orientation gave us essential rubrics and checklists..... yet there are some things still need to be clarified, HEC should answer all the inquiries of universities regarding PSG, RIPE and PREE..."*

(QEC 1)

**Perceived Benefits to Universities**

The framework has prompted institutions to formalize procedures that were previously handled in an ad-hoc or loosely structured manner. One of the most significant changes has been the push to develop both macro and micro-level policies—ranging from academic quality protocols to administrative and financial regulations. These efforts reflect a growing institutional awareness that effective quality assurance depends not just on teaching and learning reforms, but on clear, consistent, and well-documented internal processes.

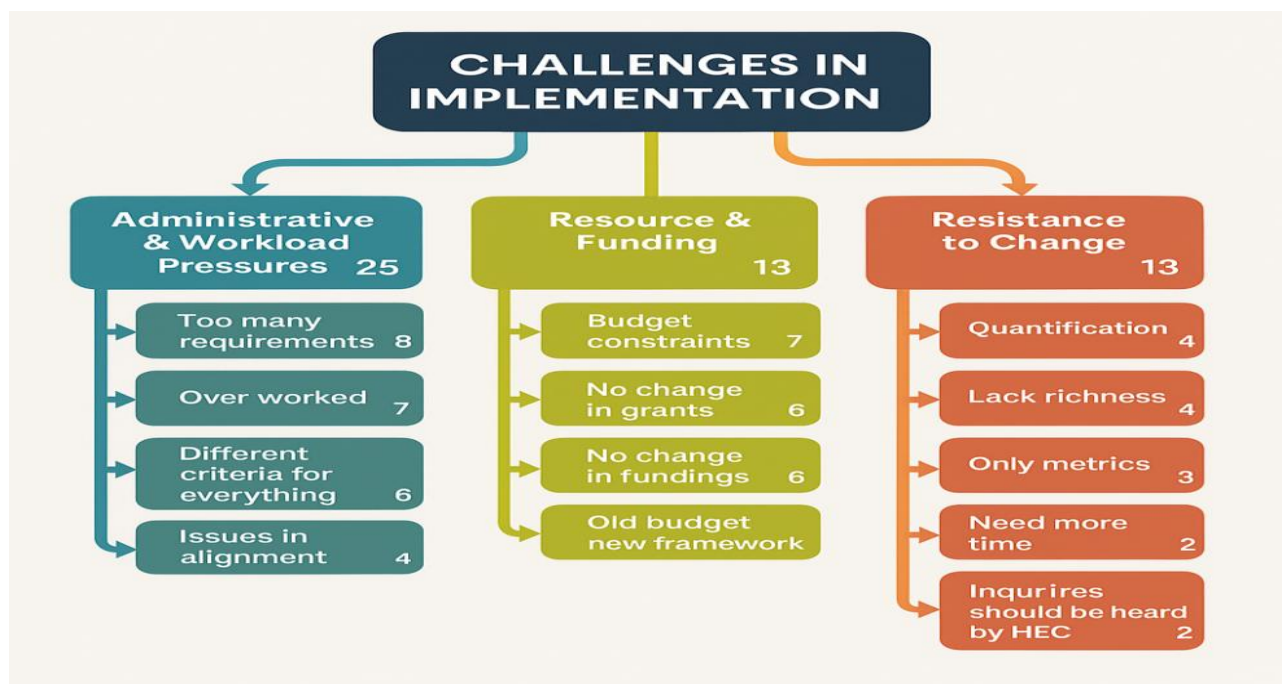
The requirement to align with RIPE (Review of Institutional Performance Evaluation) standards has driven universities to rethink how decisions are made, recorded, and evaluated.

*"We are striving and attempting to develop and implement micro policies for various operations of the university for complying to RIPE standards. It is a very extensive task. University needs experts to develop it. And we are still wondering whether these will work for our scenarios or not"*

(Registrar 2)

**Theme 4 -- Challenges in Implementation**

This theme outlines the practical difficulties institutions face in applying PSG-2023. Key issues include heavy administrative workload on faculty, limited funding for research and quality assurance activities, outdated IT infrastructure, and lack of standardized templates or tools. Initial trainings were often too theoretical, with minimal follow-up support, leaving many to adopt a trial-and-error approach. Resistance to change, especially from senior faculty, and inconsistent readiness across universities further hindered effective adoption.



Theme 4: Challenges and Opportunities

**Administrative & Workload Pressures**

One of the most prominent concerns voiced by academics is the sheer volume of documentation and compliance-related tasks now embedded into their regular workload. Faculty members are expected to complete a range of forms and reports each semester, many of which are mandated by the QEC as part of aligning PREE (Program review for effectiveness and enhancement) and broader PSG requirements. Faculty members find themselves juggling national curriculum revision committees (NCRC), accreditation council requirements (e.g., NCEAC), and now the comprehensive PSG-2023-RIPE-PREE frameworks—each with its own set of forms, standards, and timelines.

*“Filling out the many mandatory PREE tables and forms each semester—course alignment, PLO mapping, research log, student feedback, QEC report, faculty self-appraisal—now consumes almost 25 % of faculty working hours in a semester.....on one hand we are complying NCRC requirements, on the other hand NCEAC standards....and now this new quality assurance framework requirements sent by QEC..... how can we do all the things in our academic time”*

*(Dean I)*

### **Resource & Funding**

One of the most frequently cited challenges is the disconnect between the policy’s strategic objectives—such as improved faculty development, expanded research output, and comprehensive quality assurance—and the static or constrained institutional budgets allocated to achieve them.

Faculty members report that, despite PSG’s explicit emphasis on increasing research support, financial support for such activities has not improved. Requests for research grants, travel allowances, or international collaboration are often denied due to insufficient resources.

*“Funding for faculty research was not increased, despite PSG’s call for ‘research support.’ My request for an international conference was denied”*

*(Assistant Professor)*

From an administrative perspective, leadership is also facing constraints in reallocating or expanding budgets to fully implement PSG-2023. Although many universities previously allocated funds for quality assurance-related activities, these budgets were often designed to support occasional external reviews or compliance with earlier HEC mandates. The more expansive scope of PSG—demanding frequent audits, data dashboards, policy development, training sessions, and evidence generation—requires a sustained financial commitment that many institutions are not yet prepared to meet.

*“We are still unable to sanction separate budget for the full implementation of new quality assurance framework....previously we usually sanction budget for various self and HEC’s reviews to QEC.... last year it was around 20 million”*

*(Vice-Chancellor I)*

### **Technical & Infrastructure Hurdles**

As institutions strive to meet the data-driven and digitized requirements of the framework—such as real-time dashboards, standardized templates, and evidence submission portals—they are often constrained by outdated systems and underpowered hardware. These limitations pose real barriers to timely and effective compliance.

Many institutions still rely on legacy student information systems (SIS) or basic learning management systems (LMS) that are not configured to handle the complex and large-scale data required by PSG, RIPE, and PREE standards. Customizing these platforms to include new data fields, automate workflows, or assign responsibilities across departments often exceeds their current technical capacity.

*“We are planning to put PSG/RIPE/PREE on our LMS..... yet our software house acclaimed that we still didn’t have such fields to hold this many data—e.g., sanctioning different questions and standards from RIPE and PREE to relevant faculty or administrative heads, tracking the submission and much more.”*

*(QA Coordinator)*

In addition to software limitations, hardware constraints also impede smooth operations. Faculty and QEC staff report difficulties uploading large documents—especially comprehensive reports required under PREE or SAR formats—because institutional computers and networks cannot handle the file sizes or processing loads.

*“Uploading large reports often crashed outdated QEC computers, forcing us to split documents into smaller files.”*

*(Associate Professor)*

### **Resistance to Change**

A key area of resistance lies in the shift from qualitative, narrative-based reporting toward a more standardized, data-driven model that emphasizes dashboards, rubrics, and measurable indicators of performance. For experienced educators, this transition is seen not just as a methodological shift but as a challenge to long-standing academic values and practices.

Senior faculty members, in particular, express discomfort with what they perceive as an attempt to “quantify the unquantifiable.” Many argue that the richness of academic work—especially in the humanities and social sciences—cannot be fully captured through rigid metrics or dashboards.

*“Senior professors argued that new frameworks demanded to quantify the quality that is simply impossible. They felt their traditional way of writing reports are no longer ‘counted’ because new framework emphasizes on dashboards and rubrics.”*

*(Vice-Chancellor)*

Efforts by QEC teams to promote flexibility and context-sensitive implementation have been met with mixed success. Quality managers try to communicate that rubrics and dashboards are adaptable, not rigid prescriptions. However, skepticism remains, particularly among department heads and senior staff who associate the new tools with surveillance or loss of autonomy.

*“We tried our all efforts to convince our heads of all academic and administrative departments that the rubrics and dashboards are flexible can be change as per requirements, but the senior members are still reluctant and resistant to this change”*

*(Manager QEC I)*

Two of the universities said that they are not at this stage of implementing dashboard or rubrics. Yet, we are writing up reports and developing various policies.

### ***Lack of Follow-Up Training***

A recurring concern voiced by faculty and administrators regarding the implementation of PSG-2023 is the lack of sustained, practical follow-up training after the initial orientation workshops. While early sessions introduced the policy and outlined its theoretical foundations, many participants found these sessions insufficient for bridging the gap between understanding the policy on paper and applying it in day-to-day academic operations. The early trainings, though appreciated for providing structure, were often viewed as overly conceptual, with limited focus on hands-on strategies or contextual examples.

*“Initial ‘PSG-2023 aka Best Practices’ workshops were too theoretical. We needed ongoing coaching to implement rubrics every semester or end of the year.”*

*(Head of department/Professor)*

Senior leadership has also emphasized the need for more responsive and iterative training efforts from HEC. The absence of follow-up training not only hampers technical compliance but also weakens faculty confidence and morale.

*“HEC should periodically organize workshops and meetings for listening up the hurdles by the universities had to go through for the implementation of this wholesome sort of quality assurance framework”*

*(VC 5)*

### **Conclusion**

The implementation of the Pakistan Standard Guidelines (PSG-2023) marks an important turning point in Pakistan's higher education reform agenda. This study demonstrates that the framework has generated meaningful progress in enhancing academic quality through outcome-based education (OBE), revised curricula, student-centered pedagogy, and increased research activity. Similarly, strengthened governance and accountability mechanisms—particularly the formal empowerment of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), the creation of oversight committees, and the adoption of real-time dashboards and scorecards—have positioned institutions to adopt more transparent and evidence-driven practices. These developments indicate that PSG-2023 has laid the groundwork for a culture of continuous quality improvement within universities. At the same time, the findings highlight that the journey toward full implementation remains uneven and complex. Faculty and administrative perceptions reveal a divided landscape: junior academics value the clarity of performance benchmarks, while senior faculty often perceive PSG-2023 as restrictive and bureaucratic. Moreover, the framework's effectiveness is undermined by persistent challenges, including heavy administrative workloads, inadequate funding, limited IT infrastructure, insufficient follow-up training, and resistance to change. The absence of standardized tools and templates has further complicated compliance, leaving many institutions to rely on fragmented and inconsistent approaches.

Overall, PSG-2023 has succeeded in setting new standards of accountability and quality, but its long-term success depends on sustained investment, clearer implementation mechanisms, and capacity-building support for institutions



and faculty alike. Policymakers must prioritize phased and context-sensitive training, allocate dedicated resources for research and quality enhancement, and ensure that digital infrastructure is upgraded to support data-driven governance. Universities, on their part, must foster a culture of collaboration, adaptability, and shared responsibility in order to internalize the principles of PSG-2023 beyond compliance. By drawing attention to both the achievements and the obstacles of this reform, the study contributes to the wider discourse on higher education quality assurance in developing contexts. The lessons from Pakistan's experience underscore the importance of balancing global best practices with local realities, ensuring that quality frameworks are not only ambitious in design but also feasible and sustainable in practice.

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