



Examining the Impact of Quality Assurance on Facilitating and Accelerating the Internationalization Process of Higher Education in Afghanistan

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of quality assurance on the internationalization of higher education in Afghanistan. Quality assurance in higher education refers to a systematic set of policies, processes, and practices designed to maintain, enhance, and continuously evaluate the quality of academic, research, and service activities within higher education institutions. These mechanisms aim to meet expected academic and professional standards while gaining the trust of stakeholders. Internationalization of higher education is defined as a strategic process that integrates international, intercultural, and global dimensions into policy-making, planning, teaching, research, and academic services to enhance institutional quality, competitiveness, and engagement with the global academic community. Given the growing importance of both quality assurance and internationalization, this study seeks to understand how the implementation of quality assurance frameworks can facilitate and accelerate the internationalization process. Employing a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, the research involved a comprehensive review of scholarly literature and institutional documents. Data collected from this review were analyzed using thematic analysis. Key findings reveal that effective quality assurance mechanisms play a critical role in building academic trust and credibility, improving educational and research quality, increasing participation in international collaborative research projects, facilitating faculty and student exchange programs, and promoting the internationalization of curricula. In conclusion, the study highlights that quality assurance not only strengthens institutional capacity but also serves as a vital driver for the global integration of higher education in Afghanistan, offering valuable insights for policymakers, administrators, and academic leaders seeking to enhance institutional international engagement.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Internationalization, Higher Education, Higher Education in Afghanistan.

Introduction

The advancement of societies is closely linked to the quantitative and qualitative expansion of education systems, particularly higher education, which is widely recognized as an investment in human capital. High-quality higher education is essential for cultural, social, and economic development, and its significance has been emphasized by numerous scholars and international organizations. In today's interconnected world, higher

education is increasingly shaped by global dynamics, where internationalization has emerged as a key driver for fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange, and the development of globally competent graduates (Peaceleenn, 1993). Internationalization involves cross-border collaborations, joint research initiatives, faculty and student exchanges, and curriculum development aligned with global standards. However, effective internationalization is contingent on the existence of robust and institutionalized quality assurance (QA) systems. Without QA, higher education institutions risk falling short of international benchmarks, leading to isolation from the global academic community (de Wit & Hunter, 2015).

Globally, scholars and policymakers highlight QA as an indispensable requirement for credibility, competitiveness, and integration into international academic networks. QA frameworks strengthen academic credibility, enhance institutional trust, and create opportunities for international partnerships (Plater, 2013; Pillay & Kimber, 2009). These processes are not only utilized to ensure internal improvement but also to elevate global visibility and recognition (Chi Hou, 2016). At the same time, QA has been recognized as a multidimensional concept that safeguards every stage of research and education—from planning and implementation to outcomes and dissemination (Smith et al., 2018). Without QA, research and teaching face significant risks, including weak reproducibility, reduced validity, and declining trust from society and international partners. Institutions with dedicated QA mechanisms generally achieve stronger academic performance, higher publication quality, and more effective international collaborations (Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

The literature suggests that international organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, WHO, and the European Science Foundation (ESF) have consistently emphasized QA as the foundation for global credibility and transnational cooperation (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2015). For instance, the OECD reports highlight that many countries still lack sustainable mechanisms for continuous QA, which undermines institutional credibility (OECD, 2021). UNESCO (2015) has recommended establishing national QA frameworks to ensure continuous evaluation, while the ESF has reported that QA directly enhances global credibility, funding opportunities, and cross-border partnerships. From this perspective, QA serves not only as a technical mechanism but also as a strategic tool for advancing internationalization.

Afghanistan's higher education system faces a particularly complex context. Decades of political instability, weak infrastructure, inconsistent policies, and shortages of qualified personnel have hindered the development of robust QA systems, thereby limiting international integration (Welch & Wahidyar, 2020; Niroo & Glass, 2021). While some efforts have been made by the Ministry of Higher Education and universities to strengthen QA frameworks and align them with international standards, significant challenges persist, including limited financial resources, weak accreditation processes, unequal access to education, and fragile international collaborations (Mussawy, 2019). Consequently, Afghan universities face difficulties in building global academic connections, enhancing institutional credibility, and improving international visibility.

Despite the recognized importance of QA and internationalization in the global higher education discourse, limited studies have addressed their interaction in the Afghan context. Research on QA in Afghanistan remains in its infancy, and little empirical evidence exists to demonstrate its impact on the internationalization of Afghan higher

education institutions. Existing works emphasize QA as critical for international collaboration but provide limited insights into its actual role in shaping international partnerships, faculty and student mobility, or curriculum internationalization (Guri-Rosenblit, 2015; Roof, 2014). This lack of comprehensive analysis creates a major research gap, undermining evidence-based policymaking and strategic planning.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining the role of quality assurance in facilitating the internationalization of Afghan higher education. Specifically, it explores the extent to which QA mechanisms influence the credibility, teaching and research quality, and international engagement of Afghan universities. The research addresses the following key questions: What is the current state of the QA system in Afghan higher education? Does QA contribute to enhancing academic credibility, improving teaching and research quality, supporting international collaborative projects, and facilitating student and faculty exchanges? Furthermore, does QA foster curriculum alignment with global standards and enable meaningful international partnerships?

Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach and thematic analysis, this study systematically reviews existing literature, institutional reports, and international frameworks to provide evidence-based insights. By doing so, it seeks to identify the challenges and opportunities facing Afghan higher education institutions in their pursuit of internationalization through QA. The findings will contribute to scholarly discussions on QA and internationalization in fragile contexts, while also providing practical recommendations for policymakers, university leaders, and international organizations engaged in Afghan higher education reform. Ultimately, this research aspires to demonstrate that QA is not merely a procedural formality but a strategic and ethical imperative that can strengthen the credibility, effectiveness, and global integration of Afghan higher education.

Material and Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical design, focusing on higher education institutions in Afghanistan to examine the role of quality assurance (QA) in fostering internationalization. As a review study, it relies on library-based data collection through an extensive literature review and document analysis. Relevant scholarly articles, books, theses, conference papers, and reports from international organizations, national QA agencies, and Afghan higher education institutions were systematically selected based on credibility, currency, and relevance. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved familiarization with texts, coding of recurring patterns, grouping into themes, and integrating findings to construct a comprehensive narrative. Special attention was given to contextual factors influencing QA and internationalization in Afghanistan. This method ensured rigor, credibility, and the synthesis of diverse perspectives, thereby enabling the study to highlight the mechanisms, challenges, and implications of QA frameworks for advancing the internationalization of Afghan higher education.

Role of Quality Assurance in Advancing the Internationalization of Higher Education

Early discussions on higher education internationalization primarily focused on student and faculty mobility, curriculum internationalization, and cross-border educational partnerships. However, as international activities expanded and became more complex,

concerns regarding quality and standards increased. This led to a growing recognition of the vital role of quality assurance (QA) in supporting and legitimizing internationalization efforts. For instance, the European higher education area has actively promoted a common QA framework to enhance trust, transparency, and facilitate internationalization (European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2024). This framework emphasizes that QA is not merely an administrative task but a strategic tool for global engagement.

Multiple studies have examined the multidimensional impact of QA on various aspects of internationalization. Strong QA mechanisms, such as accreditation and quality reviews, play a central role in enhancing the academic credibility of higher education institutions. Such credibility is crucial for attracting international students and faculty and for establishing legitimate global partnerships. When institutions adhere to internationally recognized quality standards, their degrees and qualifications gain broader acceptance and transferability across educational systems, directly supporting student and faculty mobility.

Furthermore, implementing QA frameworks significantly improves the quality of teaching and research in higher education institutions. By promoting regular self-assessment, external review, and continuous improvement, QA processes encourage institutions to refine teaching methods, enhance research infrastructure, and cultivate a culture of academic excellence. This internal strengthening makes institutions more attractive partners for international research collaborations and joint academic programs (Velkoska & Nuredin, 2024). Integrating global perspectives into curricula—a key component of higher education internationalization—is often facilitated through QA processes that encourage curriculum review and alignment with international standards (Oyedotun, 2025).

QA can act as a supportive driver of internationalization by establishing standards aligned with global expectations. Conversely, internationalization can contribute to quality improvement by introducing best global practices, promoting faculty professional development, and enabling resource sharing (World Bank, 2013).

The emergence of QA mechanisms and frameworks has coincided with an increase in international partnerships, creating potential synergy between the two processes. Such collaborations can provide valuable resources, research findings, expertise, and quality enhancement models, while QA frameworks ensure that international cooperation aligns with local needs and standards (Roof, 2014).

Studies indicate that higher education internationalization requires institutions to meet specific quality benchmarks to expand international relations, attract foreign students, and participate in cross-border research projects (Knight, 2012). The European Network for Quality Assurance has identified QA mechanisms and the European QA framework as key elements in building trust and transparency, thereby facilitating internationalization across European higher education. This perspective underscores the fundamental role of coordinated QA systems in enabling cross-border activities, including mobility and recognition of academic qualifications (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2024).

The following analysis explores the impact of QA on various dimensions of higher education internationalization and addresses each of the research questions. This analysis

draws on empirical insights, theoretical frameworks, and findings from the systematic literature review.

Current Status of Quality Assurance in Afghanistan's Higher Education System

The higher education system in Afghanistan is primarily administered by the Ministry of Higher Education, which oversees both public and private universities. Academic programs are offered at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels; however, master's and doctoral programs are still under development and remain limited in scope. In recent years, the Afghan higher education system has sought to expand access and improve quality. The quality assurance (QA) system within higher education is in its early stages of development, experiencing both significant progress and persistent challenges. After decades of conflict and instability, efforts to reconstruct and reform higher education have included the establishment of QA mechanisms. Nevertheless, institutional-level barriers— affecting both public and private universities—limit the effective implementation of QA processes. Despite these challenges, there is a notable commitment among stakeholders to improve the quality of higher education, indicating potential for progress if structural issues are addressed. Consequently, the current state of QA in Afghanistan can be characterized as a developing system, with foundational QA infrastructure in place but confronted by operational and contextual obstacles (Welch & Wahidyar, 2020).

Research indicates that although efforts have been made to institutionalize QA and accreditation processes in Afghan higher education, their implementation has faced substantial difficulties. Key challenges include nascent frameworks, divergent understandings of QA, political instability, resource constraints, weaknesses in policy and planning units, and inefficient execution mechanisms. As a result, expected benefits of QA—such as enhanced academic credibility and international recognition—have not yet been realized. No higher education institution in Afghanistan has achieved global recognition in international evaluation systems, highlighting the urgent need for fundamental reforms and structural support for QA frameworks. A persistent gap exists between Ministry-level QA policies and their implementation at the university level, representing a major barrier to effective quality enhancement (Fahimi, 2025). Studies further reveal tensions between declared QA policies and practical implementation, citing issues such as limited financial resources, insecurity, and insufficient capacity within the Ministry of Higher Education (Welch & Wahidyar, 2020).

Findings suggest that the implementation of QA and internationalization in Afghanistan faces significant challenges. These include limited resources, insufficient institutional capacity, cultural factors, political instability, and the centralized governance structure of the higher education system, all of which affect the relationship between QA and internationalization. The tension between government oversight and institutional autonomy impacts both QA implementation and internationalization strategies. Striking an appropriate balance between central coordination and institutional flexibility remains a critical challenge for Afghanistan's higher education system (World Bank, 2013).

The Role of Quality Assurance Frameworks in Enhancing Academic Credibility

The impact of quality assurance (QA) frameworks on academic credibility is a recurring theme in the literature. Numerous studies indicate that QA is a fundamental pillar in building global trust, and entry of higher education institutions into international collaborative networks depends on the existence of such frameworks (Westerheijden, Stensaker & Rosa, 2007).

There is widespread recognition that robust QA systems and frameworks are vital for maintaining institutional credibility and achieving academic excellence. According to the International Education Accreditation Council (IEAC, 2025), QA frameworks typically cover areas such as academic standards, teaching and learning, assessment, and the student experience—all of which play a critical role in the quality and credibility of higher education institutions.

The implementation of strong QA frameworks plays a decisive role in enhancing the academic credibility of higher education systems globally. International academic credibility is built on trust, transparency, and consistent demonstration of high educational and research standards. Institutions with internationally recognized QA systems are perceived as reliable and valuable, ensuring that their qualifications enjoy higher acceptance and recognition in the global education market. This credibility is a key factor in the international recognition of degrees, mobility of faculty and students, and the development of global academic collaborations (Velkoska & Nuredin, 2024).

Implementing QA frameworks provides a structured approach to ensuring adherence to educational standards, thereby strengthening the confidence of students, employers, and other stakeholders. As emphasized by the IEAC (2025), well-defined and coherent QA mechanisms are essential for maintaining educational standards and demonstrate an institution's commitment to continuous improvement and academic excellence.

The Impact of Quality Assurance Frameworks on Enhancing Teaching and Research Quality

Research findings indicate that the application of quality assurance (QA) frameworks has a positive effect on improving both teaching and research quality in higher education systems. Strategies such as establishing robust QA frameworks, implementing data-driven decision-making, enforcing curricular standards, and emphasizing innovation have been recognized as key factors in enhancing educational and research outcomes (IEAC, 2025).

In the domain of teaching, these processes lead to curriculum review, improvement of instructional methods, enhancement of student support services, and optimization of learning environments. QA promotes faculty professional development, adoption of innovative teaching approaches, and alignment of instruction with labor market needs and global standards.

In the research domain, QA frameworks foster a culture of rigorous investigation, adherence to research ethics, and production of impactful results. These processes encourage institutions to invest in research infrastructure, promote interdisciplinary collaborations, and disseminate high-quality scholarly outputs (Oyedotun, 2025).

The Impact of Quality Assurance Frameworks on Collaborative Research Projects with International Universities

The application of QA frameworks has a direct and positive impact on the implementation of collaborative research projects with international universities. International research collaborations are often complex processes requiring trust, mutual understanding, and assurance regarding partners' scientific capacity and ethical compliance. Institutions with strong QA systems inspire greater confidence in their data, research methodologies, and ethical oversight among potential international partners.

Furthermore, QA frameworks often incorporate guidelines for research governance, intellectual property management, and data sharing, all of which are critical for the success of international collaborations. Adherence to global research standards enhances

institutions' capacity to participate meaningfully in international projects and elevates their standing within the global academic community (Velkoska & Nuredin, 2024).

International collaborative research projects frequently encounter challenges such as differences in scientific cultures, research methodologies, and ethical regulations. QA mechanisms and frameworks provide a common foundation and shared understanding of expected standards, which is essential for successful implementation of joint projects with international universities (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2024). Additionally, QA encourages the publication of research results in reputable international journals and conferences, increasing the visibility of institutional research. This, in turn, generates new opportunities for international research collaboration (Chien, 2023).

The Role of Quality Assurance Frameworks in Faculty Exchange with International Universities

Quality assurance (QA) frameworks play a pivotal role in facilitating faculty exchange programs with international universities. The effectiveness of such exchanges, however, depends on trust in the academic standing and professional competence of visiting faculty. QA frameworks help establish this trust by ensuring that faculty qualifications, teaching methodologies, and research capabilities align with recognized standards. This assurance simplifies the acceptance of visiting faculty by international partner institutions. Consequently, QA directly enables faculty exchanges and, through reciprocal academic enrichment, enhances the teaching and research capacity of higher education institutions (European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2024).

QA frameworks support faculty mobility by guaranteeing the academic and professional quality of participating faculty, standardizing teaching and research collaborations, and promoting a consistent quality of experience for both incoming and outgoing faculty members. QA mechanisms typically include rigorous evaluation of faculty qualifications, teaching effectiveness, and research output, providing partner institutions with confidence that visiting faculty meet the necessary standards (IEAC, 2025).

The Impact of Quality Assurance Frameworks on Student Exchange Programs with International Universities

The implementation of QA frameworks has a significant impact on student exchange programs with international universities. Student mobility is a key indicator of higher education internationalization, as it provides opportunities for intercultural learning, exposure to diverse academic environments, and the development of global employability competencies. For these programs to succeed, mutual trust between partner institutions regarding the quality of education, fair assessment, and recognition of academic credits is essential. QA frameworks ensure that academic programs meet high standards, have clearly defined learning outcomes, and employ transparent assessment methods (Velkoska & Nuredin, 2024).

QA frameworks achieve this assurance by verifying that curricula, teaching standards, and student support services at partner institutions align with recognized benchmarks. This ensures consistency and reliability across exchange programs, thereby fostering confidence in the mobility process and supporting broader internationalization objectives (IEAC, 2025).

The Role of Quality Assurance Frameworks in the Internationalization of Curricula

There is a strong and growing relationship between the implementation of quality assurance (QA) frameworks and the internationalization of university curricula. Curriculum internationalization involves integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the content, learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of academic programs. QA frameworks serve as essential tools to ensure the systematic and effective integration of these dimensions while maintaining academic rigor and coherence. QA processes can guide the development of new internationalized curricula and ensure that such programs meet both local and international standards (CTI, 2015).

QA frameworks provide the necessary structure for curriculum review and development, ensuring that internationalization is a core component of program design rather than a superficial add-on. These mechanisms encourage higher education institutions to align their programs with international benchmarks, incorporate global case studies, and enhance students' intercultural competencies (Oyedotun, 2025).

By directly influencing the design, implementation, and evaluation of curricula with international dimensions, QA frameworks contribute to the improvement of program quality. QA processes encourage institutions to regularly review and update curricula to align with global labor market needs and international challenges, thereby strengthening both the academic quality and global relevance of educational offerings (Deardorff, 2006).

Conclusion

This study comprehensively examined the multifaceted impact of quality assurance (QA) frameworks on the internationalization of higher education in Afghanistan. The findings indicate that robust QA mechanisms serve not only as regulatory tools but also as fundamental enablers of sustainable internationalization. QA enhances academic credibility, ensures alignment of curricula with global standards, and fosters trust among international partners, thereby facilitating student and faculty mobility, cross-border research collaborations, and meaningful academic exchanges. Despite significant efforts by the Ministry of Higher Education to institutionalize QA processes, challenges such as nascent frameworks, limited resources, political instability, centralized governance, and gaps between policy and implementation persist. Nonetheless, effective QA frameworks positively influence teaching and research quality, strengthen global competitiveness, and support systematic integration of international perspectives into curricula. Overall, the study confirms that a strong QA foundation is essential for building stakeholder trust, attracting global talent, and achieving meaningful, sustainable internationalization of Afghanistan's higher education system.

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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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