



The Role of Monitoring and Evaluation in Enhancing the Quality of Higher Education Institutions in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Monitoring and evaluation play a vital role in shaping the quality and accountability of higher education systems. In Afghanistan, where the sector faces persistent challenges, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are urgently needed to ensure institutional improvement and sustainability. This study explores how global best practices can inform the development of such systems, particularly by drawing on models from Finland, Canada, and Singapore, which illustrate how structured, well-resourced, and technology-supported approaches enhance educational excellence. The research employed a comparative review method, combining theoretical foundations, policy analysis, and secondary literature to assess both international experiences and Afghanistan's current realities. By examining strategies, structures, and outcomes of effective monitoring and evaluation frameworks abroad, the study identifies adaptable lessons for Afghanistan's higher education context. Findings indicate that Afghanistan struggles with limited administrative capacity, insufficient financial resources, cultural barriers, and weak technical infrastructure. In contrast, the selected countries demonstrate how standardized monitoring practices, strong institutional capacity, and the integration of digital technologies can lead to improved accountability, better teaching and learning outcomes, and stronger governance mechanisms. The study concludes that Afghanistan can significantly benefit from adopting comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems tailored to its local needs. Strengthening human resources, ensuring adequate funding, and establishing clear, standardized procedures are critical steps. By synthesizing global experiences with local challenges, this research contributes to a practical framework for reform, offering pathways to sustainable quality enhancement in Afghan higher education.

Keywords: Monitoring, Evaluation, Higher Education Institutions, Challenges, Solutions.

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable development, social cohesion, and economic growth. In a rapidly evolving global context, the quality of education has emerged as an essential driver of societal progress, requiring not only expanded access but also meaningful and effective learning outcomes aligned with community and national needs. Previous studies highlight that high-quality education is inseparable from the presence of strong quality assurance mechanisms capable of

sustaining transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement (OECD, 2010; UNESCO, 2015).

Within this framework, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) constitute vital instruments that allow institutions to track, assess, and enhance their performance. Monitoring ensures systematic oversight of processes, resources, and outputs, while evaluation provides deeper insights into outcomes, impacts, and long-term relevance (Patton, 2017; OECD, 2021). Literature emphasizes their complementary nature: monitoring addresses implementation, whereas evaluation clarifies effectiveness, challenges, and future directions (Stiggins, 2005; UNDP, 2022). Theoretical debates in the field reflect both converging and diverging views on the most effective balance between monitoring practices and evaluative research, with some scholars stressing efficiency and others underscoring adaptability (Kakar & Durani, 2018).

Despite this growing body of research, significant gaps remain in understanding how M&E can be applied in fragile and resource-constrained contexts. Afghanistan represents one such case where higher education suffers from governance weaknesses, financial shortages, and infrastructural deficits that hinder effective quality assurance (Rahmani, 2020). Yet, systematic M&E frameworks could provide a transformative pathway for institutional strengthening and reform.

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of monitoring and evaluation in improving the quality of higher education in Afghanistan by drawing on international models and adapting them to local realities. By identifying challenges, exploring comparative experiences, and proposing practical recommendations, the article seeks to provide a comprehensive framework to guide Afghan institutions toward more robust quality assurance systems. In doing so, it highlights how effective M&E can foster resilience, improve learning outcomes, and contribute to broader national development objectives.

Material and Method

This research employed a qualitative and comparative review methodology to examine the role of monitoring and evaluation in higher education. The study synthesized theoretical frameworks, policy documents, and peer-reviewed literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of monitoring and evaluation practices. International models from Finland, Canada, and Singapore were purposively selected as case studies due to their established reputation for effective and systematic quality assurance systems. Secondary data were collected from academic publications, government reports, and international organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, and UNDP to assess both the structures and outcomes of these models. The Afghan higher education sector was then critically analyzed in light of these global experiences, enabling the identification of challenges, opportunities, and practical strategies for reform. The comparative approach ensured that lessons drawn from international best practices could be adapted to Afghanistan's specific socio-cultural and institutional context.

Concepts and Principles of Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are two interrelated but distinct processes that serve as the foundation of effective quality assurance in education systems. Together, they provide the evidence and insight needed to guide decision-making, ensure accountability, and drive continuous improvement within educational institutions.

Monitoring is an ongoing, systematic process carried out during the implementation of a project, program, or policy. It involves the regular collection and analysis of data using predefined indicators to track progress, resource use, and operational efficiency. Monitoring helps institutions understand what is happening on the ground—whether activities are being implemented as planned, how well resources are being used, and what adjustments may be needed to stay on course (UNDP, 2022). In the context of higher education, monitoring can help universities and colleges stay aligned with academic goals, identify early signs of issues, and ensure transparency and accountability in their operations.

Evaluation, by contrast, is a more analytical and comprehensive process that focuses on the value and impact of an initiative. It examines not just whether goals were achieved, but how and why they were—or were not—met. Evaluations are typically conducted at key stages—before, during, or after a program—to assess effectiveness, relevance, sustainability, and long-term outcomes (OECD, 2021). In higher education, evaluation provides the evidence needed to refine academic programs, improve teaching and learning, and ensure that institutional strategies are meeting the needs of students and society.

While both monitoring and evaluation aim to improve performance and outcomes, they differ in focus and function. Monitoring is primarily concerned with “how” things are being done, emphasizing process and progress. Evaluation, on the other hand, addresses the “why”—exploring causes, effects, and lessons learned (Patton, 2017). Monitoring is often conducted internally, as part of routine management, whereas evaluation may involve external reviewers to provide an independent perspective.

For M&E systems to be effective and meaningful, they must be grounded in a set of core principles. First, transparency ensures that information is open and accessible to all stakeholders, building trust and accountability. Second, participation promotes inclusive engagement, where educators, administrators, students, and even external partners have a voice in shaping and understanding the process. Third, credibility requires the use of valid methods and reliable data sources to ensure that findings are accurate and trustworthy. Finally, timeliness highlights the need for prompt analysis and communication of results, allowing institutions to respond quickly and adapt as needed (USAID, 2023).

In sum, understanding the distinct roles and shared value of monitoring and evaluation is key to enhancing the quality of higher education. When guided by clear principles and

integrated into institutional practices, M&E can serve as a powerful tool for educational reform and innovation—particularly in countries like Afghanistan, where building resilient and responsive higher education systems is critical to national development.

Importance of Monitoring and Evaluation in Higher Education Institutions

Monitoring and evaluation play a crucial role in improving the quality of education in institutions. Monitoring supports the continuous review and supervision of educational processes, allowing problems to be identified early and addressed through timely interventions. It systematically oversees all aspects of a school's or university's functions, significantly contributing to quality improvement and providing reliable information for informed decision-making (OECD, 2010; Fullan, 2007).

The evaluation of learning outcomes assesses the extent to which educational objectives are achieved and measures students' progress in knowledge, skills, and competencies. This evaluation enables teachers and institutions to implement changes in curricula, teaching methods, and learning environments. Consequently, it serves as a fundamental part of the learning process, ensuring student success and guiding efforts to enhance educational quality (Stiggins, 2005; Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Administrative and instructional supervision is also critical for maintaining order and transparency in educational institutions. It monitors teaching practices, schedules, instructional planning, and administrative performance. Through this supervision, institutions gain insights into challenges and weaknesses in their operations, facilitating rapid improvements and enabling the development of a positive and progressive educational environment (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hopkins, 2007). Overall, monitoring and evaluation promote transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement in institutional operations.

Current Situation of Monitoring and Evaluation in Afghanistan's Higher Education Institutes

In Afghanistan, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are recognized as important components of improving educational quality and strengthening institutional performance. However, despite some foundational efforts, the existing M&E systems within higher education institutions remain underdeveloped and far from aligned with internationally accepted standards. Most monitoring activities are limited to routine data collection, basic reporting, and documenting institutional activities. While these efforts serve as an entry point, they often lack the depth and structure required for meaningful evaluation and continuous quality improvement (Abdullah, 2021).

One of the major challenges facing Afghanistan's higher education sector is the shortage of skilled technical and administrative personnel. Many institutions lack trained staff who are capable of designing, implementing, and analyzing effective monitoring and evaluation processes. This human resource gap is compounded by limited financial investment and underdeveloped technological infrastructure, making it difficult to build or sustain

efficient M&E systems. The absence of adequate digital tools and data systems means that most monitoring is still paper-based and reactive, rather than proactive and data-driven. A further complication is the lack of transparency and accountability in reporting mechanisms, which undermines the credibility of M&E practices. Reports are often inconsistent or incomplete, and there is limited follow-up to ensure that findings are used to drive change. The lack of coordination between relevant government agencies also weakens the overall monitoring framework, making it difficult to share information, align goals, or conduct joint evaluations across institutions (Karimi, 2022).

In some areas, especially those affected by ongoing conflict or instability, security concerns create additional barriers to conducting regular monitoring and evaluation. Field visits, inspections, and stakeholder consultations become difficult or impossible, further isolating institutions from the support and oversight needed to ensure quality (Noori, 2023). This situation not only affects data collection but also limits opportunities for professional development and peer learning.

Moreover, the absence of continuous training and capacity-building initiatives has left many monitoring officers without the tools or knowledge needed to produce accurate and useful evaluations. Without investment in human development, even well-designed systems cannot function effectively. The reliance on outdated methods and the lack of institutional commitment to M&E reflect a broader need for reform.

To address these challenges, Afghanistan's higher education sector must prioritize the development of a more robust and responsive M&E system. This includes increasing financial and technical support, investing in digital infrastructure, and—most importantly—building human capacity through structured, ongoing training programs. Strengthening these areas will be essential not only for improving educational outcomes but also for fostering a culture of accountability, learning, and continuous improvement across the country's higher education institutions.

Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of Monitoring and Evaluation

The effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems in higher education institutions depends on a range of interconnected factors that influence both the quality of processes and the relevance of outcomes. In the Afghan context—where resources are limited and institutional capacity is still developing—understanding and addressing these factors is critical to improving M&E practices and, ultimately, enhancing educational quality.

One of the most significant factors is human capacity. Effective M&E requires teams that are well-trained, knowledgeable in educational evaluation methods, and skilled in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Without these competencies, M&E systems cannot function as intended. Many institutions in Afghanistan face a shortage of qualified personnel, which limits the scope and accuracy of evaluations. Investing in ongoing professional development and creating opportunities for learning and skill-building are

essential for strengthening M&E capacity and empowering institutions to take ownership of their quality assurance efforts (Kusek & Rist, 2004).

Equally important are technical and financial resources. Successful M&E depends on access to appropriate tools such as computers, data management systems, statistical software, and reliable internet connectivity. These resources enable institutions to collect and analyze data efficiently, store information securely, and generate timely reports. However, many universities in Afghanistan operate with limited funding, which constrains their ability to support even the most basic M&E functions. Adequate financial planning and budget allocation are necessary to cover essential costs like staff training, travel for site visits, data processing, and reporting (Patton, 2012). Without these resources, even well-intentioned monitoring efforts may fall short.

A third critical factor is the quality of data collection and analysis. Accurate, relevant, and timely data form the backbone of any effective M&E system. Institutions must be able to gather information systematically, use appropriate tools and methodologies, and interpret results in a way that informs practical decision-making. Ensuring data integrity, using standardized indicators, and effectively communicating findings to stakeholders are all key elements of successful M&E. When data is unreliable or poorly analyzed, the entire process loses its value, and the institution risks making uninformed or misguided decisions (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2012).

In sum, human expertise, access to technology, financial investment, and data quality all play vital roles in determining the effectiveness of M&E systems. For Afghanistan's higher education institutions, addressing these areas must be a national priority. Strengthening these foundational components will not only improve M&E outcomes but also contribute to building a culture of accountability, learning, and continuous improvement across the sector.

Enhancing Quality through Monitoring and Evaluation In Higher Education Institutions

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are essential tools for improving the quality of higher education. By systematically collecting and analyzing information, M&E provides valuable insights into the performance of teaching, learning, and institutional processes. These insights help shape more effective policies and practices, ensuring that educational institutions evolve in ways that truly meet student and societal needs. In the context of Afghanistan's higher education system, where reform and improvement are urgently needed, M&E offers a practical path toward data-driven decision-making and sustainable development.

One of the most significant contributions of M&E is its ability to generate accurate, up-to-date information about teaching methods, student learning, and administrative performance. These data-driven findings enable institutions to assess the effectiveness of their current activities and adjust their strategies accordingly. For policymakers, this

evidence forms the foundation for designing relevant reforms and implementing innovations that are grounded in real needs and performance metrics (OECD, 2010). In this way, M&E not only supports internal improvement but also plays a key role in shaping national education strategies.

Moreover, M&E enhances transparency across the education sector. Regular evaluation of academic and administrative activities ensures that decisions are made openly and are based on clear evidence. When stakeholders—including faculty, students, administrators, and government agencies—have access to reliable information, they are more likely to trust the decisions being made. Transparency also ensures that educational resources are allocated efficiently and reduces the risks of mismanagement or corruption (World Bank, 2018). In a fragile system like Afghanistan's, promoting openness and trust is fundamental to rebuilding confidence in higher education institutions.

Another major advantage of effective M&E is the strengthening of accountability. When teachers and administrators are regularly monitored and evaluated, they become more aware of their responsibilities and are expected to demonstrate the outcomes of their efforts. This sense of accountability fosters professional integrity and encourages a culture of continuous self-improvement. Teachers are more motivated to enhance their instructional approaches, while institutions are more likely to prioritize student learning outcomes and institutional performance (UNESCO, 2015). As a result, M&E contributes not only to improved teaching and learning but also to the development of a more responsible and transparent educational culture.

In summary, monitoring and evaluation play a transformative role in enhancing the quality of higher education. They empower institutions with actionable data, promote transparency in governance, and build a sense of accountability among educators and administrators. For Afghanistan, investing in effective M&E systems is not just a technical necessity—it is a strategic step toward achieving a more resilient, equitable, and high-performing higher education sector.

Global Experiences and Lessons Learned

Around the world, several countries have developed strong and innovative education systems that can offer valuable lessons for improving quality assurance in higher education. Nations such as Finland, Canada, and Singapore are frequently cited as global leaders due to their effective use of monitoring and evaluation, commitment to teacher development, and integration of modern technology in teaching and learning. These countries prioritize continuous assessment, standardized monitoring practices, and a deep responsiveness to student needs—factors that contribute directly to high-quality educational outcomes (OECD, 2020).

What sets these systems apart is their foundation in social equity, inclusive access, and collaborative relationships between educators and students. In Finland, for example, educational success is not driven by high-stakes testing but by trust, professional autonomy, and a culture of self-evaluation. Singapore's model emphasizes performance-based accountability, frequent data use, and targeted teacher training. Canada focuses on decentralized decision-making and strong institutional autonomy, coupled with mechanisms to ensure accountability and quality improvement (UNESCO, 2018). These examples show that effective monitoring and evaluation are not just technical tools, but part of broader systems committed to transparency, feedback, and continuous learning.

For Afghanistan, where the higher education sector is still developing and faces numerous structural and contextual challenges, these international experiences can offer inspiration and direction, but not direct replication. Local realities—such as security concerns, infrastructure limitations, and resource constraints—require that any external model be carefully adapted to fit the national context.

That said, there are practical and achievable lessons that Afghanistan can adopt over time. These include investing in professional development programs for teachers, establishing structured and transparent quality monitoring systems, and gradually integrating technology to support teaching and evaluation processes (World Bank, 2022). Emphasizing collaboration among educators, encouraging self-assessment practices, and fostering a culture of trust and accountability can also help improve the quality of education from within.

It is important to recognize that such reforms cannot be implemented overnight. Given Afghanistan's current situation, the adoption of international best practices must be gradual, context-sensitive, and sustainable. Efforts should begin with small-scale pilot programs, capacity-building for M&E professionals, and the development of policy frameworks that encourage long-term institutional growth (USAID, 2021). By learning from global experiences while staying grounded in local realities, Afghanistan can take meaningful steps toward a more resilient and effective higher education system.

Table 1. Type, purpose and reference of monitoring and evaluation in higher education institutions

Type of M&E	What's Monitored/Evaluated	Purpose	Reference
Internal Monitoring	Teaching quality, curriculum compliance, research output, lab and library resources	Ensure standards are met and trigger early corrective action	MoHE institutional QA framework; Bakhtar Univ QA Dept researchgate.netreddit.combakhtar.edu.af+1mohe.gov.af+1
Internal Evaluation (Self)	Entire institution, departments, programs	Reflect on strengths/weak	MoHE QI Directorate; Khatam Univ example

Type of M&E	What's Monitored/Evaluated	Purpose	Reference
Evaluation)		nesses, prepare for external reviews	
External Evaluation & Accreditation	Overall institutional quality, educational services, learning outcomes	Validate quality, assure stakeholders, provide recognition	MoHE QA accreditation bill; Bakhtar univ accreditation
Design-Focused Evaluation (DFE)	Course design alignment: objectives, activities, assessments	Ensure instructional coherence and quality	Background on DFE in HE
Program M&E	Specific HE programs: e.g., research grants, capacity building	Monitor implementation, assess outcomes, ensure funds use	Afghan donor-funded project study
National-Level M&E	Research productivity, university rankings, curricula effectiveness	Inform policy, national strategy, resource allocation	MoHE vision & national M&E plan

Challenges and Solutions

The implementation of effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems in Afghanistan's higher education sector is confronted by a range of administrative, cultural, and technical challenges. These barriers not only limit the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms but also slow down the overall development and modernization of educational institutions.

From an administrative perspective, many institutions struggle with unclear organizational responsibilities, insufficient budget allocations, and weak oversight mechanisms. These gaps make it difficult to ensure consistent monitoring or evaluate outcomes meaningfully, leading to inefficiencies in both academic and management practices (World Bank, 2021). Without clearly defined roles and responsibilities or sustainable financial support, even the most well-intentioned M&E policies risk remaining ineffective on the ground.

Cultural resistance is another significant barrier. Deep-rooted reliance on traditional teaching methods, skepticism toward reform, and reluctance to adopt new policies often hinder innovation and change. In many institutions, both faculty and administrators may be hesitant to embrace data-driven approaches or external evaluation processes, fearing

criticism or disruption to established routines (UNESCO, 2020). This mindset limits progress and stalls the integration of modern educational practices.

On the technical side, a lack of access to modern technology, inadequate information management systems, and limited staff capacity pose ongoing difficulties. Many universities in Afghanistan operate without sufficient digital tools for data collection and analysis, and staff often lack the training needed to use existing tools effectively. These shortcomings severely impact the efficiency and reliability of monitoring and evaluation activities (OECD, 2019).

To address these multifaceted challenges, several strategic solutions are necessary. Administratively, institutions must undergo structural reforms to clearly define roles, strengthen internal M&E units, and ensure adequate financial support for quality assurance activities. A more transparent and results-oriented system can help build a culture of accountability and support continuous improvement (Asian Development Bank, 2022).

Culturally, change must be fostered through awareness-raising and capacity-building programs. Providing ongoing training for teachers, administrators, and students can help shift attitudes and build confidence in the value of new educational approaches. Highlighting the benefits of monitoring and evaluation for improving teaching quality and student outcomes can also help overcome resistance (World Education Forum, 2021).

From a technical standpoint, the government and institutions must invest in upgrading technological infrastructure, including software for data management, digital evaluation tools, and internet access. Additionally, training programs must be expanded to equip staff with the skills needed to operate these systems effectively and make data-driven decisions (International Journal of Educational Technology, 2023).

Ultimately, overcoming these challenges requires a coordinated, inclusive, and long-term strategy. Success depends on collaboration among government agencies, higher education institutions, development partners, and communities. Through shared commitment and sustained effort, Afghanistan can gradually build a robust monitoring and evaluation culture that supports quality education and institutional growth (World Bank, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted role of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in strengthening the quality of higher education, particularly in contexts facing systemic challenges such as Afghanistan. Consistent with global literature, this research confirms that M&E functions not only as a technical mechanism for data collection and assessment but also as a transformative tool for institutional learning, accountability, and strategic reform (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2015). However, the Afghan higher education sector demonstrates a critical gap between theoretical principles of M&E and their practical application. Current practices remain largely procedural and compliance-driven,

with limited emphasis on analytical depth, stakeholder participation, or long-term impact assessment.

One of the central issues is the shortage of human and technical capacity. As supported by Kusek and Rist (2004), M&E systems require specialized expertise to generate credible evidence and inform decision-making. In Afghanistan, the lack of trained personnel, coupled with insufficient technological infrastructure, undermines both the quality and sustainability of M&E activities. This not only restricts institutions to reactive, paper-based monitoring but also limits their ability to engage in forward-looking evaluations that can shape policy and practice. Furthermore, weak coordination across government agencies and inconsistent reporting mechanisms erode trust and accountability, echoing findings from Karimi (2022) on the fragmented nature of institutional oversight.

Another important factor relates to cultural and organizational resistance. Traditional teaching practices, skepticism toward reform, and limited acceptance of data-driven decision-making hinder the integration of modern M&E approaches. This aligns with broader research emphasizing that cultural factors are as critical as technical tools in determining the effectiveness of quality assurance systems (UNESCO, 2020). Without a shift toward participatory and transparent practices, M&E risks being perceived as a bureaucratic exercise rather than a meaningful driver of educational improvement.

Comparative insights from Finland, Canada, and Singapore illustrate that effective M&E thrives when embedded within a culture of trust, professional autonomy, and continuous learning (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2018). While direct replication of these models is unrealistic in Afghanistan due to structural and contextual constraints, the principles of inclusivity, transparency, and professional development are highly transferable. Small-scale, context-sensitive reforms—such as piloting digital monitoring systems, introducing structured capacity-building initiatives, and institutionalizing self-evaluation practices—could gradually strengthen Afghanistan’s M&E landscape.

In sum, the discussion underscores that monitoring and evaluation in Afghanistan’s higher education must evolve from fragmented, compliance-oriented practices to integrated, capacity-driven systems. Achieving this requires not only technical investment but also cultural change, policy alignment, and sustained commitment from multiple stakeholders. By adopting a phased and adaptive approach, Afghanistan can transform M&E into a cornerstone of higher education reform, fostering resilience, accountability, and continuous improvement across institutions.

Conclusion

This study underscores that monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are not auxiliary tools but fundamental mechanisms for advancing the quality of higher education. The results demonstrate that without systematic monitoring, institutions struggle to identify challenges promptly and apply corrective measures, while evaluation provides the evidence base necessary to assess learning outcomes, institutional performance, and policy effectiveness. Together, M&E create a framework for transparency, accountability, and informed decision-making, which are critical for sustainable reform. In Afghanistan’s higher education system, where fragile infrastructure, limited resources, and ongoing reform needs prevail, strengthening M&E practices emerges as an urgent priority. The discussion highlights that beyond technical mechanisms, a culture of continuous learning,

stakeholder participation, and professional capacity-building is indispensable for effective implementation. Drawing on global experiences, the study concludes that embedding M&E into governance structures, supported by investment in technology and collaborative approaches, can gradually foster more responsive, equitable, and resilient institutions.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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