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# "Quality-Less" Higher Education: Relationship and Neocolonialism in International Development in Afghanistan

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**“QUALITY-LESS” HIGHER EDUCATION: RELATIONSHIP AND  
NEOCOLONIALISM IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFGHANISTAN**

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of  
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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## ABSTRACT

### “QUALITY-LESS” HIGHER EDUCATION: RELATIONSHIP AND NEOCOLONIALISM IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Wolayat Tabasum  
Old Dominion University, 2022  
Director: Dr. Chris R. Glass

This study aimed to explore the internal quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) policy at University X in Afghanistan. A single case study and document review methods were chosen to examine the policy implementation process and its perceived effectiveness at a single university. This case study also explored faculty members' perceptions toward QAA, the policy's impact on teaching and learning, and the opportunities and challenges it might offer. The findings of the study produced unexpected and expected results. The expected findings were tailored around social relationships, labor division, the hierarchy of labor, incompatibility of the policy, and their impact on the implementation process. The common findings tapped more directly into the research questions: the policy's perceived effectiveness on teaching and learning, the faculty members' capacity to implement it, and the future of the policy. Many participants did not believe that the approach had enhanced teaching and learning methods. Some stated that QAA had demotivated students from learning and teachers from teaching. The only sub-group that showed a positive reaction was QAA advocates involved with the Ministry of Higher Education regarding QAA implementation.

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This dissertation is dedicated to all Afghan fathers, like mine,  
who stand against all odds and send their daughters abroad to set the world on fire.

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My supportive and loving father endured immense challenges and struggles in Afghanistan to educate his daughters. Without his support, I would not have been able to obtain my Ph.D. Next, I would like to thank the Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education, faculty, and staff members of universities and colleges. My former colleagues and friends in Afghanistan were a source of support in initiating contacts with participants from afar. I would also like to thank my roommates and friends, Mrs. Kathy Williamson, and Mr. Perry Williamson, who provided me a cozy and comfortable place to focus on writing my dissertation. Mrs. Williamson graciously read my lengthy piece to flag out any typos or funny terms I was blind to catching.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan's higher education system has undergone significant structural changes under different regimes and foreign influence. Afghanistan's higher education has been grappling with rapid changes in the adoption, amendment, and implementation of policies designed to enhance the quality of the higher education system for several decades. Overt and covert participation of foreign forces in policy formulation and implementation in Afghanistan higher education have been present throughout the post-World War II era (Difranceisco & Gitelman, 1984; Tsvetkova, 2017). Most of the changes have resulted from foreign countries' political interventions, including France, Great Britain, the former Soviet Union, and the United States (Difranceisco and Gitelman, 1984; Tsvetkova, 2017). In the 1960s, France and Great Britain altered the education system. Educators in Afghanistan adopted policies to modernize education at all levels, grounded in a local Afghan context, including the mandatory teaching of French and English in schools and adopting a Westernized dress code for male and female students (Difranceisco and Gitelman, 1984).

In the 1970s, the system was further altered based on the former Soviet Union's policies. This included learning the Russian language in schools and introducing Russian-led curricula in some programs. In addition, scholarships were given to students to study in Russia and some of the former USSR countries, including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (Tsvetkova, 2017). In the last 18 years, national and international efforts have been put in place to change the Soviet system. As a result, French and Russian language learning had been eliminated from schools (Difranceisco & Gitelman, 1984). An effort to decentralize higher education started in 2001 with the international community's involvement (Berger and Thoma, 2015).

Afghanistan's current higher education system is hierarchical and centralized. Berger and Thoma (2015) regard Afghanistan public institutions as one of the most highly centralized systems in the world where the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) controls every aspect of each university. Public university administrators and teachers are the implementors of the MoHE's orders, and the MoHE is in a position of absolute power and control over the universities. It is believed that enforcing a centralized and hierarchical administration in the Afghan higher education system is the Soviet regime's legacy (Difranceisco & Gitelman, 1984; Tsvetkova, 2017). Difranceisco and Gitelman (1984) indicate that the implementation of specific policies in the field of Afghan higher education was carried out covertly by influencing local people during the Soviet regime, such as replacing the previous Afghan-led policies (Difranceisco & Gitelman, 1944; Payind, 1989; Tsvetkova, 2017). Thus, a lack of autonomy at the university and faculty levels has been the reason for efforts to change the higher education system since 2001.

One of the significant changes in Afghan higher education is implementing a quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) policy. Western donor agencies funded and supported the policy, like the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). QAA policy targets delivering quality education and focuses on issues of the autonomy and financing of Afghan universities (Berger & Thoma, 2015). Driven by QAA mandates, the MoHE attempted to grant financial autonomy to universities as part of a national higher education strategic plan (Berger & Thoma, 2015). However, in 2012, the Afghan Parliament did not pass the Higher Education Law's amended acts which encompassed granting autonomy to universities. Autonomy and policy implementation are correlated. In other words, autonomy could be an incentive for the implementers because it would create ownership. Scholars argue that, in addition to existing challenges to the implementation of QAA, the rapid increase in enrollments and the rise of private institutions

are impacting the quality of education. Enrollment in Afghanistan higher education is expected to reach 300,000 at public institutions and 100,000 at private institutions by 2030 (Berger and Thoma, 2015).

This qualitative study takes a single case study approach within a social constructivism paradigm (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). The Afghan government policies related to QAA are reviewed to enrich the findings. Furthermore, this study explores the formulation, implementation, and outcome of the QAA policy in Afghanistan higher education and its challenges and opportunities. University X, a pseudonym, is used as a case through which the governance, implementation, and outcomes of the QAA policy are discovered. This study allowed faculty members at the target university and other Afghan universities to describe their perspective on implementation and products as they are the sole implementers of the policy formulated by the foreign agencies and more. The result of this study echoed the success and failure of the QAA processes and indicated future directions.

### **Background of the Study**

Quality assurance policy is the primary national reform policy adopted since the fall of the Taliban regime. The policy attempted to reform Afghanistan's higher education, including teacher training, creating facilities like libraries and dormitories, increasing female students and faculty, making professors responsible, and changing the Russian set-system and regulations. In 2009, the policy was completed and piloted, and the teachers' self-assessment began in 2010. In 2012, the policy implementation officially took place in major public universities, such as Kabul University, Herat University, Kandahar University, and Nangarhar University. For this study, the term Faculty was used to indicate a specific school. I will use the words professors, teachers, and faculty members interchangeably to reference faculty members.

One of the Afghanistan National Development Strategic (ANDS) plans mandated the formulation and implementation of a QAA policy with the collaboration of the MoHE and the World Bank at the 2001 Bonn Conference (ANDS, 2004). After discussions around the rebuilding and reconstruction of Afghan higher education, this decision was made. After a few years of formulating the processes, the policy was implemented as a pilot project in 2010. After MoHE and World Bank feedback, the program was officially implemented in 2012. Since then, the policy has been implemented in public and private higher education institutions, and universities are ranked based on their performance. One of the main reasons for adopting this policy was to enhance the quality of higher education in the country to create standards and uniformity for the universities in the region. In this attempt, one of the first steps was to ensure that quality education was delivered in higher education institutions. The MoHE would assess teaching quality through quality assurance processes and hold faculty and administrators accountable for their teaching methods.

The policymakers and implementation reported different reactions to the policy. They went so far as to say this policy has transformed Afghanistan's higher education (Hayward, 2015). Leaders recount the increase in enrollments and enhancement of faculty members' educational credentials as evidence of success. For this argument, a subtle challenge toward the policy outcome has been funding, lack of autonomy, increasing enrollment when universities lack capacity, and independence (Berger & Thoma, 2015; Hayward, 2015; Shakir, 2012).

On the other hand, implementers express dissatisfaction with the policy's results. Due to the World Bank's direct involvement, the policy is seen as a foreign mandate; hence, ownership has not been developed. Couch (2019) believes that the policy is not conceptualized locally. The author's findings indicate that foreign involvement in writing the policy resulted in less attention to aligning it with Afghan social, political, and financial

contexts. A faculty member at one of the public universities in Afghanistan wrote, “The policy cannot be implemented when there is no cartridge for printers to print, not enough teachers to have smaller courses, and no specific teaching methods” (personal communications, March 27, 2019). Afghanistan’s higher education challenges are real and numerous (Welch & Wahidyar, 2011). Hence, these challenges have hampered the implementation of a policy. The policy implementation is mandatory according to higher education law. However, according to the faculty members and university officials, any tangible results are missing.

As a result, much is lost in finding a solution to implement the policy successfully. Still, much is yet to be seen whether it is viable to keep it in place, amend it, or start over. Also, the outcome of implementing this policy during the past eight years has not been well documented. Welch and Wahidyar (2019) have examined the evolution of the QAA in Afghanistan higher education, one of the few scholarly studies to tackle the issue so far.

### **Reference to Previous Studies**

There has been an interest among a limited number of researchers in the concept of quality and quality assurance in Afghanistan’s higher education; however, speculations have been growing slowly. A little research body could suggest many elements of the QAA in Afghanistan’s higher education. In recent years, quality assurance has focused on teachers’ perceptions of the faculty members at public universities. Tahiryar’s (2017) unpublished work uncovers problems around a standard definition of QAA at a public university. Mussawy and Rossman (2018; 2020) offer the faculty members general perceptions about QAA, how they make sense and give a reason at a few public universities in Kabul, Afghanistan. These researchers agree that implementing QAA has had challenges, particularly for resources and funding; however, a coherent study that tackles or reviews the

policy's outcome since its implementation in the past 8-10 years and the critical challenges the implementers face is missing.

The university presented in this study has not been studied in isolation and in-depth. Notably, the aspect of teaching and learning and teachers' capacity to implement has not been given attention. Studies of the existing ability to implement the policy, its impact on teaching and learning, and future directions are rare. Most current research on QAA in Afghanistan higher education has been based on relatively broad approaches, making it impossible to narrow down and see an element in isolation.

The literature on QAA in developing countries' higher education has concentrated principally on its fit in the systems. A case study approach to flag out the outcome and challenges of the QAA in developing or underdeveloped countries is scarce. Is it a policy that does not fit within what is available in Afghanistan, or is it the implementers' capacity that did not bear many effective results? Hence, this study will be a valuable addition to the limited body of literature and will bring new elements to scholarly research.

### **Statement of Purpose**

This study explores the internal quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) at University X in Afghanistan. This case study also looked at opportunities and challenges toward implementing the QAA. There are fewer research studies on QAA measures in developing country contexts and even less on fragile states such as Afghanistan (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018). But for the system to prosper, good quality higher education is vital, and a study of the implementation of QAA measures is a significant contribution. Hence, an empirical approach in assessing faculty members' perspectives toward implementing the policy in Afghan public universities is necessary. Some universities have shown strong resistance and have been vocal about the QAA policy's "failed" outcome. Thus, it is essential to look at the implementation process, understand resistance, the results of the policy

implementation if there are any, and look for alternatives. The data for this study was collected from various faculties and departments at University X. For this study, the term *faculties* are used in the same way universities in the United States use the term colleges, which are separate but interrelated academic units.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the study:

1. How is the Quality Assurance and Accreditation policy perceived by faculty members at University X in Afghanistan?
  - 1a. What are faculty members' perceptions of the *capacity* of their faculty to meet the requirements of quality assurance and accreditation policy at University X?
  - 1b. What are faculty members' perceptions of the *impact on teaching and learning* from implementing quality assurance and accreditation policy at the University of X?
  - 1c. What are faculty members' perceptions of the *future opportunities and challenges* created by implementing quality assurance and accreditation policy at University X?

### **Professional Significance**

Quality assurance and accreditation are recently adopted and implemented in Afghanistan higher education. Since its adaptation and implementation in 2012, challenges and resistance have been formidable. However, the reasons why implementing this policy has faced tremendous challenges have remained less explored. Faculty members believe that the policy is a Western impartation that does not fit into the local context. Some faculty members argue that QAA policy is a copy-and-paste process that does not make sense (Mussawy and Rossman, 2018).



On the other hand, authorities in the MoHE do not accept the fault-line of the policy, but instead, they blame the implementers for failing to implement the policy. Thus, blame and shame from both sides continue. On the one hand, the implementation of the QAA policy has not been evaluated on the ground. On the other, implementers did not have the power to speak up against it due to possible repercussions. Therefore, a lack of communication and autonomy seems to have created tension between QAA enforcers and implementers.

QAA policy and its implementation in Afghanistan has not attracted scholars' attention, although a few studies have covered Afghan higher education and women's circumstances. Only three recent studies (Couch, 2019; Mussawy and Rossman, 2018; 2020 Tahiryar, 2017) have touched on QAA and have focused on perceptions or understanding of the instructors regarding QAA in Afghanistan higher education. Even though QAA is mandated in Afghanistan legal documents – such as the Afghanistan National Strategic Development (ANDS), National Higher Education Strategic plans a thorough and scholarly study about QAA challenges on the ground has not been done.

Then, this study is professionally significant in many ways. First, this study filled the gap in current higher education literature, particularly in Afghanistan higher education. Second, this study broadens implementers' and administrators' prospects to look at the policy and its challenges differently. In other words, this study helps the implementers and central power of MoHE to resolve the ongoing tension. Finally, the outcome of this study is an instrument for future studies for scholars in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

### **Overview of the Methodology**

This qualitative study took a single case study approach and a document review to explore faculty members' perspectives in implementing the QAA policy in one of the public universities in Afghanistan. The university chosen was with more enrollments, offers more degree programs, and has more schools than some public universities. A case study analysis

was chosen because this method allowed the researcher to explore the case of the policy implementation process and its outcome at a single university (Guba, 1990). A document review method was chosen to understand the legal basis for the implementation of QAA and how the mandated processes document incongruences with faculty members' daily practices of QAA implementation.

Data collection began in fall 2020. Participants were faculty members at University X who were the primary implementers of the policy on the ground. Participants were chosen based on their agreement and availability. The selection process was based on a snowball sampling method that identified the next participant through the previous one. The first participants were identified through the researcher's connections at the university. Participants were not recruited based on their gender, race, or ethnic background to protect their anonymity. For instance, only a handful of women held faculty positions at the university. Hence, identifying their identity markers would expose them to authorities at the university and more.

The data collection method was one-on-one interviews conducted online via WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger Applications with 29 faculty members from multiple disciplines. The interview method was chosen to generate knowledge and build detailed information (Kvale, 2008). The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. The questions centered on the process and procedure of implementing faculty members' daily teaching strategies. Meanwhile, Afghan government-related policies and practices pertinent to QAA were reviewed to understand mandates on the implementation of the QAA policy.

The examination of qualitative data uses a constant comparative method in which the researcher moves back and forth between data collection and data explication; preliminary analysis derived further data collection (Leedy and Ormrod, 2015). Data explication began early in the process, and it included the following steps: reflexivity journals, field notes,

transcription, coding and categorizing to determine themes to make meaning out of the interviews and putting them in order, delineating units of meaning, writing summaries of each interview, member checking, modifying of themes and summary, identifying general and unique pieces, and writing a resume.

### **Delimitations**

Qualitative research limits a study in scope. Hence, this study was limited to Afghanistan's higher education sector as qualitative research. This study was further delimited by choosing one national policy, QAA. Furthermore, the study took place in Afghanistan, and its scope was narrowed down by studying the perspectives of the faculty members at one university. Although the university did not represent all higher education in Afghanistan, it was one of its most prominent public institutions. Hence, choosing this university as a case study with more extensive degree programs, schools, and departments made more sense.

Afghanistan's higher education system is vast, with over 120 private and 36 public institutions. In Kabul, the capital, four public universities and more than one-hundred private universities. In most cases, public universities are specialized in a specific field. For example, Kabul Medical Science University trains medical doctors, Kabul Polytechnic University teaches mechanical engineers, and Kabul Education University trains teachers. According to the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education website, at least 20 faculties or schools at University X cover several departments. Since the university I chose encompasses almost all disciplines (e.g., engineering, literature, science, computer science, etc.), the approach was justifiable, and the outcome of my data was relatively balanced. The results from both sets of institutions may vary significantly. Therefore, the focus of this study was on one public university in Afghanistan.

Another delimitation had a narrowed lens in the literature. Since the study focused on QAA policy in Afghanistan higher education, literature from developing countries or countries with similar social contexts made more sense. Hence, in this study, the literature briefly touched upon the history of QAA on different continents; however, it was limited to Asian, African, and post-Soviet countries.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

- Afghanistan's *centralized* higher education system is the hierarchical government organization led by a top-down government, the MoHE. In Besley and Coat's (2003) definition, a centralized system oversees all spending decisions, and the financing is from general revenues and donors in Afghanistan's case.
- *Case study research* is a qualitative approach that picks multiple cases to investigate (Marriam, 1988).
- *Developing countries* are defined as developing countries seeking to become more advanced economically and socially (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The United Nations classifies developing countries as those economies that are in transition and still developing their economy. Thus, Afghanistan is one of the developing countries in this category, and this term was used throughout the study.
- *Faculties* are used in the same way universities in the United States use colleges as separate but interrelated academic units.
- *Implementers* in this study are referred to as faculty members or instructors.
- *Paradigm* is a pattern that leads the researchers to narrowly look at a phenomenon within their scope of study and develop a specific finding (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Guba and Lincoln (1994) define a paradigm as a basic set of beliefs or worldviews that guides research action or an investigation.

- *Polytechnic* is used in the same way universities in the United States use mechanical engineering. Although the word's origin is Greek, Russians utilized it and named the university as such – e.g., Kabul Polytechnic University is a Russian legacy.
- *Public universities* in the Afghanistan context are fully funded, regulated, and overseen by the Afghan government. There are 36 public universities, most of which were re-established post-Taliban era (World Bank, 2017). These universities do not generate revenue and do not charge tuition to students admitted based on the University Entrance Examination scores. All expenses for the public universities across the country are covered by the budget that MoHE receives every year from the Afghan government and donor agencies.
- *QAA* is an abbreviation for Afghanistan higher education's quality assurance and accreditation policy. This study does not involve program-level accreditation but focuses on the QAA policy in general and, specifically, its implementation.
- *Quality culture* is broadly defined as the values of an institution (Speek, 2019). Others describe it as the organizational culture and defined beliefs (El Safty, 2012). For Harvey and Stensaker (2008), a quality culture is a tool that can be useful for analysis, questioning, and dialogue in higher education.
- *Saturation* is often used in scientific fields like chemistry. It indicates the maximum fullness or satisfactory chemical interaction. In data collection, saturation refers to the reasonable level of data one would need in research (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 59).

### **Summary**

QAA, allegedly, is under scrutiny at some public universities in the capital of the country. The local implementers often critique the challenges to implementation and a tangible outcome. Although some studies like Mussawy and Rossman (2018), Taheryar (2017), and Hayward (2015) highlight the positive perceptions of QAA and its

implementation in Afghanistan higher education institutions, others argue that this policy does not match local needs. A third approach enables the community of scholars, policymakers, and implementers to understand the fault-lines of the policy adoption, formulation, and implementation.

Chapter Two includes an overview of the literature, beginning with a brief overview of the history of QAA in the world and Western and developing countries. The case of Afghanistan will be highlighted as an example of a developing country, followed by a brief history of higher education in Afghanistan. Chapter Three includes an overview of the methodology, organized into the following sections: research questions, research design, setting, participants, instrumentation, data collection, data explication, limitations, researcher bias, and summary. Chapter Four presents the data results, and Chapter Five presents conclusions, future directions, and recommendations.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) in Afghanistan higher education is recent. This policy was initially implemented in 2010 as a pilot, and it has been in place since 2012, beginning in Kabul's public universities (World Bank, 2013). Quality assurance is less studied or explored in academia in underdeveloped and developing countries, such as peer-reviewed journals. So, the first place I looked for literature was Google Scholar, knowing the nature of my subject. Then, I searched for relevant literature at Old Dominion University's Perry Library, a public database online, to get an idea of available literature. Initially, I searched for the following keywords: Afghanistan, higher education, quality assurance; the search resulted in no relevant studies. I restarted my search on quality assurance in South Asia and the region; again, the investigation resulted almost in no relevant research. I continued my search for quality assurance in developing countries. I found Lim's (1999) piece, and from his references, I found other relevant literature in Southeast Asia that has focused on the challenges of implementation of QAA. Another place I searched was Education Resources, where I searched for "quality assurance in developing countries," which did not result in relevant results. Furthermore, my connections in Kabul, Afghanistan, and my advisor's connections in the U.S., helped me access more relevant literature about how quality assurance in developing countries has progressed.

#### **Purpose of Statement**

This study aims to evaluate the challenges and successes of QAA implementation in Afghanistan's higher education. Since implementing this policy in 2012, there have been different views on its ability to bring tangible change to the Afghan higher education system. Some argue that the adaptation and implementation of this policy transformed the higher

education system (Hayward, 2015). Others believe that this policy has wasted money, time, and human resources and has not brought any changes or does not work in the current system (Tabasum and Glass, 2020). So, a third approach is needed to help decrease this division.

### **Structure of the Literature Review**

In this dissertation, I briefly review the existing literature about QAA broadly. I provide a historical overview of QAA on different continents. Then, I highlight the emergence of QAA in higher education and layout the structure and functionality of QAA in Western and developing countries. I pay particular attention to the policy implementation issue in developing nations and bring up QAA. Next, I provide a brief history of higher education in Afghanistan, shed some light on the political highlights of higher education in the country, and discuss the adoption and implementation of QAA. I connect on the current context of higher education and the incentive behind adapting QAA policy. Then, I discuss the QAA adaption process and its implementation, challenges, and the way forward. I examine the motivation behind adopting this policy; I discuss the current challenges and explain how implementers perceive the QAA system.

Examining stakeholders' ambitions and capacity in Afghanistan higher education, this study used the developing countries, mostly post USSR countries' relevant literature, as a proxy for measuring QAA implementation in the Afghanistan HE context. The purpose of a literature review is to identify the need for additional research and to clarify the relationship of quality assurance and accreditation within emerging nations generally to the specific context of its development and implementation in Afghanistan. The literature review presented a comprehensive examination of Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA), emphasizing the QAA process in emerging nations. The study began with a discussion of QAA in the United States and Western Europe. The literature expanded to examine QAA Policy in developing regions, including Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the



Caribbean. In addition to the professional literature, I analyzed legal and government documents. As the literature review focused on QAA in Afghanistan, the topics included the history of QAA, the current context, the option of QAA policy, and attempts to create a quality culture in higher education.

### **The Concept of Quality**

The term quality is interpreted differently by different people. To some, it is how good a specific material is. In different words, one's internal decency is quality. To others, quality is the external appearance of anything, from materials to human beings (Mishra, 2006). In philosophy, the word quality is an attribute to a property. In service delivery, it is referred to as the expectations of the performance of a particular place, people, and so forth (Mishra, 2006). The term quality, according to Mishra (2006), comes from the Latin word: *Qualis* means "what kind of" (p. 9). The idea of quality has always been important to humankind. Harvey and Green (1993) define quality in five ways: exception, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformative. On the other hand, Garvin (1988) defines quality in five different ways: transcendent, product-based, user-based, manufactured-based, and value-based.

The concept of quality has been a concern of production, especially in architecture, agriculture, and exporting in the Middle Ages and beyond. Shah, Nair, and Wilson (2011) trace the concept of quality back to Medieval Europe, when artisans organized themselves into unions rather than working individually in the late 13th Century. In addition, it is argued that before 1900, quality was an essential element for artisans (Mishra, 2006). In the early 1900s, artisans assessed the quality of their produced materials individually since their businesses were not significant in determining the quality of their materials. Later, this concept was used in manufacturing and industrialized societies modeling the artisan's method (Mishra, 2006; Shah et al., 2011). It is believed that quality was brought to the people's

attention after industrialization when production increased. Industrialization began in developed nations like Victorian England, the Middle East, and North Africa. And in the mid-1900s, quality was used during the inspection of products before businesspeople hit the market (Mishra, 2006).

### **The Emergence of Quality Assurance and Accreditation**

Having said this, Mishra (2006) presents “quality as a 20th-Century phenomenon” (p. 16) that is rooted in industry and management. Moreover, in the late 1900s, quality was adopted in direction. In this era, quality assessment shifted from individuals to amass product checkups and gave birth to quality control. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, companies and businesses applied quality control to their goods through a statistical approach before sending them out (Mishra, 2006). Later, quality control was used in scientific areas, such as physics, astronomy, chemistry, etc. From here, one would argue that the word quality does not have a universal definition, but rather the term is defined following the social and cultural understanding of a group of people who make meaning out of it.

Today, quality assurance and accreditation are distinct in two ways: internal and external. Both distinctions have equal importance in an educational institution. Although external quality assurance aims to control or oversee the public images of an institution, internal quality assurance attempts to assure teaching and learning quality (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education; ENQA, 2017; 2010). Both aspects of QAA are assessed through different tools; however, qualitative and quantitative methods are the primary instruments: interpretive, numeric, alphabetic, and charts (Mishra, 2006).

#### ***External Quality Assurance***

The process of external quality assurance is self-evaluation, peer review by experts together with one or two site visits, assessing the set benchmark, and surveys of students, employers, and professionals. This is the common practice globally; however, systems or

countries have adopted this model to fit best in their system (ENQA, 2017). External QAA, in a sense, plays the role of the *gatekeeper* (Woodhouse, 2012), as the recognition, reputation, student attraction, and funds received are related to the result of external quality assurance (ENQA, 2017). QAA is the evaluation outcome to inspect an institution's programs, enrollment, eligibility for grants and employment, governing leadership, and so on (ENQA, 2017). The Executive Committee of the accreditation agencies makes a final decision on recognizing a specific institution. The *accredited* status is given to an institution when the report is summarized, then an executive team of assessors evaluates the institution (ENQA, 2017).

### ***Internal Quality Assurance***

Internal quality assurance has an essential role in internal deliveries. This element of quality assurance ensures that quality learning is delivered and experienced (ENQA, 2010). Internal QAA shows that the assessors continue to provide quality teaching; assessors make their plan; student evaluations of the assessors are conducted and ensure all other activities internally. Internal quality assurance also monitors whether international communications have been consistent and effective, and the flow of information has been transparent, on time, and helpful. Through these practices, the weaknesses and strengths of an institution are recognized, and necessary steps are taken. Overall, internal quality is a tool to assure that a quality culture is practiced, maintained, and sustained within a specific institution (ENQA, 2010).

### ***QAA Agencies***

According to Mishra (2006), the first quality agencies were developed in the U.S. based on volunteers and independent of the government. The National Commission of Certifying Agencies (NCCA) began in the U.S. in 1991, and now, this agency includes 148 QAA agencies from 75 countries across the world (Brittingham, 2009). There are four

general types of accrediting bodies in the U.S.: regional, national, programmatic, and faith-based school accrediting agencies (Hegji, 2017). The highest level is the regional accrediting agency. These operate in six regions of the U.S. and concentrate their reviews on higher education institutions within specific geographical areas. National accrediting agencies used across the U.S. and programmatic agencies review programs and single-purpose agencies, while faith-based agencies focus on religious schools and programs (Hegji, 2017). In some countries, the desire to adopt QAA has been to reduce government control, while in the U.S., the QAA process began independently of government control. However, no matter what, the government is involved in the outcome of the process one way or another. The U.S. federal government controls higher education institutions since they grant financial aid to institutions based on accreditation (Woodhouse, 2012).

Quality assurance agencies have been established in many regions around the world. Umemlya (2008) lists those regions as such: the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE), the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), the Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (CANQATE), the Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEE), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and La Red Iberoamericana para la Acreditación de la Calidad de la Educación Superior (RIACES) in Latin America, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Some of these agencies have produced standards and guidelines for quality assurance. For example, the ENQA, as a response to a request from the Ministers of the Bologna Process, signatory states develop an agreed set of standards, procedures, and guidelines on quality assurance practices (Umemlya, 2008). The ASEAN developed guidelines for its member institutions was established in 1999 with 17 members, and now it is 21 (Umemlya, 2008). For instance, in India, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)

has identified seven criteria to serve as the basis for assessing higher education institutions across India. QAA agencies set standards for their processes and procedures as they carry out the method of recognition through that criterion (Woodhouse, 2012). Even though the term *quality* has a similar connotation everywhere, its models, the goals behind its results, and rationales are different. In addition, some agencies recognize certain degrees or programs internationally, such as APAC in Asia and CHEA in the U.S. A discussion of professional recognition and qualification of specific fields, such as engineering and agriculture, has encouraged cooperation with APAC. In that vein, some programs are international, like engineering, nursing, architecture, counseling, etc., are accredited (Woodhouse, 2012).

Since the rise of the QAA, assuring quality in higher education institutions has continued to evolve. Assessing or ensuring quality is referred to differently outside of the U.S. The process is often called quality assurance, quality monitoring, quality assessment, quality control, quality management, quality enhancement, and accreditation (Anderson, 2018; Damme, 2002; Wilkinson and Gollan, 2017; Ryan, 2015). Since QAA is no longer a purely national concept in a single country or region, different continents and countries have adopted and practiced various components of the QAA (Ryan, 2015). For instance, in some countries, public rankings of schools (i.e., value, intellectual, and delivery in society) are essential. In contrast, faculty and student performance in the classroom (i.e., teachers' input and outcome in student learning) is vital (Ryan, 2015).

Additionally, countries like the U.S. have national and regional agencies, whereas other countries have one government-related agency that determines the recognition of higher education institutions. However, in many continents in the world, such as Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, the quality of institutions of higher education is reviewed by the government or government-authorized agencies (Brittingham, 2009; Gary et al., 2009;

Mishra, 2006; Woodhouse, 2012). In the next part of the literature review, I will briefly discuss the history of QAA and its practical dimensions in different regions.

### **Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Western Regions**

Research indicates that QAA was first developed and implemented in Western countries with political and government support (Mishra, 2006; OECD, 2005). Successful implementation of QAA is contingent upon the political will, sustainable funding, institutional autonomy, and a precise mechanism, all of which are instituted in Western regions. The U.S. and Europe are the leading countries spreading QAA in higher education institutions.

### **Quality Assurance and Accreditation in the United States**

The United States of America was the first to develop a QAA process. QAA was introduced in the U.S. higher education institutions in the early 1900s, and the first accrediting agency was the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (NCASC; Gary et al., 2009). A more standardized version of QAA began in science programs in higher education institutions, like engineering and statistics (Gary et al., 2009; Land & Gordon, 2015). This concept did not take hold in Europe until the early 1990s with the Bologna Process. Before that, associations, like European Federations, oversaw the quality of the programs in institutions of higher education (Gary et al., 2009; Iacob, 2015). Attracting students, receiving funding, and national and international recognition by showcasing the quality of instructors of the institution have been the main reasons behind developing, adopting and implementing QAA in institutions of higher education (Gary et al., 2009). QAA has been part of higher education literature since the early 1980s, yet its origin and development, to date, remains a lesser-explored subject in academic discourse (Land & Gordon, 2015).

Shah, Nair, and Wilson (2011) related the U.S.'s role in establishing QAA after WWII. Ideas in business, science, and marketing were the initial steps to developing Total Quality Management (TQM) by William Edwards Deming, Joseph Moses Juran, and Philip Bayard Crosby. Mishra (2006) and Woodhouse (2012) identify these individuals as the leading thinkers in expanding the concept of quality in industrial and manufacturing sectors, leading to the emergence of the QAA in the U.S. Although the usage of the term TQM has faded, its practice has continued. Deming is considered the founding father of the quality movement (Mishra, 2006). He defined quality management as "fitness for purpose" (Deming, as cited in Mishra, 2006, p. 18). Deming's definition meant to target the field of business, so the produced items in a company should fit the market need. His focus was on customer satisfaction. This definition applies to the field of education as well. For example, designing specific programs in higher education institutions to fit the intended purpose of providing a quality education for the citizens of a country is crucial. On the other hand, Crosby and Juran focused on the quality of management in an institution or organization; Juran used quality management in the education field to control quality in statistical tests, and Crosby used it in business management (Mishra, 2006). Their explorations about the concept of quality management are not limited to industry but other sectors (Woodhouse, 2012).

Since American higher education institutions were established individually and independently rather than as part of a government body, it became a challenge to manage and oversee when demand for teaching began to increase (Hegji, 2017). School systems lacked a clear division between different disciplines, programs, and categories; besides, not having a specified consensus on educational programs, content, degrees, and educational offerings did not have set boundaries or nationwide standards. More importantly, not having a central point to control the education system's quality and set a standard way of delivering education became problematic (Hegji, 2017). Then, the New England Association of Schools and

Colleges (NEASC) was founded by a group of secondary school headmasters acting in concert with a group of college presidents led by Charles Eliot of Harvard in 1885. They gathered to consider their mutual interests in ensuring that preparatory and secondary school graduates were ready for college (Hegji, 2017).

In the United States, too, quality in the higher education realm had been practiced before forming associates like NCASC; however, the term *quality* was not used *per se* (Brittingham, 2009). The trend of massification in the U.S. encouraged institutions of higher education to be identified as qualified institutions that could attract more students and be recognized as quality institutions of higher education. Also, higher education institutions' narrowed curriculum and classical courses in the 1800s were other main reasons (Brittingham, 2009). Brittingham also indicates that QAA officially started operating when NCASC legitimately identified colleges. Increasing institutional diversity continued until 1934, when the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges developed the mission-oriented approach to accreditation, which is endorsed even today. QAA has officially been in place since 1950 in the U.S., and a standard and timely review of the schools began to take place. Then, the official accrediting bodies, like NCASC New England Association, developed in the late 1950s and set their missions and criteria (Brittingham, 2009).

### **Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Western Europe**

Europe has also been a pioneer in initiating QAA in their region. Van Vught (2018) relates the roots of QAA to Notre Dame in Paris, France. He believes that Notre Dame's chancellor acted as a delegate of the bishop of Paris to oversee the quality of that institution, and he was above the masters of the schools. The chancellor thought universities should be seen as "ecclesiastical colonies" (van Vught, 2018, para. 1). The chancellor also played the role of external power or authority to grant or withhold teaching licenses and decide what content should be taught. According to van Vught, although the term quality assessment or



accreditation was not used back then, the practice accomplished what QAA does today in higher education institutions. The author believes that when school principals took power, they formed committees that decided who should teach and what should be taught at schools; hence, van Vught posits that the word *accountability* stems from the French model and *peer review* comes from the English model. These elements slowly became crucial in overseeing school qualities and responsibility (van Vught, 2018).

The process of QAA in Europe was initiated with the Bologna Process in the mid-1990s (Damme, 2002). The idea, constructed in the Bologna Declaration in 1999, was “to create a European space for higher education to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and increase the international competitiveness of European higher education” (Damme, 2002, p. 11). The premise of achieving this goal had to be achieved through quality assurance and accreditation. Like the U.S., quality assurance measures were performed in European higher education institutions; however, QAA was not explicitly used. There was no agency in charge of this process. The same is valid with the policy and procedures. According to Damme (2002), the Bologna Declaration was built to promote further cooperation in QAA, such as the European pilot project in the mid-1990s.

The U.K. model of QAA was influential and spread throughout the countries of the Commonwealth, too (Damme, 2002). Western Europe brought significant changes in universities and colleges while adopting QAA: deregulation, enhancing autonomy, devolution of authority, market-oriented elements, pressure on competition nationally and internationally, and loosening strict government oversight over universities and colleges (Damme, 2002). However, QAA has made government oversight even more robust in some other parts of the world and shrunk the system’s autonomy. For example, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (EAQA) disseminates information and good practices to QAA agencies and public authorities in the European higher education

institutions. EAQA has 51 member agencies in 28 countries and was established in 2000 following a recommendation from the Council of the European Union in 1998 (Damme, 2002). In the late 1980s, the accountability movement started in European and American countries, which caused the universities and colleges to be autonomous entities and overseen by agencies other than the government (Gary et al., 2009); however, the concept of *accountability* has remained limited to the U.S. and European system. QAA has received global recognition but transforming higher education into autonomous entities has not.

### **Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Canada**

QAA is organized differently in Canada (van Vught, 2018). In contrast to the U.S., only one agency is authorized in decision-making to grant accreditation or withhold it (van Vught, 2018). In other words, Canada has not developed national or regional accreditation agencies (Weinrib & Jones, 2017), which means Canadian higher education oversees assuring their quality since the federal government does not regulate them. The only functional agency is the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), representing non-governmental and not-for-profit universities and colleges (Weinrib & Jones, 2017). The Council of Education has developed a degree qualification across Canada (CMES) applied nationally (Weinrib and Jones, 2017). In Canada, specific degrees are accredited but not universities or colleges.

### **Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Australia**

In Australia, either government, territories, or commonwealth overseas higher education institutions. According to Shah et al. (2011), before adopting the QAA policy in the 1980s, Australian universities were overseen by the school board to ensure the quality of education. However, post-1980s, the commonwealth eliminated the universities board system since the boards lacked a system through which reviewers' recommendations were implemented in their best ways (Shah et al., 2011). The country introduced *Quality and*

*Diversity* in the 1990s to ensure the review board's recommendations were enacted. Australia, too, has QAA agencies; however, the agencies for QAA and enhancement make recommendations to the government about the universities, like an improvement, funding, and other concerns or developments. Implementation of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) took place in 1995 and is now called the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) took place in 1995 and is now called Institutional Assessment Framework (IAF). The country used this model to evaluate university performances and negotiate to fund. Then, the Commonwealth government offered the QAA framework for higher education and the National Protocols for the Higher Education Appraisal Process to have a better outcome (Shah et al., 2011).

### **Challenges in the Implementation of QAA Policy in Western Countries**

Implementing the QAA policy has been a challenge in modern and developing countries. For instance, in the U.S., the accrediting bodies do not define the quality of education; instead, they attempt to assess an institution's quality according to the mission and goal of that institution (Marcus & Goldberg, 1983). Instead, they should be responsible and qualified to evaluate students, administrators, and faculty through programs such as evaluation, appraisals, etc., including the existence and proper functionality of QAA (Marcus & Goldberg, 1983). Although according to Gary et al. (2009), Australia and New Zealand have successfully developed a better QAA system, they have faced enormous challenges overcoming a wave of resistance to different elements of QAA from academics and staff. Accreditation agencies in European countries have also not been immune from challenges. In many European countries, such as the Netherlands, the harmonization of QAA has been a challenge (Damme, 2002). However, challenges are more severe in developing countries. Notably, Asian countries have not been facing challenges.

### **Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Developing Regions**

Developing regions have been following in the footsteps of Western regions in initiating and implementing QAA in institutions of higher education (Lim, 2020). However, a driving force behind the fast-spreading trend of QAA in different developing regions is the World Bank and, in some cases, the OECD (Gounko and Smale, 2007). In contrast to the western areas, QAA implementation and results have not been as successful. Hence, it is worth highlighting the case in each region.

### **Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Africa**

The history of QAA in African higher education is rooted in the British intervention on the continent (Hayward, 2006). Hayward points out that Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone was established in 1827 and is the first college on the mainland. The college was affiliated with Durham University in England. Many other universities across the continent were affiliated with British universities, i.e., Cape Town University in South Africa and Liberia College were affiliated with the University of London and Durham University. Similarly, some African universities were affiliated with French and Portuguese universities until the 1960s. The governing board of the affiliated institutions had the authority over the quality of African universities. According to Hayward (2006), since African higher education was affiliated with British, French, and Portuguese universities, external examiners implemented the quality assurance process through their partner universities.

After independence, each country's authorities began to oversee higher education. Hence, older universities such as the University of Cape Town became mentors for newer universities. After independence, higher education and its quality and access became major issues in African countries. The individual governments began to call for change when they recognized the need for internationally competitive education systems with world-class standards (Hayward, 2006). Therefore, governments, stakeholders, and the education community sought an alternative to solve the problem and established a QAA structure. The

Parliament approved the Commission for Higher Education (CHE) in 1985 in Kenya. The actual practice of QAA began in 1989 for private universities in Kenya. Nigeria was the second, establishing the National Universities Commission (NUC) in 1990. Slowly other countries started to follow this process.

### **Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Latin America**

Universities opened their doors in the 16th Century of Spanish intervention. The primary reason for the rise of universities in Latin America relates to Spanish authorities' aim to train personnel in the services of the Church and state (Ayarza, 2018). During that time, education was informal and heavily based on the practiced religion. According to Ayarza, after independence, each country established a national university that was state-run with less focus on Catholic religious teaching. The universities' academic programs, such as law, medicine, and engineering model from France back then. The idea of reforming higher education in Latin America began in 1918 when Argentinian university leaders expressed a desire for autonomous institutions. With social development movements and economic growth, Latin American countries needed to use their resources effectively; hence, developing countries needed to adapt and transfer technologies and policies abroad. Accordingly, they imported QAA policies based on U.S. standards to regulate their higher education system (Ayarza, 2018).

### **Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Caribbean Countries**

In 1988, the Steering Committee of the Ministers of Education (SCME) of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) began a study on reforming higher education to enhance international standards. Subsequently, they established an accreditation system and its implementation in the 1950s. Perkins (n.d.) says several national and regional accreditation agencies in the Caribbean countries. For instance, the University Council of Jamaica (UCJ), Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (CANQATE), and the

Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Education in Medicine and other Health Professions (CAAEM) that accredit higher education and their programs (Perkins, n.d., p. 1). The author evaluates the outcome of QAA as a professional practice in education, which encourages research, training, and international collaborations. According to the author, a few countries in the Caribbean do not have functional QAA policies and agencies. She says that those countries strive to develop QAA policies and strategies that help the country's education field (Perkins, n.d.). In some Caribbean countries, British influence has been enormous; in others, Latin American influence is visible, and France's influence is there (Ayarza, 2018). English-speaking countries in the Caribbean adopted the American model of QAA. According to Perkins (n.d.), English-speaking countries appear to be advanced in QAA compared to French-speaking countries.

### **Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Eastern Europe**

East Europe (many post-Soviet countries) began to use QAA practices in 1989. in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, etc. Countries in this region began to adopt this policy or approach in the early 1990s. Tomusk (2010) believes that QAA was adopted due to the increasing, uncontrolled, and unregulated number of private higher education institutions in Eastern Europe. Since the rise of private higher education institutions, which were run independently, there was no unified regulating agency, no center that would oversee those institutions' functionality and quality (Tomusk, 2010). The two main reasons for the people's will to initiate private institutions and adopt the QAA approach in higher education were the disparity in reforming and changing the system controlled strictly by the post-Soviet government and the curriculum that the Soviet Union set. Hence, according to Tomusk (2010), Eastern Europe used the Netherlands model chosen over the American or British model. Tomusk's (2010) conclusion is that QAA has not been functional or practical enough to regulate the private universities and colleges and oversee the quality of those institutions.

He argues that the reformation initiative did not help bring change and even made it worse than “unqualified, stricken and unscholarly” (p. 12) schools established by the Soviet Union.

### **Imported Policy Issues in Developing Countries**

Policy implementation in developing countries has become a pressing issue (Blanco & Jahirul Haque, 2014; Dani & de Haan, 2008; Lim, 1999; Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). Hudson, Hunter, and Peckham (2018) articulate those policies do not fail or succeed by themselves. Instead, some factors lead to policy failure or success. Different reasons cause challenges in policy implementation in developing countries, mimicking policies from developed countries and attempting to implement that in a developing country (Dani & de Haan, 2008; Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). This trend has caused multilayer barriers to a successful outcome of the policy implementation in the case of developing countries. Foreign agencies adopt and fund policies, such as the World Bank. Challenges are not limited to policy adopting and international agencies’ intervention but rather lack of knowledge and skills, resources and sufficient funding, political backing, and overly ambitious policy goals. Another central gap between policy formation and implementation is a lack of collaboration. Lack of cooperation between policymakers, which are usually political authorities, and policy implementers on the ground, causes the issues of distrust, hierarchy, and resistance from multiple levels (Hudson, Hunter, & Peckham, 2018).

Literature indicates a non-original policy in any sector of a country does not fit and hence does not have a tangible outcome (Dani & de Haan, 2008). Dasuki et al. (2015) argue that imparted policies or programs do not work as they are meant to fit the country that has developed them. The authors studied an international degree program and its policies in Nigeria. In the study, the focus was on programs and policies imparted from developed countries into Nigeria. The program was helpful; however, there were gaps between design and the realities achieved. In Nigeria’s case, the program demanded a more significant

amount of funding to implement the policies, rules, and regulations; however, the program needed more faculty with skills and the higher education system that Nigeria lacked. The program was imported from the U.K., where students chose the program by option (e.g., students had some technology background).

In contrast, students were placed according to their university entrance examination in Nigeria. This approach did not make sense because Nigeria lacked the modern technology to educate students according to the set program, and students did not have a background in the field. Hence, Dasuki et al. (2015) argue that it is vital to understand the social, cultural, economic, and political context, make policies and evaluate their implementation accordingly. Therefore, a wide gap and challenges persist that produce performance results hard to highlight.

Policies imported from countries are not free from their original countries' intervention or influence. Donor agencies initiate some policies. Agencies in developing countries aim to implement those policies considering their perspective and perceptions (Lim, 1999). Madden (2014) studied quality assurance implementation challenges in Vietnam's higher education. She highlighted the blurred line or gap between a policy imparted from a developed country and decentralized system of higher education to a "state-centric" and "protectionist" country like Vietnam. In this study, Madden elaborated that the World Bank's influence in quality assurance policy had created a line between the state and the approach of neoliberalism. According to Madden (2014), this perspective had caused a confusing and unrealistic implementation process. Madden argues that the Vietnam government adopted a plan between state-controlled systems and neo-liberalism. In other words, the government of Vietnam considered the donor's ideas and structure of the policy while implementing the policy and attempted to showcase the concept and design in a state-centric higher education system.



According to Madden (2014), this circumstance resulted in a poorly implemented and uncertain policy outcome. The author says that to walk the line between these systems, the government adopted a form of “organizational hypocrisy” to satisfy World Bank loan conditions (Madden, 2014, p. 92). Significant challenges are inconsistency in its formulation, copy-paste model, setting ambitious standards, practice, discrepancies, and implementation (Gary et al., 2009). In some instances, the interventions of dominant countries are without assessing the ability of higher education in a specific country and the capacity within (Gary et al., 2009). This is the case, particularly in developing countries. The shortcomings in policy implementation in conservative and anti-Western countries are even more substantial due to the resistance on the ground. To explore this point, I will bring the case of adopting and implementing QAA policy in developing countries' higher education.

Since its emergence, QAA adoption and adaptation by many countries worldwide has been rapidly increasing. In many countries around the globe, QAA is articulated in national development policies (Land & Gordon, 2013). Observants see QAA as beneficial to higher education; however, some countries observe it as a potential threat (Damme, 2002), as the policy is, in most cases, imported from developed countries (Lim, 1999). Lim (1999) argues that one of the threats is imparting Western ideologies into the local system. In support of Lim's argument, Damme (2002) says that a model and policy that responds to a country's needs or region's plan do not necessarily suit the academic environment of another country or continent. For the author, it is imperative to learn from other countries' experiences, particularly those successful in this regard. Yet, it needs to be adapted and integrated according to cultural, national, and social contexts.

### **Donor Agencies**

Agencies that aim to intervene in developing countries' developmental missions are usually the U.S., Canada, and some European countries. Precisely, increasing policy and

capacity development organizations, such as the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Agency (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), etc., attempt to offer aid and support. These agencies have aimed to implement those policies considering their perspective and perceptions (Lim, 1999), devoting more focus on quality enhancement than uplifting the issues of social inequality and targeting equity in higher education. Blanco and Berger (2014) demonstrate that quality assurance involves power and control as an outside agenda in developing countries. In such cases, local actors have less freedom in imposing their ideas while adopting or implementing the policy. Hence, donor agencies knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate the issues of the already existing equity issues in local communities through higher education.

### **Higher Education**

Regarding policy formulation and implementation, developing countries' higher education becomes the consumer of funding, structure, and ideology (Mwangi, 2017). Higher education is the doer and implementer only. Since higher education in developing countries is already grappling with limited resources, this inferior position automatically urges it to accept what the funding organization demands. Higher education leaders, in turn, take the superior classes over the implementers of the policy, placing them in the position of doers. Consequently, developing countries, like Afghanistan, struggle with power dynamics instead of prioritizing things like bridging the gap between social inequality and providing opportunities for different social groups. In such cases, implementing a QAA policy adds another layer to the current struggle over power, distrust, and chaos that ultimately promotes inequality instead of closing the equity gap.

In sum, the spread of the Anglo-Saxon QAA model in Eastern Europe and the developing world could be an example of adopting a process and implanting it without contextual consideration (Mussawy and Rossman, 2018). Knight (1997) points out concerns

over the imposition of Western standards in Asia-Pacific countries. As Damme (2002) writes, today's national quality assurance or accreditation systems are inspiring examples elsewhere. Still, there are also difficulties and challenges connected to policy transfer in this field relating to national and cultural sensitivities. There is certainly a growing awareness, but not a formal acceptance, that harmonization of QAA arrangements is necessary for increasing transnational trade in higher education (Damme, 2002). Damme states those countries merely imported the model because of the successful results of the country of origin in its higher education. This trend, according to him, creates the notion of cultural "imperialism" or "dependency" (Damme, 2002, p. 18). This is true in many cases where foreign or the dominant countries' intervention creates discrepancies and ineffectiveness, as those countries are unaware of the contextual basis of higher education in a specific country. In the end, those policies or documents are not appropriately implemented. Damme believes that QAA committees for cultural diversity are aware of and express concerns for copy-paste models with no tangible results.

Lastly, it could be said that many countries have not been successful in implementing the QAA, and the outcome has not been as expected. Adversely, in some countries, such as Eastern Europe, the adoption of the QAA worsened the quality of higher education institutions. From the brief overview of the QAA practices on different continents, it could be argued that adopting models from countries that are successful in reforming or regulating their higher education institutions may not be helpful. Therefore, practicing quality and achieving the best result could not be accomplished by mimicking. Like Australia, other countries should understand the concept of quality and cultivate the culture of quality among individuals and institutions, as assuring and achieving quality depends on individual beliefs and practices. An example of this case is Afghanistan higher education, which the next section discusses more broadly.

## **The Case of Afghanistan**

This part of the literature review highlights Afghanistan's higher education and the evolution of QAA within the sector. First, I will give a brief overview of the context of Afghanistan's higher education and its political landscape. Next, I will focus on the current circumstance of higher education, followed by the process of QAA adoption.

### **Highlights of Higher Education in the Course of History**

Afghanistan had a reliable and qualified higher education system between the 1960s-80s (Samady, 2007), focusing on philosophy, poetry, and literature (Ministry of Higher Education; MoHE, 2018). The heavily philosophical concentrated aspect of education mostly came from the Moghul period, when Persian literature was at its highest development. Higher education in Afghanistan started in 1931 with one single department in Kabul, a medical department (Abdulbaqi, 2009; MoHE, 2018; Samady, 2007; Shakir, 2012). The department was headed by a Turkish professor with eight faculty members (MoHE, 2018). Within a couple of decades, a few branches within the medical department were established: dentistry, children, and military-concentrated schools.

There were barely 500 male and female students (Abdulbaqi, 2009; MoHE, 2008). In 1942, the science department encompassing math, physics, geology, etc., was established. Then followed the law and political science departments established in 1992. All the departments were managed by the Ministry of Education (MoE) as the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE, 2018; Shakir, 2012). In 1946, the government officially announced the first university in Kabul, Kabul University (MoHE, 2018; Shakir, 2012). Eventually, the Institute of Poly Technique was established to train mechanical engineers. The first university in the provinces was found in southern Jalalabad province. Nangarhar University (MoHE, 2018). By the time educational institutions began to spread, there was a need for a separate entity to organize the higher education institutions (MoHE, 2018). The Ministry of Higher

Education (MoHE) was formed to oversee all public or government-run institutions to control, oversee, and regulate.

### **Soviet Involvement**

Although higher education had continued slowly but surely, it was not free of foreign influence, which started with diplomatic relations under King Amanullah Khan in 1919 (Welch & Wahidyar, 2013). However, after the Soviet invasion in 1979, significant changes appeared in higher education, like curriculum, learning the Russian language, and giving scholarships to students in countries part of the U.S.S.R. (Welch & Wahidyar, 2013). The development of higher education in student enrollment was significant in the 1960s and 1970s. The enrollment in higher education totaled 1,700, including 157 female students, and increased to 12,260 in 1975, including 1,680 female students. However, higher education became turbulent when the Mujaheddin faction overthrew the Russian regime.

### **The Mujahideen Era**

Anti-Soviet movements in Afghanistan started from the southern provinces, bordering Pakistan (Welch & Wahidyar, 2013). Those activities were bombing, rocket firing, shootings, etc. (Welch & Wahidyar, 2013). More attention was paid to Islamic and Madrassah education during the Mujahideen era (1992-1996) than modern higher education. Many teaching systems and curricula were imported from Pakistan (Welch & Wahidyar, 2013, p. 161). Higher education in Afghanistan had become fragile due to the emergence of different factions in the name of *freedom fighters*. Beginning this period of history, most educated citizens left the country. They immigrated to neighboring and Western governments—only those who could not afford to go the country and remained helplessly enduring the hardship. In addition, since less attention to higher education had been paid during this regime, the budget did not cover teachers' and administrators' salaries. Hence, most educators' jobs, higher education, and infrastructure were damaged to depleted (Tobenkin, 2014).

## **The Taliban Era**

Higher education's already “lamentable” condition worsened under the Taliban rule due to their damaging and extreme interpretation of modern education (Abdulbaqi, 2009). There were fourteen higher education institutions in Afghanistan when the Taliban came to power, but they were reduced to seven during their reign (Abdulbaqi, 2009). Women were banned from school, and men went to school under challenging conditions. As a result, most male students also left school as soon as they learned to read and write. The Taliban era was education’s death, but schools were shut down for higher education, and women were forced to stay at home. Many people migrated, seeking asylum in Iran and Pakistan (Welch & Wahidyar, 2013). Welch and Wahidyar (2013) describe Afghanistan higher education as follows:

After the overthrow of the Taliban in November 2001, Afghanistan had witnessed 23 years. There had been little or no investment in a quality education system and 80% of the population remained uneducated. (p. 164)

After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, schools reopened; women and girls and men and boys returned to school, and immigrants from Pakistan and Iran returned to continue their education in Afghanistan. In addition, female teachers returned to take teaching jobs in female-taught schools.

## **The Current Context of Higher Education in Afghanistan**

As Tobenkin (2014) and Welch and Wahidyar (2013) put it, higher education has been one of the significant *casualties* during political and social turmoil. University campuses were rubble to stone, and the infrastructure and culture of schooling were diminished by decades of war (Romanowski, 2007; Tobenkin, 2014). Reviving the education system in Afghanistan was based on an agreement at the Bonn Conference in 2001 (World Bank, 2013). After almost a decade of the Taliban regime, rebuilding the education system was

necessary (World Bank, 2013). Accordingly, in the first years, the need to transform the higher education sector was the responsibility of the MoHE and donor agencies. Afghanistan National Development Strategies (ANDS I), ANDS II, and ANDS III focus on the development and progression of higher education and providing quality education for the youth of Afghanistan: “Although the expansion of education has been impressive, there is urgent need to improve the quality of education” (ANDS II, p. 10). In the same vein, the Constitution of Afghanistan highlights the need for quality education throughout Articles 43-47 (Constitution, 2004). Similarly, the recently developed National Higher Education Strategic Plans II & III focus on improving the quality and increasing access simultaneously (Babury & Hayward, 2013).

### ***International Involvement***

After the overthrow of the Taliban, the Afghan government, with the international community, took significant steps to rebuild and improve higher education and increase the number of public colleges and universities (Abdulbaqi, 2009; Katzman, 2010; Welch & Wahidyar, 2013). By 2007, private higher education institutions began to flourish (Welch & Wahidyar, 2013), and by 2009, 19 public universities and 75 private universities were registered (Abdulbaqi, 2009; MoHE, 2018). According to Abdulbaqi (2009), in 2004, 4,000 students (male and female) took the university entrance exam, *Kankor*, in the country, and by 2007 the number of university students had reached 57,000 countrywide. According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2018), in Afghanistan, 38 percent of high school students enrolled in higher education, 9.6 percent of the college-age population; 300,000 students, including 100,000 women, were enrolled in public and private higher education institutions.

In Kabul’s capital currently, there are four public universities: Kabul University, Kabul Medicine University, Education University, and Polytechnic University. Each

province intends to have at least one public university in the city's capital. However, some regions do not have a public university either due to insecurity or remote areas, and the residents usually prefer *Madrasah* or Islamic education (Ashraf, 2012). Public universities are government-supported, meaning enrollment is free for the students who pass the university entrance examination. These universities do not make any profit and are not revenue-generating channels. In Afghanistan, the quality of education is better in public universities than private ones, mainly because public universities have experienced faculty members and are closely watched by the MoHE. Public universities are also better equipped with libraries, campuses, computers, etc. Currently, there are 128 private universities in Afghanistan. Although private universities usually lack capacity, the number increases as demand for higher education grows, and public universities cannot accommodate all those degree seekers. Although reopening of school doors after a decade of the Taliban era was counted as a triumph, enhancing the quality of education has been a challenge for years.

In short, Afghanistan has not been free of foreign interventions in the past decades, and higher education was not immune from this dispersion (Katzman, 2010). Afghanistan has been exposed to aid from different countries (e.g., the U.S., European countries, Great Britain, Saudi Arabia, India, Iran, the Soviet Union, China), which influences higher education. According to Tsvetkovs (2017), Kabul University has been a powerful tool through which “Americans and Soviets implanted their rival political cultures” (p. 344). Both the United States and the Soviet Union tried to transform Kabul University to make it more suitable for instilling American or Soviet political culture in different periods of history. The author believes that their reforms were stimulated by ideological confrontation; they exploited Kabul University to transform Afghan society and, generally, to win Afghans' minds (Tsvetkovs, 2017). Transforming Kabul University and other universities continues with USAID efforts to change the Soviet implanted ideologies in Afghan higher education.



Thus, higher education in Afghanistan has become a battlefield between the two superpowers.

### *Adopting Quality Assurance and Accreditation Policy*

In adopting QAA in Afghanistan higher education, three main entities have had an important role: international agencies, national bodies, and local institutions. The part of international agencies in Afghanistan is to help the Afghan government improve infrastructure, policies, and management skills. Higher education was one of their mandates. The World Bank, UNESCO, USAID, and UNICEF built capacity in the country's education and higher education sectors. As mentioned earlier, after the U.S. intervention in the country, enhancing the quality of higher education was one of the priorities. The idea of adopting a tool, like QAA, to improve the quality was discussed at the Bonn Conference II, and the World Bank was assigned to support the MoHE in accomplishing this mission (Babury & Hayward, 2013). Hence, the international agencies, mainly the World Bank and USAID, kept the process financially and technically. The World Bank offered 1 million U.S. dollars to strengthen the process (World Bank, 2013).

**National Agencies.** As an entity of the Afghan government, he is the main body in charge of decision-making in adopting any relevant policies. In other words, MoHE officials had their say in the process of adopting QAA. After the approval of the QAA process by the Afghan government and higher education leaders, a commission was established encompassing academics and MoHE leaders as members to oversee the process and the reviewers of this policy. It is argued that this attention had been given to ensure that the providers (international agencies) offer something that meets the needs of quality required in the local context and the standards of teaching (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2013; Houston, 2008; Shakir, 2012). After a few years of initiative, hard work, and funding by national and international entities, this policy was ready for implementation in 2012.

**Local Institutions.** Institutions are (primarily public) universities implementing the QAA policy. It is argued that representatives were chosen from different public universities to adopt the policy. Even though MoHE officials indicated that the approach was adopted with faculty's agreement, implementers at the institutional level refused it (Personal interviews with some faculty at different Kabul-based universities, 2019).

### *Implementation of QAA in Afghanistan*

The official implementation of the QAA process first began in public higher educational institutions in Kabul and the three major Afghanistan cities, such as Herat, Kandahar, and Jalalabad. One year later, this process included private institutions in Kabul and some provinces (MoHE, 2015). Only university administrators were taught the method of QAA through workshops and one-on-one training, but the significant implementers were faculty members. Mussawy and Rossman's (2018) study found that QAA was less known among university leaders and faculty members. The meaning of quality needed to be understood in higher education in a local context first (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2013; Lim, 1999). QAA in Afghanistan has become *checking a box* process rather than bringing change on the ground (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018). The phases of implementation at the beginning, as Mussawy described, were *chaotic* due to unclear aspects of the policy, little knowledge about its performance, and no minimum required tools or resources (S. Mussawy, personal communication, March 2019). Therefore, QAA has become a process through which institutions have become agents to generate reports rather than the actual implementers of the policy (Harvey, 2006; Taheryar, 2017).

The MoHE (2015) developed quality assurance policy highlights twelve criteria:

Mission and purpose; governance and administration; academic programs; faculty members and staff; students and learning; library and information resources; physical and technological resources; financial resources; strategic planning and

evaluation; quality assurance and improvement; contribution to society and development; and integrity, public disclosure, and transparency.” (p. 4)

Each criterion has sub-criteria like students, academic programs, faculty, etc. Some requirements had positive results, such as increasing access to education, increasing the number of higher education institutions, building a female dormitory, library, training university faculty and leaders, and privatization of higher educational institutions (Hayward, 2015). MoHE and World Bank officials pride themselves in increasing the number of enrollments, particularly for women, due to building a female dormitory. The number of registrations has increased significantly; however, increasing the number of registrations is seen because of demand in higher education among Afghan youth and existing unemployment in the country more than the result of the QAA policy.

Currently, the number of enrollments has increased to the point that public institutions cannot admit newcomers due to lack of capacity, the cost of private universities, and the lack of quality (Roof, 2014; Tobenkin, 2014). It is reported that, currently, only 25% of applied applicants to higher education are accepted; the remainder are attracted to private higher education institutions as the tuition and fees are not ideal for Afghan standards (Tobenkin, 2014). That means 80% of the applicants are dropped, and most of them remain without the opportunity of getting higher education. Critics have circled the demands in increasing the number of enrollments without considering the capacity in the system (Spink, 2005).

Another main struggle for MoHE was improving faculty, staff, and curriculum. Since most teachers were teaching with a bachelor’s degree, the urge from the MoHE was to temporarily send teachers abroad so they could get at least a master’s degree (Babury & Hayward, 2013). Hence, to increase the quality of faculty members in public universities, many faculty members have been sent abroad—mainly in the region -- to come back with knowledge and a degree (Hayward, 2015; Roof, 2014; Tobenkin, 2014).

### *Quality Assurance in a Centralized System*

As mentioned before, the MoHE administers and controls all higher education institutions, public or private, across the country. In other words, Afghanistan Higher Education is a centralized hierarchal system. he is responsible for amending and deciding a specific policy such as QAA and its implementation procedures. Higher education institutions have less or no freedom and autonomy (Katzman, 2010; Shakir, 2012; World Bank, 2013). It is believed that even managing the process was controlled by MoHE and international entities such as the USAID. For many authoritative leaders in MoHE, enhancing quality means bringing more restrictions on university administrators, faculty, and students. According to Shakir (2012), there is no political will to offer freedom for internal managers. Higher education institutes have little administrative autonomy, and their administrative affairs are subject to rigid rules and strict regulations by the MoHE (Shakir, 2012). As Filipakou and Tapper (2008) put it, QAA becomes a power and control issue in such systems. In Shakir's (2012) words, only freedom, authority, and autonomy of a QAA process will determine the successful implementation (2012). Thus, managing and controlling QAA is hard when educators have no freedom, which happens to be the case in Afghanistan's centralized higher education.

It is also argued that this significant policy was adopted, and its implementation started without providing enough knowledge, information, and resources about the procedure and its successful implementation. Although Afghan higher education officials have expressed their satisfaction with the progress, arguments on the ground are different. Taheryar (2017) argues that the concept of quality assurance and its applicability has remained unclear for Afghan educators. Quality assurance must first be embedded at the individual level (Taheryar, 2017). The notion of QAA is an adaptation of western, mainly American, and European, countries. However, Afghanistan MoHE officials attempted to

*Afghanize* this model (Katzman, 2010). Their approach in Afghanizing this policy was to visit countries contextually like Afghanistan, like India and Turkey. Afghanistan is a war-torn country struggling with insurgency, conflicts, poverty, corruption, and developing challenges daily, whereas India and Turkey have a long history of democracy. As Mussawy and Rossman (2018) mention, developing nations, such as Afghanistan, have often adopted these models as a whole package and have failed to consider institutional readiness and organizational culture to implement. The authors argue that Afghanistan could adopt the QAA policy, ensuring the institutions and organizations' readiness beforehand (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018). Lime (1999) states that conditions for successful quality assurance programs are not present; therefore, quality assurance would not likely be successful. Hence, concerns about poor implementation or not being implemented have remained a discussion topic among the implementers.

### **Quality Culture**

Policies and regulations may not make a difference if *quality culture* is not entrenched in an institution's culture. As Mishra (2006) writes, quality assurance is the responsibility of every individual, and it should be an ongoing process and carried out in a self-regulatory manner. Sattler and Sonntag (2018) and Jawad, Jamshaid, and Wahab (2015) connect quality culture to quality assurance, emphasizing responsible attitudes, mutual respect, shared responsibility, and individual commitment. They refer to quality culture as the concept of organizational culture, embedded values, expectations, and commitment to quality based on shared assumptions. Jawad et al. (2015) indicate that quality culture is not a process or procedure that could be imported or imposed upon but needs development within an institution. The authors emphasize that organizational psychological aspects are important parts of quality culture, as individuals in institutions must cultivate quality culture.

Similarly, Sattler and Sonntag (2018) divide the quality culture into structural and psychological elements, each playing an important role. According to Sattler and Sonntag, quality cannot be managed if an organization does not consider the two main aspects. The authors show that the structural elements, which encompass normative, strategic, and operative portions, deal with macro and micromanagement of an institution, such as enrollment, internal-external communication, budget, etc. On the other hand, psychological elements are related to individual and collective commitment, like trust and emotional investment, without which quality culture cannot be embedded. In Bendermacher et al.'s (2016) words, quality culture comprises committed staff, shared ownership, empowerment, knowledge, and student satisfaction; quality culture is supposed to increase autonomy, credibility, and educational enhancement (EUA, 2006 cited in Bendermacher et al., 2016). It also attempts to further opportunities as opposed to delimit them.

Importantly, Harvey and Stensaker (2008) indicate that quality culture is defined depending on different cultural contexts: how power dynamics and partners' engagement can impact the result and outcome (Chrystal & George, 2017). Quality is often referred to as the quantitative product of an institution, like the number of enrollments, attrition, graduation, etc.; however, its importance on tangible aspects is overlooked. Hence, the quality culture should be discussed far beyond the numbers. To this end, there is less contextual meaning of quality assurance in Afghanistan higher education as assuring quality is quantified and document generation techniques.

On the one hand, in countries like Afghanistan, political issues, like a political will or backing, and on the other hand, financial problems and relying on donor agencies make the process impossible to succeed. As Geven et al. (2014), Hsieh (2016), and Madden (2014) argue, in countries that control education without granting autonomy, quality assurance will be challenging to implement, if not impossible. As a result, efforts to implement quality

assurance in Afghan higher education have failed (Roof, 2014). The fact is that Afghanistan's higher education, given the recent destruction, is too young to adopt such policies. Instead, higher education, in the first place, needed to rebuild (e.g., infrastructure, libraries, classrooms, books, qualified teachers, etc.) before efforts to implement QAA were started.

Currently, Afghanistan does not have basic needs such as power or water to run a specific department in the winter, let alone implementing policies such as QAA that need a robust infrastructure system to maintain its functionality. Afghanistan has been in war for several decades and suffers from a lack of space, equipment, faculty, low income, libraries, teaching material, etc. Hence, a modern aspect of enhancing quality in higher education in present-day Afghanistan might not be ideal. As Lim (1999) and Hsieh (2016) argue, programs such as quality assurance must be modified to tap into the local context in developing countries. In developing countries, particularly in Afghanistan, these programs must be simple in design, modest in expectations, and realistic requirements (Lim, 1999). The quality assurance program for countries that are not ready for the implementation cannot "internalize" the process and action as seen on paper as a mere formality.

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

QAA is a relatively new concept in higher education, and it is in its infancy in Afghanistan's higher education. Most of the studies in this regard are based on reports from internationally involved agencies or accreditation agencies. However, many studies have been conducted in Western and developed countries. Literature in developing countries, in the same line, is scarce. However, policy implementation issues are broadly incorporated in the literature review. Thus far, there are three empirical studies about quality and relevant matters in Afghanistan's higher education (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018; Taheryar, 2017; Welch & Wahidyar, 2019). The later study mainly focuses on the issues surrounding the

implementation issues. The former two studies are focused on the positive aspects of quality and QAA in Afghanistan higher education.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the qualitative methodology utilized to explore the perspectives on implementing and accreditation (QAA) policy in Afghanistan's higher education. Qualitative research is concerned with interpreting, synthesizing, analyzing, and exploring meaning out of the collected data (Creswell, 2003; Moustakas, 1994; Stake, 1995). According to Moustakas (1994), qualitative research intends to present the "essences and meanings of the human experience" (p. 105). The author further argues that qualitative study focuses on the behavior and experiences of individuals or groups and engages the research participant in meaningful ways that allow for revealing the participant's "total self" (p. 105). Finally, the author believes that qualitative study sheds light on a phenomenon through "careful, comprehensive descriptions, vivid and accurate renderings of the experience, rather than measurements, ratings, or scores" (p. 105).

Since this study explores the perspective related to policy implementation in a single university, a qualitative methodology articulates the problem and answers the research questions. Within qualitative research, a single case study tradition is a suitable approach to analyze and understand the implementation of QAA in higher education in a developing country. In addition, a document review approach is considered to enrich this study's methodology and findings. This chapter includes the following sections on the research questions: design, the setting, the participants, data collection, ethical consideration, analytic strategy, field notes and reflexivity, limitations, and summary.

#### **Research Questions**

The following questions guide the study:

1. How is the Quality Assurance and Accreditation policy perceived by faculty members at University X?

- 1a. What are faculty members' perceptions of their faculties' *capacity* to meet University X's quality assurance and accreditation policy requirements?
- 1b. What are faculty members' perceptions of the *impact on teaching and learning* from implementing quality assurance and accreditation policy at University X?
- 1c. What are faculty members' perceptions of the *future opportunities and challenges* created by implementing quality assurance and accreditation policy at University X?

### **Research Design**

A social constructivist paradigm was needed to uncover the faculty members' understanding of the QAA policy implementation within a single case study. The social constructivist theory asserts that “realities are multiple, and they exist in people’s minds” (Guba, 1990, p. 26). In different words, faculty members in one institution of higher education may have different viewpoints on implementing the policy. A relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology underpin social constructivism. In other words, the researcher becomes the instrument to uncover the multiple realities of the participants (Guba, 1990). Also, individuals perceive a specific phenomenon differently, and thus there is no single “truth.” Epistemologically, a particular phenomenon within a culture is socially constructed (Hays & Singh, 2012). In addition, according to the axiology of social constructivism, researchers and participants co-create knowledge (Hays & Singh, 2012). Thus, the social constructivist paradigm is appropriate as the researcher interacted with the participants individually. The researcher’s experiences and biases would contribute to an impact on the outcome of the study.

The case study methodology aims to explore and provide a general understanding of a particular case. The case study looks at the individual’individua2006). This method

emphasizes the “collective memories and imagined communities” (Plummer, 2001, p. 395). In Creswell’s (2003) words, “a case study is an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case” (p. 61) through which a detailed and in-depth data collection method is utilized. A bounded system is defined as “a program, an event, an activity or individuals” (Creswell, p. 61, 2003). As Hays and Singh (2012) put it, it is essential to have a bounded system, which is explained as the context of a case and its setting (Hays & Singh, 2012).

As Stake (1995) says, “the case is a specific, a complex, functioning thing” (p. 2). I chose case study methodology with a social constructivist paradigm because I am approaching one case in higher education targeting a specific setting, which is a public university. The bounded system, in my case, is the QAA policy and its implementation. I explained the QAA policy within its natural context between the two boundaries, analyzing the implementers’ perceptions. The social constructivist paradigm enabled me to understand the implementers’ perceptions of implementing QAA policy. This approach helped me discover the world of participants, as I am interested in learning about the policy and stories of my participants about its implementors (Stake, 1995). This approach helped me understand the problem, satisfy my curiosity, and, finally, address it properly (Kuhn, 1962; Stake, 1995).

### **Setting**

Data were collected in fall 2020 at a public university in Afghanistan. That university is among the top universities in Afghanistan, with many schools, degree programs, students, and faculty members. To be ranked among the public universities, the implementation of the policy and provision of a solid report of the process is required. The researcher did not identify the university’s name to maintain anonymity and used a pseudonym. The research used University X as the site for the study. Twenty-two thousand students attend this university, of which 43 percent are women (University of Kabul, 2020).

### **Participants and Selection**

Participants for this study were faculty members at University X, as they were the primary implementers of the QAA policy. Faculty members in Afghanistan higher education are not necessarily Ph.D. degree holders. Many faculty members teach with a master's and bachelors because of a lack of qualified teachers. According to Babury and Hayward (2014), by 2014, only 3% of faculty members were teaching with Ph.D. degrees, and 29% were teaching with master's degrees. The remaining 68% were teaching with bachelor's degrees. Regardless of their degree, any faculty member in charge of implementing the policy was a potential participant in their respective school and department. Participants were recruited based on their willingness and availability.

Faculty members affiliated with MoHE were avoided as their voice may not be impartial when implementing this policy. Also, the criteria for selecting the faculty members were not based on their full-time or part-time employment. I chose faculty who served as the head of the QAA implementation committee, committee members, and those not part of the committee but implemented the policy in their classrooms. However, the QAA committee head was the primary source of information and recommended other participants. A snowball sampling method was utilized to identify potential participants. The next participant was found through the previously interviewed participant (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). Given the research design, the context of the study, limited access to participants and population sample, and restrictions related to COVID-19 and international travel, the snowball sampling method was applicable (Balter & Brunet, 2012; Heckathorn, 2011).

Since the participants' demographic and gender were beyond this study's scope, I did not intend to identify them solely based on their age, ethnicity, gender, or comparison of their gendered experiences. In other words, it was not the purpose of this study to compare the affairs of the male versus female implementers, but rather to hear their collective experiences. I also did not attempt to reach the findings from the interviews and review of the documents.

Rather than focusing on any sorts of comparisons, my intention was simply lay out the policy's outcome in the past ten years from the faculty's perspectives.

### **Data Collection**

The participants' contact information was obtained from my connections in Kabul and the United States. An email note containing information about my project, the purpose of my approach, and seeking their permission and agreement for an interview was sent and read orally by the researcher before discussing potential participants. If they agreed to an interview, the researcher set up a date, time, and a means of communication convenient for the participants, e.g., Skype, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, etc. The researcher had a different entry point to find the next potential participant to mitigate the risk of collecting similar voices and perceptions. For instance, the first entry point was the researcher's connections, the second was professional connections, the third was connections through other Afghan Ph.D. students in the U.S., and the fourth was through the previously interviewed participants. This way, the researcher had a diverse entry to selecting participants.

Before the study began, the researcher discussed the elements of consent and asked whether the participant was permitted to be digitally recorded. Following the participants' consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted online. As a researcher, I strived to respect their autonomy in speaking their minds and sharing their experiences. At the end of January 2021, I ended data collection to give enough time to transcribe and code the interviews. The interviews were recorded by iPhone or Mac Air recording tool if the participants were comfortable. Detailed notes were taken, and the letters were shared for accuracy.

### **Instrument**

The main instrument for collecting data for this qualitative study was in-depth one-on-one interviews. The interview protocol and questions were written in Dari and English. A pilot interview was conducted with higher education and implemented the QAA policy to get feedback. Based on the feedback, the questions were amended. The interview was semi-structured with open-ended questions to construct more in-depth knowledge of the participants' experiences regarding implementing the policy (Kvale, 2008). The semi-structured interview and the use of open-ended questions were vital so that the interview participant did not detect a guiding towards a supposed "right" answer. According to Creswell (2003) and Stake (1995), the interview is a case study data collection method that provides a detailed and descriptive analysis.

Similarly, Kvale (2008) mentions that conversation systematically receives knowledge from another person or group. Following Kvale's (2008) method, I let the participants guide me in conversation. Therefore, the interview approach was an appropriate and sufficient method for collecting data given the study design.

Each participant was interviewed separately for about 35-60 minutes, and I was able to get factual, accurate data without group pressure and direct or indirect influence of the peers. I stopped conducting interviews when the data reached its level of saturation or when "no new information or themes" were "observed in the data" (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 59). Hence, further data collection was unnecessary. Initially, I expected to conduct between twelve and fifteen in-depth interviews. However, with fifteen interviews, the data did not reach the level of saturation. Thus, I ran 29 interviews. For a single case study, this number of participants was more than enough (Creswell, 2003). Interviews were audio-recorded upon the participant's agreement in an electronic tool, e.g., phone or computer, and notes taken from the interviews.

**Transcription.** All 29 interviews were conducted in the Dari language. After completing an interview, I transcribed it into Dari as quickly as possible. Every transcription was verbatim by the researcher as no technological tool would do so given the differences in spoken and written in Dari. Then, the researcher translated the Dari script into English. The researcher attempted to capture the message rather than translate word for word in translation. Afghans use idioms and metaphors that were impossible to translate into English and make meaning out of them. Idioms and metaphors are written in Dari but explained contextually using the English alphabet. In translating Dari data, the researcher made sure not to lose the content and richness of the data. After generating each transcription, the researcher checked against the recording and made any necessary corrections. Recordings are kept in a private space only accessible to the researcher.

**Member Checking.** Following data transcription, a note was sent to each interview participant. The letter provided a summary and themes explicated from the participant's interview to check for accuracy and if the participants were willing to bring any corrections. This step was intended to determine if the essence of the discussion was correctly captured. If the participant disagreed with the garnered themes or had more to add, a second interview would have been conducted and re-explicated, assuming a convenient time is agreed upon. However, since no interviewee got back to the shared notes, the researcher thought that participants agreed with what had been explained. Nonetheless, it was a practice to give the participants a chance to say if they were no longer willing to be part of the study. This step was significant in both validity and reliability of the data I collected (Merriam, 1988).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Since the research involves human subjects and the population I studied was slightly vulnerable since the MoHE watched them, IRB approval was obtained from Old Dominion University. The consent form written in Dari was oral, explained to some of the participants,

and their agreements were obtained. Other participants were provided the written IRB consent form for their comfort mostly. The state informed the participants about the scope of the study, confidentiality, and anonymity of their identity, workplace, and how I would use their recorded interview and transcription. Participants were given the autonomy not to participate after reading the consent form and withdrawing their consent at any point. The participant's identification was a shield to keep anonymity, and codes were used instead of pseudonyms. Interview participants were not compensated for the time spent in an interview.

### ***Anonymity***

Measures that protect participants' identity were taken to the greatest possible extent, including keeping data in a password-protected private computer, reporting findings as themes (aggregating the data), and writing individual responses using codes (assigning numbers). Researchers masked other markers of identity (e.g., discipline, subject of teaching, and biographical data). The names of individuals were not connected to participants' identities during analysis or in the resulting paper.

### ***Confidentiality***

The researcher ensured confidentiality by assigning numeric codes to the data and keeping a key that matches participants and their data secured in a separate location. Information is kept confidential in an inaccessible space to the public and is kept locked. Identifying information is kept separate from data. Only the researcher has access to both hard and electronic files. These measures effectively prevent the disclosure of personal data of participants' responses.

### ***Data Storage***

Data is stored in a locked, private office or alternative protected space. In addition, electronic information is stored on a password-protected computer or another computer to which only the researcher has access. Only researchers approved as PIs or co-PIs on this



study have access to the data. There were no hard copies of data, such as informed consent forms. The names of individuals are not connected to participants' identities during analysis or in the resulting paper.

### ***Risks and Benefits for Participation***

Afghanistan's higher education is centralized and hierarchical. Hence, the risks associated with participating in this study may not be minimal for the participants as they may face persecution or an uncomfortable relationship with the MoHE. The researcher tried to minimize the inconvenience of scheduling the interview; however, the participants were subtly uncomfortable about their experiences exposed to implementing a policy they deemed ineffective. The researcher minimized these risks by interviewing the participants' preferred means of communication, remaining sensitive to the participant's comfort level throughout the data collecting procedure, and redirected the interview conversation if there was evidence of discomfort. The benefits of participating in the study included the opportunity to reflect upon, articulate, and discuss their experience to improve higher education policy in Afghanistan. As a result, the interview may lead to a deeper understanding of their situation as faculty members.

### ***Informed Consent***

Before the data collecting procedure, all participants were explained consent. The study's purpose was presented to them, including potential risks and benefits, their rights as participants, their ability to withdraw from the study at any time, and a request for permission to be digitally recorded. The participants (especially those who did not conduct human subjects' research themselves) were encouraged to ask questions. Before beginning the interview, participants verbally agreed to be interviewed and audio recorded.

### **Analytic Strategy**

Qualitative data cannot make meaning without taking an appropriate analytical approach. Qualitative research is essential to collect quality data, and thoroughly understanding, and interpreting are of utmost importance (Thorne, 2000). One of the critical, crucial analytical tools qualitative researchers use is collaging and coding (Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999; Saldana, 2013). Davis and Butler-Kisber (1999) describe coding and collaging as a “contextualizing strategy” that could address one’s feelings and experiences meaningfully (p. 2). As such, this study utilized a coding method to explain better the outcome of the data collected.

### **Coding**

I used thematic coding, as it was the most suitable coding method for phenomenological study because it explored the participants’ emotional experiences (Saldaña, 2013). Besides, this strategy enabled the researcher to extract essential elements of the incidents (Hays & Singh, 2012). I did not use any software to code data for two reasons. As a researcher, I wanted to relate to the meaning of each word the participants said. Second, by reading and color-coding, I connected to emerging themes. First, I organized the interview transcript read, and identified themes and patterns. I highlighted each piece with a different color. I then moved on to the coding phase of data analysis and coded sentences in line with or related to my research questions. I did four rounds of coding as the data extracted from the interviews were detailed, rich, and elaborated critical elements related to my research questions. This technique helped me catch or identify a significant theme or issue discussed by each participant. Once I coded the interview transcript, themes and patterns were identified (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Field Notes**

Field notes were taken along with the digital recordings. Field notes are described as “written records developed within an observational period and continually expanded and

revised after the observation has occurred” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 228). Field notes were used to document the interview and the interview participant information. Throughout the interview, sensory impressions were noted: before, during, and after. This included descriptions and images of the following: the room where the interview took place (e.g., diagrams, sketches, the layout, etc.) and the interviewee (e.g., unease, excitement, ambivalence, etc.). During the interview, communication patterns (e.g., changes in tone, expression of emotion, anger, frustration, overwhelmed, etc.) were carefully documented. Also included in the field notes were the researcher’s thoughts, feelings, and reflections before, during, and immediately after the interview (Hays & Singh, 2012). The field notes required active participation and engagement in the interview process, paying particular attention to the interviewee's physical environment.

### **Bracketing**

Bracketing is a phenomenological study that alleviates the researcher’s influence and prejudices that may influence the research process (Hays & Singh, 2012; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Hence, I set aside my prejudgments before I interviewed wrote down what I thought and how I interpreted the interviews. Hays and Singh (2012) and Moustakas (1994) stated that removing all biases is impossible. Therefore, as a novice researcher, I was conscious of my position concerning the topic under study. As an insider and outsider, I was aware of my conflicting role. However, it was my goal to keep my thoughts separated. I learned about others’ experiences “with self-insights and subjective perceptions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 37). I acknowledged the importance of approaching this research topic with a rich understanding of my biases in this field (Wynne, 1997). I also came to this study with an open mind to accept the findings. I reported any personal and professional information that may affect data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes. My thoughts and understandings were primary, and “it includes the perception of the other by analogy”

(Moustakas, 1994, p. 37). I kept journals when interacting with participants and interpreting their experiences to reflect on my role.

### **Methodology for Document Review**

The document review method uses an interpretive paradigm. This approach enabled the researcher to understand and explore the complex context of the issue in-depth (Bowen, 2009). Also, in Bowen's (2009) words, an interpretive paradigm helped investigate the subject through detailed and critical contextual analysis of a limited number of documents concerning the implementation of QAA in Afghanistan higher education. The policy document review focused on publicly available sources. Also, the document review allowed me to interpret the data to understand better, comprehend, analyze, and scrutinize the legality of QAA policy and its implementation.

### **Data**

The documents I reviewed were the Constitution of Afghanistan, Afghanistan National Development Strategic Program (ANDS), the Law of MoHE, the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP, 2014-2010), and the QAA policy document. Afghanistan has a hierarchical government structure, and higher education is one of the government entities overseen by the MoHE. The minister of higher education is a cabinet-level position that reports to the country's president. A similar structure applies to developing and implementing a national policy, like QAA. In other words, there must be indications of specific procedures or strategies in the legal documents, such as the Constitution, the Law of MoHE, and ANDS, to ensure the QAA policy is developed and implemented on the ground. Therefore, it is critical to review and analyze these policy documents.

### **Data Collection**

This document analysis was solely based on publicly available documents. Some of the papers I collected were available online: ANDS, the MoHE national (higher) strategic

education plans, the law of higher education, and the QAA policy. In addition, I collected documents that were not publicly available through individual contacts who were working as teachers at a university in Afghanistan after being assured the documents were not confidential. For instance, the updated Law of higher education was available on the MoHE website, and the updated articles specifically centered on QAA policy and its implementation in detail.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process entailed reading, understanding, and selecting sentences or paragraphs that elaborated and answered the research questions. I downloaded the documents and paid close attention to the collected data about QAA in Afghanistan's higher education. I read the documents using the "find" function to search for the terms "higher education," "quality enhancement," and "quality assurance." I highlighted those instances and collected them together. I made sure that selected texts made sense and synthesized data that led to emerging themes. Hence, the data analysis is thematic (Saldana, 2013) because it entailed a meta-analysis, acritical interpretive synthesis, and a thematic synthesis (Rapley & Jenkins, 2010). The documents were understood, examined, interpreted, and analyzed until empirical knowledge was developed (Bowen, 2009).

### **Reflexivity**

My position as an insider-outsider might have affected my judgment about reviewing the documents. I am an insider because I grew up in Afghanistan and have studied at Kabul University. I am an outsider because I have been abroad for about 10-years on and off, absorbing the higher education system in Western countries. My outsider identity may have impacted on data collection procedure. Because I have connections with donor agencies and policymakers, participants might have shaped their responses according to my part-western identity. I might have been perceived as a Western-influenced person to promote Western

ideology. In addition, gender identity may have played a role in participant selection and data collection. Some participants may not have taken me seriously as a woman and student. Some who agreed to an interview might have perceived me as not serious and may have given me superficial responses.

Hence, I took an outsider and insider role. As an outsider, I omit myself as a subject and act as an instrument in qualitative inquiry. My thoughts and understandings were primary, and “it includes the perception of the other by analogy” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 37). As an insider, I let the participants see me as one of them and take me through the concept of the study, as knowledge is constructed and co-constructed between the participants and researcher (Hays & Sing, 2012; Kvale, 2008). In the case of social constructivism, knowledge is built between the participant and the researcher (Hays & Sing, 2012). Before writing this dissertation, I revealed my biases to flesh out my position as a student. I then started looking at the literature and findings. Throughout reviewing the documents, I maintained a reflective journal to keep my own biases aside. In Rose’s (1997) words, I tried to be transparent in my reflexivity by interpreting and analyzing the documents to separate myself as the researcher from the subject. However, it was impossible to be completely impartial; and I acknowledged my partiality (Rose, 1997).

### **Trustworthiness**

To enhance the trustworthiness of my data collection methods, I took several steps throughout the process. After the interview, I member checked with each participant to summarize the identified themes. I also kept extensive field notes and a reflexivity journal throughout the interview, and document review, before and afterward. Lastly, I triangulated my findings – i.e., the outcome of the discussions, participants’ responses after the interview (member-checking), document review, and my field notes and reflexive journal.

### **Methods Summary**

After collecting enough interviews, transcribing, coding, and identifying themes, a descriptive summary of the discussions was written. The purpose of the descriptive summary was to identify meaning in each interview and describe it thoroughly. This approach also helped the researcher highlight the similarities and differences in the interview texts. In addition, this enabled the researcher to do a cross participants analysis. Balance, fairness, and completeness were the aims of data collection and interpretation. After collecting and reviewing the primary governmental, developmental, and MoHE specific documents, relevant passages to my research questions were highlighted and extracted using meta-coding. This approach enabled me to narrow my broad codes to more specific ones.

### **Limitations**

There were many limitations in this study that might have affected its outcome. Snowball sampling itself could have resulted in some issues regarding recruiting participants. As the previous one recommended the next interviewee, hearing similar viewpoints was high. In addition, it was not guaranteed that the participant was impartial in their input. Since faculty members held different positions and some within the government, their second job affiliation might have averted their point of view. Another major limitation was focusing on the implementation aspect of the policy and interviewing only the faculty members in one institution. Since this study's aim was not a generalization, choosing one institution was sufficient (Vagle, 2018); however, it might have its challenges and impacts on the study's outcome.

### **Summary**

The purpose of conducting this study was to understand the implementation of national higher education in one of the policies of public universities in Afghanistan. This chapter described the methodology and methods I utilized to conduct my research on the ground. Similarly, I explained the setting, participants for this study, how I recruited

participants, data collection strategy, ethical consideration, reflexivity, and limitations.

Chapter four presents the findings of this qualitative case study.



## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The study exploring QAA policy perceived by faculty members at University X revealed two unexpected findings. First, there is no context for QAA in Afghanistan. This finding reflects the decontextualized aspects that affect the *meaning* of the policy and reflect its importation from Western contexts and Marxist isolation among implementers. Second, the results expose critical relationship dynamics that affect the *implementation* of the policy. Following the exploration of these two significant findings, I explore three interrelated themes of QAA implementation, including faculty social construction of the meaning of the policy, capacity of the faculty to meet the policy's requirements, and perceptions of future opportunities and challenges. I explore the multifaced perspective of participants by considering the meanings from three different perspectives: participants who wish to dismantle the policy, those who want to reform it, and those who are its advocates. I pay particular attention to language and idioms in Dari that illustrate the richness of these perspectives. Furthermore, I outline a document analysis to contrast the traditional technical aspects of the policy with the social construction of the policy among the implementers.

#### **Structure**

My primary purpose was to explore the implications and perceived effectiveness of the QA policy in Afghanistan's higher education through a single public university since 2010. By studying a single university, I discussed the policy's impact on the teaching and learning method, teachers' capacities, higher education politics, and the future directions. I have based my study on qualitative descriptive research, within which document review analysis entailed elaborating on the policy's technical aspects. Individual interviews were selected to answer my research questions.

The finding chapter encompasses two sub-chapters. The first sub-chapter highlights a brief analysis of the policy's technical aspects in legal and national higher education developmental documents, like the Constitution of Afghanistan, Afghanistan National Development Strategic plans, the Law of Higher Education, National higher education plans, and QAA policy. I choose to review these documents because they are vital policies and procedures that were updated or developed after the fall of the Taliban regime and have significant roles in developing policies like QAA in higher education. This section investigates how the QAA policy was initiated, how it took its first steps within the system, which documents supported it and gave it a legal basis, and what they inquire regarding implementing it. Lastly, the QAA policy will be described briefly to lay the ground for the next sub-chapter that mainly taps on the implementers' perspectives.

In the second sub-chapter, I present the results of 29 individual interviews with faculty members at University X. I analyze the personal interviews based on main and sub-themes shown in Table 1 and Table 2. Since the participants' demographic information was beyond this study's scope, I did not identify participants based on age, ethnicity, gender, or comparison of their gendered experiences. In other words, it was not the purpose of this study to compare the affairs of the male versus female implementers, but rather to hear their collective experiences. I also did not attempt to reach the findings from the interviews with a review of the documents. Rather than focusing on the comparison, I intended to lay out the policy's outcome in the past ten years from the faculty's perspectives.

### **Explicit Goals of QAA Policy in Official Documents**

To understand how faculty members perceive the QAA policy, I first examined relevant documents. In this section, I outline the objectives of the QAA policy in governmental documents, including the Constitution of Afghanistan, Law of Afghanistan Higher Education, and the National Higher Education Plan. I note the significant themes in these documents, including promoting education quality at all levels and embedding it into the organizational structure. These details and pieces provide critical background and contrast to participant perspectives. The documents provide baseline information of what interview participants respond to in the struggles they navigated with QAA implementation. The paper provides the technical aspects and explicit goals of QAA policy. I outline connections, disconnections, and inconsistencies within the policy documents which serve as a valuable context to the social construction of this policy by implementers presented in the next section of this dissertation.

#### **Government Documents Related to QAA Policy**

The document review process entailed reading, understanding, and selecting sentences or paragraphs that elaborate and answer the research questions. I downloaded the documents and paid close attention to what the documents indicated about QAA in Afghanistan higher education. I read the documents using the “find” keywords to search for the term “higher education,” “quality enhancement,” and “quality assurance.” I highlighted that and collected them together. The researcher ensured that selected texts made sense and synthesized data that led to emerging themes categorized and analyzed. Two main themes identified in reviewing primary documents (first, improving quality in higher education, second, embedding the QA policy in an organization) will be discussed in detail. First, I gave background information and explained the relevance of the documents to QAA. Second, I

explained the identified themes while reviewing the selected papers and discussed a brief analysis. Finally, I presented the concluding remarks to close the sub-chapter.

### **The Constitution of Afghanistan**

The Constitution of Afghanistan (Constitution) was written in 2004 after the Bonn Conference I in 2001. The delegation was composed of 500 individuals representing Afghans' characteristics from across the country (Constitution, 2004). Since Afghanistan was opening a new chapter of democracy after the Taliban regime, the Constitution was focused on rebuilding the country from different elements. In the Constitution, education was one of the essential foundations. The education sector in Afghanistan was affected for decades. Hence, the Constitution has been the basis for nearly all developmental initiatives, including higher education.

### **ANDS**

Afghanistan National Development Strategic Plans (ANDS) tackled pressing issues national concerning developmental elements in the country. Together with the Afghan government, international donor agencies developed the first ANDS in 2004 that served from 2006 to 2010, ANDS II was made to serve from 2008 to 2013, ANDS III from 2013 to 2017, and ANDS IV from 2018- 2020. ANDS plans were developed to help the country's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and are security, governance, and economic growth policy. The overarching objective of the ANDS plans has been to substantially reduce poverty, improve the Afghan people's lives, and create a safe and stable country. The ANDS plans established the government's strategy and defined the policies, programs, and projects for five years, and provided the means for effectively implementing, monitoring, and evaluating these actions.

### **Law of Afghanistan Higher Education**

The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) Law is implemented in higher education institutions across the country. MoHE Law was altered after the fall of the Taliban regime. Afghan lawyers, higher education leaders, and donor agencies updated the previous law, which has had the Russian government's direct influence -- centralized, mandating specific teaching and learning methods, etc. The Law legitimized QAA and demanded its implementation across higher education institutions.

### **National Higher Education Plan**

The Afghanistan ministry of higher education launched the first NHESP in 2009. After consultation with NGOs, academics, and teachers (Hayward, 2015). The policy's two main primary purposes were to improve the quality of education and increase female access to education. This plan's main message was to rebuild Afghan institutions of higher education and transform them to compete at regional and international levels. Hence, after ANDS 2004 and MoHE Law, NHESP was the first to officially acknowledge the QAA policy and outline its structure and implementation process. The second NHESP does not focus much on QAA policy or anything about its future path. Instead, the second NHESP uses the term Quality Enhancement. The focus is mainly on the recruitment of female students.

### **The QAA Policy**

The QAA policy is written in English, Dari, and Pashto. The English version is accessible through a Google search, while those written in local languages are not. Hence, one must either receive the Dari and Pashto versions through a connection at the department of QAA or a faculty member of the committee of QAA at institutional levels. The policy written in local languages is brief, while the one written in English is extensive, detailed, and publicly accessible. I reviewed the English version for two reasons, taking ethical considerations into account. It was the most detailed version, and two, because it was easily

accessible without any due restrictions mentioned, d and two because it was quickly accessible without any due limits.

### **Major Central Ideas in Government QAA Documents – Quality and Structure**

Reviewing the documents, the researcher identified two main themes across the four primary national documents. The first emphasized promoting the quality of education at all levels, and the second was an attempt to imbed QAA in an organizational structure.

#### ***Promoting Education Quality at All Levels***

Education was an essential element of the Constitution. Although higher education was not a specific focus, enhancing education quality was particularly highlighted. Article Seventeen of the Constitution broadly touches on developing a strategy that promotes education at all levels: “The state shall adopt the necessary measures to foster education at all levels” (2004, p. 5). And Article Forty-Six says, “Establishing and administering higher ... educational institutions shall be the duty of the state” (2004, p. 10). It also delineates admissions to higher education institutions legally.

While the Constitution broadly referred to higher education much, ANDS I laid out specific strategies to improve higher education quality. ANDS focused on the national developmental plans; however, it specified higher education and its quality and quantity enhancement. The plan called for increasing students and teachers with high learning outcome delivery. In the same lines, a practical assessment or monitoring was highlighted in the document: “This component of the strategy will be monitored by the structure that has been established through an agreement, and Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with the World Bank on the establishment of Afghanistan National Qualification Authority” (ANDS, 2008, p. 118). ANDS II also focused on the development and progression of higher education and providing quality education for Afghans’ youth: “Although the expansion of

education has been impressive, there is an urgent need to improve the quality of education” (ANDS II, p. 10).

### ***Embedding QAA in Organizational Structural***

Unlike the Constitution of Afghanistan and ANDS plans, the Law of higher education narrowed down to higher education and the establishment and implementation of the QAA policy. Chapter Five of the MoHE Law dealt with quality assurance and accreditation in higher education. Article 52 of the Law specifically mentioned establishing a department and a board of quality assurance and certification that was functional specifically to the structure of Afghanistan MoHE. According to Article 52, QAA was a tool to enhance quality and recognize tertiary institutions in public and private institutions. Article 53 then mentioned the board’s structure or organization: nine currently teaching in higher education institutions. The board consists of a chair, a co-chair, and a clerk selected by the board members. The MoHE’s Provost Office selects the members, and the Minister approves the appointees. The nine members serve for three consecutive years, extending for another three years.

The Law of Afghanistan higher education focused on the structure of the QAA policy. It mandated that the board would function as part of the MoHE. The committee chair, deputy, and other members are selected with specific job descriptions and develop materials for their use. The Law was explicit about the selection criteria for the nine board members chosen by the provost and approved by the Minister. First, the faculty member should hold a master’s or Ph.D. or master’s degree. Second, the faculty member should have at least ten years of work experience. Third, the faculty member should have a good reputation. The board’s structure and the job description were also considered in the Law: (a) evaluating institutions of higher education regarding their academic standing; (b) deciding whether unqualified institutions should discontinue their functionality or not. Given this, there was no further detail about conducting the reviews, etc.

In NHESP I, the establishment of a nationwide QAA was deliberately highlighted. In this document, QAA was defined as a tool to guarantee “a high-quality higher education system” in Afghanistan (NHESP, 2010, p. 23). NHESP brought up QAA as a mission that would rebuild Afghan higher education and a building block for standardizing Afghanistan’s higher education with the rest of the world in the long run. Also, it would foster national development and be at the same level as the region and the world.

In NHESP II, QAA was mentioned as a challenge and opportunity. The challenge was that its board was not independent, and the chance was that it could be a separate entity away from MoHE and any other government entities. It was emphasized that this board should be separated; however, it was not mentioned how, when why. Like the Law of higher education, the strategic plan focused on accreditation elements of the policy instead of clarifying the international implementation and evaluation of it. The focus was on accrediting five higher education institutions at three levels; giving information about QAA to institutions, keeping the list of the accredited institutions; monitoring and evaluation, giving awareness to the committee of QAA; and reporting and logistics to the reviewers.

### **The Process in the QAA Policy**

This section highlights the essential government documents' connections, disconnections, and inconsistencies. The document review highlights disconnections that led to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. The following sub-chapter discusses participant experiences implementing the policy at a single public university in Afghanistan. The detailed policy focused on five main categories: (a) the roles of the QAA department head, its members, and institutions; (b) self-assessment protocol for institutions; (c) procedures and worksheet on the criteria of the self-assessment; (d) peer review report writing process; and (e) grading guideline for the peer-reviewers. The self-assessment, peer-reviewing, site visit, reporting, and the approach for scoring centered around the 12 criteria provided by the



policy. The standards were as follows, each of which has its list of sub-criteria: 1. Mission and Purpose; 2. Governance and Administration; 3. Academic Programs; 4. Faculty Members; 5. Students; 6. Library and Other Information Resources; 8. Financial Resources; 9. Strategic Planning and Evaluation; 10. Quality Assurance and Improvement; 11. Contribution to Society and Development; 12. Integrity, Public Disclosure, and Transparency.

First, the roles of different constituencies in QAA policy were expanded from what was already laid out in the Law of higher education. The directorate of QAA was to monitor the internal and external processes. Internally, the directorate oversaw accrediting all higher educational institutions and carrying out the mission with MoHE. The external quality assurance and its direct responsibility were assigned to the directorate in higher education institutions across the country. Compatible with higher education law, the policy detailed the selection of board members and duties within the directorate of QAA. Externally, the directorate is responsible for connecting with accrediting agencies in different parts of the world to keep their processes relevant and updated.

Second, accrediting an institution began with self-assessment. As mentioned in the policy, the self-assessment process goal was to help the institution identify its weaknesses, strengths, and areas for improvement. After self-assessment, the institutions prepared their self-assessment reports: “The self-assessment results in a self-assessment report which lays out its findings in terms of each of the criteria or standards set by the accreditation” (Ministry of Higher Education, 2005, p. 18). The self-assessment results should align with the 12 criteria provided by the policy. Only the report format was provided with broad guidelines to the institutions. Institutions set a benchmark and a timeframe to complete this process. The policy included a suggested framework for conducting and reporting the self-assessment findings.

According to the policy, a committee consisting of five to nine members should represent major programs, departments, and schools within the institution. This committee would oversee the quality enhancement measurements and conduct the self-assessment process. Internally, the committee develops a three-page reporting format that each department or university should complete and submit to the institution's reviewing committee. Then, that report with evidence would be forwarded to the QAA board at the ministry. Based on the information, the board decides whether to send the peer reviewers for a site visit or not. Peer reviewers overseen by the board of QAA conduct a site visit and score the universities' performances based on the twelve criteria and score guidelines.

Level 1 candidacy indicates that an institution's progress was satisfactory but needs improvement within a year to reach Level 2 candidacy. If an institution received Level 2 candidacy, the institution must achieve satisfaction for accreditation within a year. After a year, the assurance of quality enhancement would be done by self-assessment report, peer review site visit, and evaluation of the review report by the board to determine if the 12 criteria are met or not. According to the policy, at least 50 scored institutions would achieve Level 1 candidacy and wait to reach Level 2. At least 70 scored institutions would achieve Level 2 candidacy. Level 1 candidates must wait for a year to present the minimum bench score for Level 2 candidacy. Level 2 candidates must also wait a year to make the benchmark score for accreditation. The peer review reports from the site visit were crucial in transitioning from one level to another. Accreditation will be granted for five years, after which the institutions should reapply for certification. The peer reviewers relied on the report provided by the universities and would perform a physical site visit.

Fourth, peer reviewers had a checklist when they visited the institutions. The policy provides a sample reporting guideline with questions the reviewers should consider while writing their report from the site visit. Their information was tied to the self-assessment

reports of the institutions. That was explained as a way for peer reviewers to understand the specific university. The reviewers would write their essays based on their site visit and evaluate the self-assessment report, and the board of the QAA could challenge the information. The information would be submitted to the board, and the board would decide whether an institution had achieved Level 1 or Level 2 candidacy.

Lastly, the policy provided a worksheet to note the university and peer reviewers' scores and add their final remarks. The range of scores for each criterion and sub-criteria were different, ranging between 5 to 12. Some criteria had a total score of 5, and others had 8, 10, or 12. For instance, an overall score for Criteria 1, mission and purpose, was 8, while the agency scored 1.6. For Criteria 3, which is Academic Programs, the total score was 12. There was no explanation based on how or why these criteria were scored differently. The final score for all criteria was 100: A = 90-100, B = 80-89, C = 70-79, D = 60-69, F = 59 and below. Despite this information and guidelines, the policy did not specify which one was Level 1 candidacy, Level 2 candidacy and which one was for final accreditation.

### **Connections and Disconnections in QAA Documents**

The QAA documents were also riddled with terminology, process, and inconsistencies. The document review highlights inconsistencies that led to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Inconsistencies of the terms used for each responsible entity about QAA stood out throughout the reviewed documents. For instance, the primary entity that oversees QAA was named “board” in the Law of Higher Education. In contrast, it was called “director” in NHESP and “agency,” council, and commission in the QAA Policy. In the Law of Higher Education, it was called an accreditation board. In the NHESP, it was referred to as a QAA agency; and in other documents, it was called the accreditation directorate. Similarly, the directorate then had a board council in some documents.

The line between the council and the directorate was blurred and confusing, e.g., was the directorate separate from the board and commission? Was the director the one chosen among the nine members or different? Was the board independent of the directorate, or was the board part of it, and so on. However, from a reviewer's point of view, responsibilities were often overlapped among council, agency, board, directorate, etc. For example, according to the policy, while the agency managed external aspects of QAA like training its members, reviewing and revising the procedure, and connecting with people in other countries and NGOs, the QAA council dealt with peer reviewer reports collected from the site visits at universities. In a way, the two entities oversaw each other's work and provided feedback. While the council oversaw undertaking the QAA actively on the ground, the directorate head oversaw making the final decision.

Also, it was hard to understand who the peer reviewers were. It indicates that the institutions nominate peer reviewers to the directorate or board of QAA. Reviewers would not be sent to site visits or reviews at their university. However, the qualifications of the reviewers remained unclear; how many, for how long, etc. In addition, none of the policies elaborated on monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the QAA process. How would it be evaluated, when, how, what, etc.?

## **Summary**

This section was dedicated to analyzing the relevant documents and offering the technicality of the QAA, its formulation, and functionality in Afghanistan higher education. I checked the records and highlighted unclarities, inconsistencies, and disconnections among the documents, particularly the Law of MoHE, NHESP, and QAA Policy, the primary documents concerning QAA. QAA in Afghanistan higher education is a lesser studied topic. And to date, one study (Welch & Wahidyar, 2019) has looked at the documents that make connections between the formulation and implementation of QAA; hence, the researcher

deemed it imperative to review the papers. The study showed disconnections, lack of clarifications, and in some cases, misinterpretation and misunderstanding. The following subchapter will discuss participants' experiences implementing the policy at a single public university in Afghanistan.

## Interviews Analysis

Interviews provide rich accounts of how the participants socially constructed the meaning of complex, disconnected, and inconsistent documents. To explore this social construction, I interviewed 29 individuals from University X, 23 men, and 6 women, between 30-55 years of age. I organized the significant interview findings into two main sections: expected and unexpected results. First, I outlined two unexpected findings related to (a) the decontextualized aspects that affect the meaning of the policy and (b) the critical relationship dynamics that affected the implementation of the policy. The unexpected findings shed light on the issues of gender, ethnicity, and division of labor that the researcher was not specifically looking for. These points tapped the Marxist theory of labor and value, benefit, and division.

Expected findings relevant to my literature review were related to the research questions. I begin this section by highlighting three predominant perspectives that emerged from my participant group: advocates, reformists, and dismantlers, and I note these views throughout the remainder of the chapter. I then explored three aspects of the policy: perceptions, implementation capacity, and opportunities and challenges.

### **Advocates, Reformers, and Dismantlers**

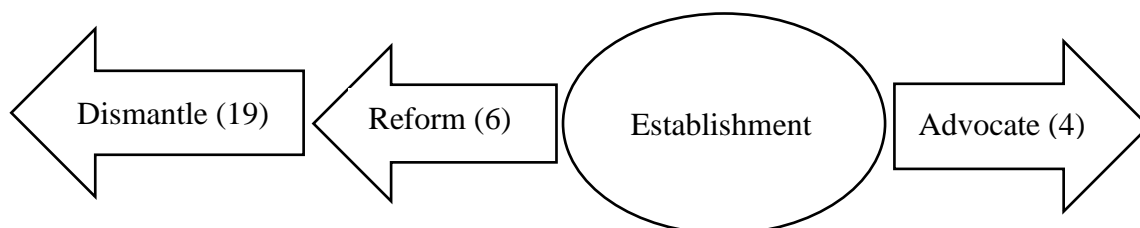
The policy advocacy group, whose members were involved with QAA leadership either in their respective Faculty, the university, or MoHE besides their teaching positions, was inclined to promote and sustain the implementation of the policy. This group presented the university as a *Harry Potter City*, where everything worked perfectly fine according to people's choices. The advocates blamed their faculty colleagues for not taking the responsibility to implement the policy appropriately. The dismantler group resented the implementation of the QAA and its impact on teaching and learning overall. This group had less to do with QAA leadership than implementing it in their teaching duty. The dismantlers

were angry, frustrated, and worried about the policy's negative consequences on teaching and learning. QAA was an extra burden; thus, they wanted to end the policy. The reformist group highlighted the problems and shortcomings of the procedure and its minimal effectiveness; however, their responses reflected the policy's positive future and the changes that would come slowly but surely. The reformist, whose group members had studied abroad, dealt with QAA to some degree, were familiar with the policy mission, and believed that it would bring change if appropriately implemented. The reformist wants to amend the policy, calling on the leaders and implementers.

QAA advocates stayed firm in their highly positive viewpoints about the policy and its outcomes; however, some reformist and dismantle groups shifted back and forth between reforming and dismantling the policy. Advocates wanted to push harder for implementation without significant changes to the procedure. Women mostly spoke about the challenges of QAA that elevated inequality issues and supported the university's patriarchal and relationship-based environment. As Figure 1 demonstrates, four participants were on the advocate side, four people on the reformist side, and the remaining 21 participants were on the dismantle side, although with some shifts in their thoughts and beliefs.

### Figure 1

#### *Participants' Characteristics Toward QAA*



*Note.* The figure explains the characteristics of the participants toward QAA.

Participants' demographics were not included to protect their identity. Participants were assigned codes rather than pseudonyms. Any closer indication of the participant's identity would jeopardize the anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected and increase the risk of exposing them. Hence, codes like F1, F2, F3 were created to identify participants' input. Two categories were identified in analyzing the interviews: unexpected and expected findings. The unexpected findings alluded to the themes of Marxist theories related to labor, division, and inequality (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Unexpected Findings*

<b>Main Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Context, Labor, Division, and Inequality	<i>"This Is Afghanistan"</i>
	<i>"It Doesn't Work Here [Afghanistan]"</i>
	<i>"Its Purpose is Unclear"</i>
	<i>"No One Believes in it"</i>
	<i>"QAA is A Show"</i>
	Reformists Some Green Lights
Relationships and Impact on the Policy Implementation	<i>"Rawabit have destroyed it [QAA]"</i>
	<i>"Relationship Dynamics Poisoned Reviewers and Evaluators"</i>
	<i>Teacher Evaluation: "Evaluation Questions are Ridiculous"</i>
	<i>"QAA Has Brought a Lot of Changes"</i>

*Note.* Table 1 outlines the main and subtitles for chapter IV.



The expected findings answered the research questions which were legacies of colonialism and power relations (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Expected Findings*

<b>Main Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
<i>Perspective on Faculty Capacity to Implement the Policy</i>	<i>Domination and Subordination</i>
<i>Perspectives on Teaching and Learning</i>	<p><i>“Teachers call QAA as the quality-less policy”</i></p> <p><i>No Incentive to Promote Teaching Methods</i></p> <p><b>Learning Method</b></p> <p>Reformists: <i>“There Are Changes but Not Visible”</i></p> <p><i>No Problems with Older Teachers, or Teaching and Learning Methods</i></p> <p><i>“Teaching Method has Changed Considerably”</i></p> <p><i>“Today’s Students Are Different”</i></p>
<i>Perspective on QAA Future</i>	<i>“Helpful if...”</i>

*Note.* Table 2 outlines the main and subtitles for chapter IV.

The interviews were all collected in the Dari language. Instead of finding a meaning to a phrase or a term in English, I wrote them in Dari with the English alphabet. Since using

expressions, words, and certain metaphors is common among Afghans; I kept them that way. However, I offered a contextual explanation for those expressions.

### **Context, Labor, Division, and Inequality**

The first unexpected finding was related to policy incompatibility with the Afghanistan context, especially the university where this study took place. The unexpected or surprising results also indicated that the policy implementation and social structure, such as the concept of the relationships, ethnic and gender divisions, etc., added another layer to the existing inequality and labor division.

#### ***“This Is Afghanistan”***

Around 90% of the participants uttered the sentence: “This is Afghanistan.” They also repeatedly mentioned that the society was *Afghani* and so was policy implementation methods. *Afghani* means in an Afghan way or Afghan way of perceiving, looking, or doing certain things. A faculty illustrated teaching and learning in the cold and steaming hot weather as follows:

This is Afghanistan. In the middle of teaching, we lose power. Roads are blocked, so teachers cannot reach the university on time for their courses. When the weather gets cold in the fall semester, we must go to classes with our jackets gloves and teach in cold weather. The context for the policy implementation is not ready (F17 - dismantle).

Others indicated that because the policy was not “realistic” and was not compatible with the current system that was placed in Afghanistan higher education institutions, the course policies, plans, and curriculum they made also became imaginative or chilly rather than reality:

The QAA is not realistic, and so are the course policies we make and the curriculum.

Every university is creating its curriculum. In other words, there is no national

curriculum at the university level. As a result, whatever we do is not based on realities. So, the course policies we make are *khiayly* [imaginative] (F14 - dismantle).

*Khialy* – imaginative, unrealistic and dreamy

Another teacher also connected “this is a joke” with implementing Afghanistan's higher education policy. For him, the policy became a joke for them since the policy asked them to do what was not available to them, such as water for students to drink and refresh themselves, classes without chairs and broken windows and doors, and so on:

They planned the semester for 16 weeks. However, roads are closed for two weeks due to *jirga* [conventions], other weeks for international guests, another two weeks for explosions and other security issues, etc. So, it becomes a joke (F2 - dismantle).

*Jirga* – convening. Jirga is a way of getting public consensus on a political settlement.

Indeed, a policy's implementation relates to its baselines. At University X, the case seemed to be different. Aside from the shortage of basic needs at the university and departments, living circumstances in Afghanistan did not meet expectations from students in doing assignments:

For instance, I ask my students to watch specific movies. The next, they say, ‘we didn't have power.’ Students come one hour late due to road closure—dormitory is off due to foreign guests. We can implement it when we have everything. Its implementation relates to the condition of Afghanistan (F6 - reformist).

Another participant talked about the contradictories between QAA requirements and reality on the ground. QAA demanded student-centered classes where they should be active participants rather than passive listeners; however, the current condition was different:

We have 200+ students in one class. Once I checked, I could get done with the timesheet in 20 mins. Imagine if I should spend 20 min out of 50 min of course time only on the timesheet, what I can teach in the remaining 30 min (F15 - dismantle).

Some reformists and dismantlers said they tried their best to implement the policy putting collective efforts to carry it *langan, lagan*, or with a lame foot. A faculty explained as such:

We use our personal computers. We do not have the internet to stay connected with our colleagues. We use our effort to make it work, e, g., We pay for the internet out of pocket, heat the department, have lunch, water, transport, etc. (F15 - dismantle).

***“It Doesn’t Work Here [Afghanistan]”***

“It doesn’t work here” was related to the technical incompatibility of the policy with the university’s circumstances. The implementation method was too broad to an extent to which some departments had to struggle with meeting the requirements of the QAA implementation. For instance, teachers were unhappy about the exam questions in their respective departments. “We are puzzled by it,” said one of the participants. They also thought students had been put under pressure with strict exam timing. Faculties and departments were different, and the differences were not considered in structuring exam questions and administering them. A science teacher laid out his complaints as follows:

All schools, departments, subjects are the same process, which is problematic. For instance, I teach math. It requires me to make 25 exam questions for students right before the exam. It should be explanatory, Likert scales, but there is not enough time for us. Students have one hour and a half to complete all the questions, which is not enough for solving math problems (F1 - dismantle).

A few participants repeated complaints about the generality of the implementation process. The question was, why should the procedure not be amended based on science and

social sciences? Forcing, in the participants' words, has strengthened the centralized and hierarchical system:

In engineering, for example, there are 30 questions. 10 should be Likert scale, ten should be answered in explanation, ten more should be answered in other ways. The questions do not match our department's mission. Engineering compared to social sciences, so the same questions do not work (F17 - dismantle).

One of the participants used the metaphor of cars in implying the QA policy. He believed that we should pave the roads before bringing an American car on Kabul streets. The participant called the policy an outside agenda:

We are traveling with today's cars, on yesterday's streets, to tomorrow. It is like you get American cars in Kabul streets. Everything that comes from outside has a similar outcome (F2 - dismantle).

The policy required practical work with students and teachers there, whereas in practice, there was no context for it, according to a participant:

For example, we need to have 20 students in my class, but we have 60 students in one study. We cannot do group work. We cannot give them homework, and usually, it's difficult for a teacher to see all that homework (F10 - dismantle).

Participants argued that without listening to them or observing the challenges, the leadership imposed their "dictatorship and wants us to do what they want" (F17 - dismantle).

**Existing Bureaucracy.** QAA seemingly had supported the already existing shapes of hierarchy in the systems. In other words, implementers indicated that Afghanistan's higher education system was not yet ready. The system functioned based on manual or official letters and signatures of the authorities to get authorization for specific tasks, especially QAA. An order or decree that indicated the permission of various activities, like initiating the exam committee, was a must from authorities. The letter was called *maktoob* in Dari. That

needed to get the manual signature of the different entities within one organization and from MoHE in the case of higher education institutions. The next participant elaborated on the challenges the current system caused:

When there is a *maktoob* [directive from the government] from MoHE, the teachers would hear the news spread. Then, that would be sent to Committees at the department, the university, then without monitoring or evaluating the documents would go the MOHE, and MoHE would never check. Sometimes the *maktoob* comes late (F21 - reformist).

*Maktoob* -- means a directive from the government.

In a centralized system, QAA had formed committees and subcommittees that could cause problems in its outcome. For example, according to a participant, there are several committees, and this overemphasized bureaucracy has prevented some committees from doing their task appropriately:

QAA management has several main subcommittees consisting of one teacher from 21 faculty. Subcommittees have members from 16 departments in each faculty. Some reports are left without reading or attention (F28 - reformist).

Afghanistan's higher education is centralized and hierarchal, where MoHE oversees all higher education institutions. However, QAA is adapted from an independent higher education system where universities have autonomy. Even advocate admitted that their plans in most cases cannot be implemented because *maktoobs* and other bureaucracies delay their work. The advocate said: “For example, our department makes money, which goes to MoHE. However, when it comes to receiving our portion of the budget, we can’t get it on time” (F16 - advocate).

**“QAA Purpose is Unclear”**

Unclear in QAA's mission and definition was another major complaint of the teachers. According to my participants, when MoHE leaders launched the policy, they did not define it clearly or grant ownership in the implementers' hearts. One of the participants said because implementers were confused with its definition, they implemented it in the way they thought was correct:

There is no standard definition of QAA. It is defined as the credit system at the university and has introduced challenges at varying levels. Students should take another credit in the existing credit system if they don't pass the one they took. However, here students are taking several chances to take the exams to pass the class (F1 - dismantle).

Following this insight, another participant said that rules and regulations in implementing QAA were frequently changing, made them confused and lost about submitting their reports:

Every semester, there were new additions from the reviewers' sides without prior notifications. In such a case, our reporting would not meet their demands. Reporting was different in different departments. There was no standard way of doing one thing. Everyone would come up according to their capacity and what they deemed suitable. In the end, the committee chair would choose one person's reporting system and ask everyone to do the same (F4 - dismantle).

Some participants discussed the problem in the leadership approach: "leadership was forcing faculty to do this [implement the policy] without stating the real purpose of it" (F18 - reformist).

### ***"No One Believes in It"***

Many people thought QAA was an outside plan that did not fit Afghanistan's context. In other words, they believed the policy was "unrealities," "symbolic," and "project-based,"

and that even the leadership in charge of monitoring and evaluation even did not believe in it. According to one of the participants, officials realized the unrealistic expectations of the policy; however, for this individual, the amendment of the policy was not even transparent and inclusive that again causing romantic outcomes:

The policy was not developed based on the realities. A few people inside the ministry set it, sending it back to the universities for a recommendation. The problem is the universities don't see the owner of these policies. Also, they request a few lecturers from different universities, like University A, University B, and University C, to sit together and revise the policy again (F10 - reformist).

After the Bonn Conference I in 2001, reform in all government organizations was necessary, and donor agencies expected this. Hence, adopting QA was a significant reform step taken by the MoHE. However, the dream of reform turned into a “nightmare,” said one of the participants off the record:

It was one of the *islahat* [reform], but it was translated. It is project-based. No one believes in it, even the MoHE and managers and reviewers. Everyone is doing it to get the salary out of it. I know *Pohand*, who was on the committee, and he didn't believe in it. Just for its income, he did that. He used to say, ‘it would not work,’ yet his job was monitoring and evaluating the policy's implementation (F3 - reformist).

*Islahat* -- reform. Since 2001 the term *islahat* or reform has intertwined with government organizations.

The QA policy has been a leverage point to get money from the donor agencies, not to change the system. One of the participants said it had become a project-based business or “*projaee*” in the Dari language.



It is symbolic. It is only for people who take money for themselves. It is just wasting the paper, that is it. Make your dossiers, bring them, and take them home. Since it is part of the teaching, we do as much as possible since we need our monthly income.

We pass the day with it. What else could we do? (F2 - dismantle).

Another participant went so far as to say that the higher education leadership adopted this policy to *attest* themselves to the donor agencies:

As usual, the Afghan government has different policies, and they developed the policy to get the attention of international committees. This policy is also designed for attesting themselves at the level of the World Bank and money request (F10 - reformist).

### ***“QAA is a Show”***

A few teachers believed that QAA was not implemented for several reasons. Some of them observed the problem in leadership. For instance, one of the participants said, “QAA leadership at the university is functional only in name. In practice, it hasn’t brought specific changes in teaching and learning processes” (F20 - dismantle). A former teacher said that implementers were not committed to QAA: “This lack of commitment was because of not receiving support and motivation from leadership. He also indicated the leadership itself was not committed and “was doing it for taking credit, not for the overall good of the university” (F18 - reformist). A participant who was resentful and angry about QAA said: “It is a joke!” Similarly, another participant said that its implementing process has turned into a show or “*namaish:*”

It is *namaishi* [for a show]. None of the teachers internalize the responsibility of implementing QAA. Everyone runs away from its name (F20 - dismantle).

<i>Namaishi</i> -- showy.
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In another participant's mind, there are several reasons for implementers' disinterest in the policy: First, teachers had no idea how to implement the policy; and second, do not believe in it; third, the university is the fifth priority for some of the teachers:

Teachers didn't know how to make a course policy. The Ministry forced them to do so. 2nd, teachers don't believe in it. 90% of the teachers are busy working and teaching or working elsewhere, and universities are a third, fifth priority. Due to force from the minister, only documentation has become routine, which is considered a triumph (F14 - reformist).

### **Reformist Green Lights**

Afghanistan higher education faculty members fall into three categories: (a) teachers continue to use old teaching methods and value that system better than the innovative ways QAA demanded to bring; (b) teachers who were educated in the West and neighboring countries had different approaches. This group attempted to be innovative and value change; (c) teachers with undergraduate degrees who held lower ranking. Therefore, some members in the reformist group agreed that lack of individual responsibility and innovation among the teachers were also factors.

Another faculty member distinguished the policy's theoretical and practical parts and explained his evaluation. Individual responsibilities among faculty members were missing for him: no individual took responsibility. They run away from responsibility (F6 - dismantle). For this reason, the policy implementation had become "checking the box:" "Unfortunately, the faculty members were not taking it seriously. They were just checking the boxes" (F18 - reformist).

My specialty is special education. My students are blind deaf, so I can't say whatever the QAA policy demands. However, I change the types of the questions following the

format that the policy requires. I do group work so the students with special needs can receive help from others (F21 - reformist).

Similarly, another participant highlighted teachers' lack of commitment, awareness, and priorities "...because they are busy working outside of the university" (F20 - reformist). Yet, there was hope in the policy's slow implementation. Some implementers seemed to be happy with its 5% implementations and believed that even the lower percentage of its performance in changing the system positively in the long run:

Afghanistan's higher education has been depleted. Books were written from the political groups' points of view, especially during the Taliban and *Mujahidin* (two rival political factions). We can't change things overnight. Even where QAA is implemented 5-10%, it will triumph and bring some change! (F16 - reformist).

### **Relationship Dynamics and its Impact on the Policy Implementation**

A second significant unexpected finding involves the complex relationship dynamics during implementation across ethnic, cultural, religious, and personal identity lines. Relationships prevailed over ethics and discipline. Some of the teachers did not implement the policy, and the reviewers and department heads bypassed the faculty due to their f. The concept of relationship or friendship in the workplace is based on ethnic, religious, gender, and political ideologies. Also, the idea of a relationship was deeply rooted in organizational activities. The dynamics of the relationships and contextual explanation are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3***Definitions of Relationship Dynamics*

No	Relationship dynamics	Contextual Explanation
1	Religion	Islam the main religion in Afghanistan. Within Islam, two effective practices are politically identified: Shia and Muslim. Mainly, the Shia population consisting of Hazar are socially, religiously, and politically connected.
2	Gender	Traditionally, women and men should interact in separate spaces.
3	Generation	Friendships are also based on generation in Afghanistan.
4	Political ideologies	Politically, Afghans are fragmented, holding a specific political mindset, i.e., the current government, Taliban, northern allies.
5	Region	Regions are identified based on spoken language and religious practices, e.g., northern provinces are Uzbeks, western and central Dari, and southern provinces are Pashto speakers.
6	Language/ethnicity	Ethnicity in Afghanistan is based on spoken languages mentioned above.
7	Blood tie	blood relationships, like siblings and cousins, are strongly valued.
8	Ranking	Positions are often abused in Afghanistan organizations. The higher ranking one has the upper hand on hiring and treating the employee they will have.

*Note.* Table 2 explains the contextual definitions of relationship dynamics in Afghanistan culture.

**“*Rawabit Have Destroyed it [QAA]*”**

In Afghanistan, everything is based on relationships or *rawabit*. *Rawabit* could also be social connections or networks in a western context. However, in Afghanistan, men have the most *rawabit*, which was seen as legitimate. In most cases, people made *rawabit* and kept it healthy to get their jobs done and receive favors, such as bypassing QAA implementation. Most participants resented how *rawabit* had damaged QAA implementation and negatively affected it. F21, a dismantler, for instance, said,

*Rawabit* – connections or relationships

For instance, the head of the department or M&E member is my friend. I make 20 questions instead of 60; people who oversee monitoring and evaluation would say, that is okay because you are my friend (F21 - dismantle).

F2, a dismantler, went as far as to say that the university was inherited with family or blood relationships:

University is, in a way, occupied. The university and teaching jobs have become only receiving income (F2 - dismantle). Teachers employ their sons, daughters-in-law, daughters. So, everything is based on relationships.

F9, a dismantler, also believed that *rawabit* or relationships had impacted the outcome of the QAA. It affected female teachers who were culturally and socially prevented from forming bonds with male members and those in authority:

...At the end of the year, someone who has a good relationship with the rules becomes the Faculty’s best professor. Someone who would do a lot of work and work hard doesn’t say they are working (F12 - reformist).

**“Relationship Dynamics Have Poisoned Reviewers and Evaluators”**

According to the participants, relationship dynamics also impacted the QAA evaluation process. Because the monitoring and evaluation committee had a good relationship with some professors, the members did not present negative feedback or take the fault-line seriously:

Due to relationships among members of M & E who are also current faculty members, some teachers are not evaluated. Yes, teachers make development plans after receiving feedback, but it is never assessed, or they do it in their way, meaning they consider the relationship and don't look at it. If the teachers are seriously evaluated, some will not be qualified for teaching—*everything is based on relationships* (F29 - dismantle).

The impact of relationships was seen in the QAA committees in each school at the university and among the monitoring team. F14, an advocate for dismantling QAA, said, relationship dynamics were observed in the work of the M & E team, “Evaluators from MoHE are teachers, and due to relationships based on language, ethnicity, groups, they ignore some issues.” QAA evaluation was not successful, according to some faculty members, because it did not solve the problem on the spot. The result was given to teachers out of date when nothing could be done at that point. Also, most of the teachers at University X claimed that there was no evaluation process, and others believed they had not received any feedback about their performances.

If the committee notices that the exam of a specific teacher is not following the roles, the exam should be canceled (F21 - reformist). For instance, the teacher's problem or shortcomings of the examination process will be noted, and the teacher will be notified one to three months later. The teacher says, okay, I got it, and I will pay attention to this matter in the next exam.

F1, a strong advocate for dismantling QAA, believed he fitted his documents for evaluation as a teacher. Still, they never got analyzed, “In my department, I have not received any feedback, not at all. Not only I but no other teachers I know have received feedback based on the evaluation.” In the meantime, F6, an advocate for dismantling QAA, complained that he wasted his time preparing the documents for evaluation. Still, no one checked it, “It is to make your dossier and organize paper and show them that they have such a system. No one checks what is inside the dossier and what aspects are practiced.”

F8, a reformist, also said that he never received any feedback from his department. He believed teachers rarely received input when there was a problem: “Sometimes they give feedback when there is a problem with a teacher. Then, a betterment plan will be made and shared with the department. In general, these points are never taken seriously. For example, if my development plan in 2016 was not implemented, no one has asked me why?” This professor blamed the university leadership and MoHE for QAA monitoring and evaluation shortcomings. MoHE acted weak in its monitoring and the university's implementation, which gives teachers an excuse not to take it seriously. “Teachers react according to the situation at the university. If the university were committed to its implementation, teachers would do it.”

Another participant said teachers “give something in the syllabus, and they teach something else in the classes, during classes. No observation during the lectures or no monitoring evaluation” (F9 - dismantle). Those evaluated teachers at the department, university, and ministry level were lower-ranking teachers. In most cases, a teacher with BA evaluated teachers with MA and PhDs. Forms and questionnaires for feedback were made without any consultation with teachers. So, this had caused demotivation and less interest among teachers.

***Teacher Evaluation: “Evaluation Questions are Ridiculous”***

QAA policy requires students to evaluate their teachers at the end of each semester. However, the evaluation process has inflamed issues of ethnicity and gender that are rooted in Afghan society. Consequently, the evaluation questionnaire and student responses were politicized. Although QAA had given some power to students to raise their voices, teacher domination was visible, and students did not respond based on reality. Still, their judgments were clouded by linguistics, gender, and political lines. The QAA advocate group denied this fact, which defended the *rightness* and *necessity* of the kinds of questions in the teacher evaluation form that appeared problematic for many faculties. Faculty members complained about different elements of the questions asked by students about teachers. One of the participants defined the questions as “ridiculous:”

Questions are ridiculous. Students fear teachers. For instance, I must discuss ethnic issues in my politics class, but the students responded no. The only thing they told me was that I was *khashin*. But they didn't say anything about my teaching methods. They don't respond to reality. Questions are more on personal aspects rather than academic (F3 - reformist).

<i>Khashin</i> -- Rough
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The sole purpose of collecting evaluations from students about teachers was to bring change in teaching-learning methods and enhance education quality broadly. However, some participants believed that based on the feedback students give, and teachers could not be evaluated:

Questions are general and broad. For example, do teachers collect timesheets daily or not, present course policy, how is the teaching method, etc.? From the answer to those questions, it is hard to evaluate them. So are the students' responses. For instance, one



of the answers I received was, ‘Afghanistan and online teaching!’ It is not a measurable response (F17 - dismantle).

Another participant said that the student questionnaire demeaned teachers. The questions were as such that belittled the teachers: “The questions about student feedback are like, do teachers have the capacity to teach? If a student knows this, they are not students. If it were about conveying the message, that would be different” (F1 - dismantle). Based on her responses, a female faculty member's concern was losing her teaching reputation. She did not blame the students but blamed the entity that made the questions. She said:

For instance, one of the student evaluation form questions is, does the teacher use a projector when teaching in class? However, we do not have this capacity and capability. There is no power, no socket, etc. Despite knowing these facts, students give negative feedback, which will impact my career, which is painful (F20 - dismantle).

Most faculty members expressed that MoHE should not write the questions because they are not an academic body of higher education. Also, dissatisfaction about the generality of questions was expressed. The ministry made one set of questions for all schools or Faculties and departments that created problems mentioned above, as one of them said: “The questions are not realistic” (F17 - reformist).

### ***Ethnic Tensions Inflamed***

According to some of the participants, in the feedback from there were questions about ethnicity and gender that may have elevated students’ attitudes toward hatred. They believe that these questions were not necessary to be asked of students. For example, “Is a teacher's moral behavior good or bad? These questions damage student and teacher relations. There are questions about ethnic tensions” (F1 - dismantle). Some teachers thought students responded or gave feedback based on their ethnicity, language, and group interest rather than

reality. They believed students were partial in their responses: “For example, if a teacher speaks in their language, they give good feedback to them; otherwise, no. If students don’t like a teacher, they give negative feedback” (F17 - reformist).

Many teachers thought that the evaluation of teachers by their students was not ideal or realistic. “Therefore, teachers do not believe in students' evaluations and do not take them seriously. So, the practicality of the student feedback is under the question” (F17 - reformist). Similarly, another participant objected to the fact that the questions about ethnic tensions poison students’ minds: “Why should we confuse students’ minds with discriminatory questions?” (F4 - dismantle).

In addition, ethnicity was a blocking factor in changing the curriculum or adding readings (books and chapters) to the class. The dominant ethnic group at the university was permanently prohibiting the alteration of the curriculum based on what favored their language and ethnicity, or what might be against:

Hiring is not fair or transparent. It is usually based on ethnicity and language. So, even when making a curriculum at the university, we face difficulties related to race and language. Some people do not want to include certain subjects in the curriculum based on their ethnic and language interests (F14 - dismantle).

### ***Female Faculty Confronted***

According to reports, only 35% of college students are female in Afghanistan higher education. Therefore, higher education classrooms are dominated by men, some of whom might be from conservative provinces with negative thinking and attitude about women’s presence in public. A female faculty member had an unforgettable memory from student feedback:

There was a question in the questionnaire for students: “What does the teacher's appearance look like?” Among 140, we chose 14 students to fill out the questionnaire.

All the 14 students had said that our teacher was not modest in her clothing or *bi hijab*. I was shocked by the response and wondered how to solve the *students' probe problems*. I complained to the provost about the question and asked, should I buy a *hijab*? Shall I ask students what I should wear? The provost's response was like, "This question is asked from male and female teachers. Don't worry" (F4 -dismantle).

*Hijab* -- meaning headcover. Although the *hijab* has been defined as a headcover worn by Muslim women in public (Lexico, 2021), it includes overall modesty in women's clothing.

According to Afghan standards and tradition, this individual admitted that her clothing had covered her from head to toe. However, she [participant] said she was a little stylish. According to her, no one had raised their voice about this question, although female teachers received very harsh feedback from students. "Instead, they looked at their clothing style to see the flaw so they could fix this," she said. Another female faculty complained about the misogynist questions in the students' feedback forms: "There are a lot of questions that are not related to the lectures or the syllabus. They are related to the professor's personality. How she will share. How she behaves. Had she put on makeup or not" (F9 -dismantle). One of the male faculty members bluntly said that "Implementing QAA has facilitated teachers to be in contact with students without enough professionalism and considering ethical elements of teacher-student relationships" (F22 - reformist). He continued, "Allowing connections has increased the risk of female students being sexually harassed by their professors. Students do not know how to approach and communicate with teachers to some degree. Teachers also have weak morale, and they misuse their innocence" (F22 - reformist).

Some faculty members indicated that student feedback or comments about female teachers' dress and appearance were ethnicity-based. A professor said, "I never had negative

comments about my dressing and appearances. Because I am a Pashtun woman, my dressing is conservative” (F25 - dismantle). She said that other female professors who wore slightly brighter or tighter clothes showed strong reactions than male students. However, she admitted teachers with the slightest touch of color and organization in their appearance would catch male students’ negative attention and response. “One day, we were heading out of the campus, and one of my male students approached me with a negative comment about another female professor walking in front of us. He said, ‘professor, what we learn from a professor with that style of dressing’” (F25 - dismantle). She continued that if they did not dress up, they would be called those who would come to classrooms with pajamas. If they dressed up, they would be called immodest.

A women’s appearance and dress in public have always been a concern for men in Afghanistan. Men were respected for those women who appeared with Arab-style hijab, meaning no hair and no neck showing, long and baggy dresses with dark color. The designation of women by men is based on the length of their headscarves and skirts has been the critique of rising feminists in Afghanistan. In the meantime, many women adjust their public appearances based on what men see as modest or *sangen* and with positive moral values. They deem gaining the respect of men as building upon their public reputation and image.

<i>Sangen</i> -- modest
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### ***“QAA Has Brought a Lot of Changes”***

Despite these challenges, some of which were serious, a handful of participants mentioned the policy’s positive outcome. Some participants blamed teachers, the sole implementers, for not taking it seriously. One of them highlights the initiatives of the plans in teachers’ teaching:

For example, many lecturers did not even have a syllabus for their classes. Personal development is another result of QA. Previously teachers were not observed, but now they are. Based on that, the lecturers are required to make plans to improve their weak points in terms of everything related to their subject, class, and teaching (F19 - advocate).

In the same line, another participant believed that QAA implementation had eliminated teachers using their preferred way and required them to follow a standard curriculum. In other words, the methods of teaching were *khod sarana* or self-approved methods:

Teachers did not have a plan, and their activities were unclear and, in their control, *khod sarana*. They have teaching and teacher activities in teaching. At the beginning of the semester, teachers share their course policy with students. Now teachers get feedback from students. Teachers' activities are monitored and controlled (F13 - advocate).

*Khod sarana* -- On their way, which means everyone follows whatever they deem right rather than following the rules and regulations.

Advocates also believed in the proper implementation of the policy and its failure monitoring and evaluation within their departments and Faculties. A female faculty member who was involved with QAA Committee indicated the list below:

We demand outcome-based plans and their results. The head of the department goes to classrooms and monitors. Also, the department head requires a development plan or *behbood plan* and evaluates if that is implemented or not. We have checklists for teachers' activities. Also, we assess teachers' movements based on students' feedback - e.g., how much homework they give, how they make final exam questions, etc. In the case research, the outcome of their publication is a piece of evidence. The reports

will go to the department head, university leader, and higher education minister. We talk about the result of feedback from students and others in person confidentially to avoid embarrassment. However, we never had such an issue in our department and teachers (F13 - advocate).

*behbood plan* – development plane

### ***“Questions About Ethnicity & Gender are a Must”***

A few implementers who were overly optimistic about the overall idea of QAA said that questions about ethnicity and gender were a must in the student feedback questionnaire. They believed teachers should not come to class with their “pajamas,” “I believe this is a legitimate question in our reform efforts,” he said. About questions concerning ethnicity, a participant who oversaw QAA at the university said:

... the teachers should not be discriminatory. In the past, teachers have failed students because they were from a different ethnic group. When we saw the questions, we realized the problem in teachers, not students. These questions will help us vent ethnic discrimination between teachers and students (F6 - advocate).

Another faculty head of the department defended the questionnaire questions and blamed the teachers for not explaining them well: “The problem is with the questionnaire about teacher evaluation. The problem is that teachers do not explain the questions and aim of the feedback, so students do not give appropriate or right responses. No explanation of the method had caused students to respond differently” (F16 - advocate). In the same vein, a female faculty member turned blind eyes to the questionnaire’s existing problems. She said that with their committee’s effort, questions had been altered and made fit to the school and departments’ needs:

In the beginning, questions for evaluating teachers were made by the MoHE. After a few semesters or years, we changed them as the questions were strange and less helpful. We worked on it and changed it completely. We suggested the shift in ministry to the problems, and they did. We challenged them. All at the university level use the same questions (F13 - advocate).

This section unpacked faculty members' perceptions about the QAA policy's space in Afghan society and higher education. The next part will uncover perceptions of the implementers concerning the research questions.

### **Perspectives on Faculty Members' Capacity**

Older generation teachers at University X pressured younger generation faculty to resist implementing the policy and secure their positions. They asserted pressure on younger faculty, including the leadership, (a) because they did not believe in the policy; (b) because they did not have basic technology skills to meet the requirements; and (c) because they could be assertive through their relationship dynamics, the power their ranking granted, and respect to elders in society. Senior teachers, who were granted a Ph.D. degree due to the number of years they taught, took a significant number of seats. Younger generation teachers, who were with a BA degree and usually held lower teacher ranking, took 40% of the seats at University X. Those in the highest ranking of teachers ruled the institution and made decisions at the university level. Leadership believed that the older teachers could not update themselves quickly, as they perceived the "legacy of a hard regime and war." According to the Law, teachers could not be fired, so leadership had to "be patient and wait until they retire one by one" (F7 - advocate). They were not adept at rapid change at their age: "They [senior teachers] don't believe in the credit system. They think it is better to drop and fail students to learn better" (F6 - advocate).

Older teachers used the power that society, the Law, and position granted to resist change. Accordingly, working with senior teachers had been difficult as they were opposed to not only implementing the policy but innovative ideas about teaching methods, too:

When changing the curriculum, we face many problems with old teachers. They don't accept new teaching systems. Their theories and thinking are dependent on the ancient period. When we want to bring the change, they argue (F8 – dismantle)

Participants related Afghanistan higher education to a dictatorship or military base where the teachers hold enormous power, and the students are passive consumers without any voice, rights, or roles. Teachers were trained that way for so long. This was primarily the case with senior teachers.

However, QAA had given some power and voice to students that were considered an overnight shift from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness. This system permitted students to evaluate teachers' behavior and teaching methods at the end of each semester. This shift was easy for younger generation teachers; however, senior teachers with different teaching and learning styles did not receive it well:

They [older teachers] think they are complete, and no one can evaluate them, especially students. They believe students cannot assess the professor and take it as an insult (F28 – dismantle).

### ***Domination and Subordination***

Power between older and younger generation teachers at University X cultivated dominant and subordinate relationships. On the other hand, relationship dynamics had been taken for granted by some department heads. According to a participant, this behavior led to discriminatory acts among academics: “Academics behave discriminatorily. When everyone does not agree with the one idea, relationships come into play” F8. Another faculty member said:



Older teachers dominate younger ones because they are department heads or have been their students. They are in the decision-making roles, so younger professors are intimidated. Even MoHE is intimidated by them (F14 - reformist).

The decision-making authority came from achieving a Ph.D. by the number of teaching years and publishing locally (regardless of quality). Power and authority were misused in asserting their beliefs toward some issues at the university. Thus, their action toward QAA cannot be questioned:

Older teachers have advanced until *Pohand*, but they don't read books. They go to workshops and seminars in other countries, but when they return, they talk about that country's cars, girls, not about what they learned in academics. When there is a new approach, they stand against it, let alone implement the policy. The prefix of *Poh* has damaged everything. They write articles with copy-paste and plagiarism and increase their level to *Pohand*. When they are *pohand*, we can't say anything to them. No one can (F2 - dismantle).

*Pohand* -- Equivalent to Ph.D. After a few years of teaching and publishing, civil higher education law grants positions for teachers.

However, they would retire at a certain age. Given this, government entities broke the rules. They allowed the retired teachers to continue teaching: "... Older teachers with the presidents and government authority decree begin to teach again. Or they change their ages by five years to be eligible to teach" (F14 - reformist).

All the participants related the policy implementation to Afghanistan circumstances, as they repeated that this was Afghanistan and that everything related to the performance of the policy was *Afghani* or in Afghan ways. Afghan way was to turn blind eyes to limitations that prevent proper policy implementation. For example, a senior teacher cannot make a

syllabus, course policy, or PowerPoint; however, the reviewers and evaluators ignored the facts. A participant explained the Afghan way better in his words:

For instance, a head of a department cannot make a PowerPoint. Everyone around would say it is okay. He is respected for his older age. M&E from MoHE knows that this person has problems but turns a blind eye. Younger teachers make their course policies because they don't see how (F14 - dismantle).

### **Perspectives on Teaching and Learning**

Participants also shared their perceptions of the impact on teaching and learning from implementing quality assurance and accreditation policy. Regarding *education*, those participants who wanted to dismantle or reform the policy referred to it as a “quality-less policy,” *tazminelines beqai fiat*, and meaninglessness of credentials. QAA added loads of work but without any incentive, which resulted in teachers’ discouragement in improving the teaching method. Those who were advocates perceived significant and substantive changes in teaching quality. Regarding *learning*, those participants who wanted to dismantle or reform believed that the policy “demotivated” students’ learning, whereas the advocates believed the system transformed students.

#### ***“Teachers call QAA as the quality-less policy”***

QAA policy was vernacularly defined as the policy to assure and enhance quality. In Dari, it is called *Tazmin e qai fiat*. However, some teachers call it *Tazmin beqai fiat*, meaning quality-less. In his words: “Teachers don’t have email addresses, don’t have computers, and don't know how to use the smartphone. With these circumstances, QAA has no meaning. People ridiculed it. They call it quality-less assurance” (F2 - dismantle). Another participant indicated a similar narrative, which was wasting teachers’ time in documentation rather than enhancing quality: “Professors, instead of thinking about the quality of teaching, were thinking about filling out the form, documenting, taking pictures in the classroom and

meetings” (F20 - dismantle). Teachers also argued that without feedback, university administrative bodies demanded improvement in teaching methods: “When there is no feedback, what is the expectation for teachers to improve their teaching method?” (F1 - dismantle).

*Tazmin beqaifiat* -- translated as without quality. The prefix of *be* at the beginning of the word, *qaifiat*, negates the process of assuring. To better understand the English language, I translated it as quality-*less* assurance.

QAA outlined promising changes in teaching methods. Examples were using a projector, having fewer students in a class, and student-centered teaching. However, according to faculty members, there was no context and tool. “... they want the lecturer to teach adequately, but unfortunately, the classes are not at the same level, which cannot be useful for the student” F10. For this reason, QAA has turned into an official matter only: “For example, it is required for teachers to use PowerPoint, a projector in classrooms, and in exams to have a cutting point, bring 60 questions. There is no PowerPoint, and instead of 60 exam questions, teachers bring 20 questions. No one, teachers, students, and heads of departments object to this” (F21 – reformist).

### ***No Incentive to Promote Teaching Methods***

Lack of incentive for teachers and unfair distribution of work created barriers in motivating teachers to improve teaching methods. One of the participants said: “...all teachers, those with BA, MA, and Ph.D. from abroad, receive the same amount of income or incentive. That is why they are discouraged and look for another main job that pays well and knows the worth of their knowledge” (F17 - dismantle). According to another faculty member, teachers who work hard and are innovative did not get any incentive and recognition from the leadership: “teachers who teach a lot and those who do not receive the

same income. I think there should be some degree of motivation so the teachers should feel protected, encouraged, and valued” (F14 - dismantler). Similarly, another teacher said: “No teacher has been appreciated or got a notice. Teachers only make a dossier that is never checked. Everything is based on relationships” (F5 - dismantler).

### **Learning Method**

Some of the dismantlers believed that the QAA or credit system had made students take education for granted. According to dismantlers and reformists, QAA has attempted to change the teaching method from teacher-centered to student-centered in an overnight manner, whereas students were still in the same mindset of lecture-based teaching habits, some had no capital to purchase books, access academic journals, or anyone in the family to get help with studying and learning. Students were not ready to understand and enhance their learning outcomes with these changes.

QAA requires an outcome-based teaching method based on practical work in the classroom. When doing group work for the first or two or three sessions of the classes, I heard that they [students] were arguing that ‘Our professor, he is not prepared to teach in the class’...they expect from the teachers, to give them lectures (F11 - reformist).

Another faculty member shared a similar sentiment and said that teachers are often mocked or blamed for their lack of knowledge by students if they use modern teaching systems, like PowerPoint. According to her, students would say: “‘That's why they give all the responsibility to us, that's why we have to study instead of them’” (F10 - reformist).

Implementers believed that the QAA policy made demands beyond their students’ capacity and what they could offer. The policy required the students to be self-learners; however, there was no such environment on campus and strategy in hand. A reformist said: “Students are illiterate from their families. They don’t have anyone who can read and write in

the family, and no one from whom to obtain support. This culture cannot be changed in academia” (F3 - reformist). Still, he thought that students who had the means have improved in learning as they knew from their activities and questions. Changing the learning methods is also related to providing resources like libraries, books, labs, computers, the internet, access to journals, etc. However, University X did not have any of those: “There are no tangible changes in students' learning. Also, the system has not accepted students as a source of knowledge” (F15 - reformist).

According to faculty members, improvements in student learning would occur when there were improvements. As one of the participants said, “if the university environments do not change, students' knowledge will not change either” (F17 - reformist). Another participant went as far as to say that the QAA had damaged the learning spirit amongst students. According to this dismantler, QAA requirements were unrealistic, and teachers knew this. Therefore, implementers and leadership bypassed many conditions that negatively affected the learning process.

In comparison to semester-based systems, we see a lot of negative changes. This system has demotivated students. It has told students that they would not fail. There are six exams for students to pass a one-credit course, absolutely against the rules. Students think if they study or not, come to class or not, they will give anyway. The current system has dropped down our students' learning ability by far (F1- dismantle).

**Reformists: “There Are Changes but not Visible.”**

In teaching, reformists believed, the policy made the teachers a bit accountable, and in learning, a little attention has been given to students. In the same lines, some reformists acknowledged the tremendous changes to teaching and learning due to policy implementation. However, they were cautious in their optimism, as those changes could only be seen broader.

Some of the reformists said changes were there, but it was not something that they rely on or count on too much, “Overall, it made the teacher a little responsible; however, its impact is not very visible” (F3 - reformist). Another reformist indicated that generally, the policyholder the teachers accountable for documenting their activities: “... Documentation was not a part of the past...” (F9 - dismantle). Another reformist said: “Those [faculty members] who want to do it [implement the policy], they do it with all the limitations and problems they face” (F19 - reformist), particularly those who did not have the capacity or bypassed it using their power and authority.

Regarding student learning, some reformists thought it had given a window for students to express their opinions, “whereas, in the past, some teachers would fail the students so they could abuse them [either for money or other reasons]. It has given some room to the system to support students and protect them, although, in the end, they save and support the teachers” (F6 - reformist). Another touch of change was to help students know about their semester plans from the start. In contrast, this practice was not part of the system before QAA: “In the past, some teachers, instead of teaching, gave lectures about their personal life, political opinion, etc.” (F14 - reformist).

Other reformists saw unequal progress in student learning and the same outcome. Paradoxes about the policy requirements and Afghanistan circumstances were the reasons. For instance, the family system differed culturally and socially from students’ policy: The policy made the system student-centered. However, students were not mentally prepared to understand this: “We don’t train students in our families to be independent, but the policy urges them to be. It doesn’t match the family education system” (F6 - reformist).

### **Problems with Older Teachers, or Teaching and Learning Methods**

However, QAA Advocates dismantled all the problems mentioned above. They believed they had educated older teachers and that teaching and learning changed significantly.

***“We Dismantled Resistance”***

Advocates did not accept the problem with senior faculty members. One of the participants believed problems with older generation teachers existed at the beginning of the policy initiatives, which was no longer the case: “For example, when we went to the class to evaluate their teaching, they kicked us out of the classroom, saying, ‘I will get rid of you with your QAA.’ But we made them understand by holding workshops. Now they do not resist” (F16 - advocate).

Similarly, another participant who was part of the QAA committee in her department said that the policy was independent and that no person or entity could influence it. In their opinion: “We don't see a relationship policy, so we don't see the influence of relationships” (F12 - dismantle). Besides, some of the advocates bragged about assigning lower-ranking faculty members to help senior teachers with using technology:

Each *Pohand* receives help from lower-ranking teachers. There is a sense of support among teachers. In the beginning, we had many problems with our senior teachers, but that has been resolved. Family and children help them with technology - e.g., they know how to use WhatsApp and smartphones so they can connect with us (F13 - advocate).

QAA policy had challenged the senior faculty who have spent their lives teaching students with an old system. They perceived the new system as questioning or threatening their abilities to lead. Given this problem, the evaluators needed to come up with creative ways to enter the classrooms as observers: “We do not tell them that we are evaluating their

teaching style. We told them we want to know if everything is alright with your teaching, class, students, etc., then they calmed down” (F16 - advocate).

***“Teaching Method has Changed Considerably”***

Advocates also thought there was a tangible change in the teaching system observed. They thought teachers do not give priority to collecting information for the data for their reports: “Then, they copy and paste another department’s report with name and date change in a short period because they don’t have data” (F24 - advocate).

Conducting research and publishing as part of teaching was another triumph that was considered based on the QAA policy’s implementation: “In the field of research, it has had an impact. Some teachers publish. The outcome is weak, but it has stimulated teachers to think about it” F7. Similarly, another participant said that QAA made teachers responsible for their delivery to students: “It helped teachers to see their weaknesses and work on them. It enabled them to have a plan” (F28 - advocate).

***“Today’s Students Are Different”***

Advocates believed in the positive change in student learning as well: “Student capacity is directly affected by the teacher. When teachers are well planned and organized, and strive to teach effectively, that will have a positive effect on student capabilities” (F19 - advocate). On the other hand, some insisted on the student’s improvements compared to five years ago: “Today’s students compared to 5 years ago are different. Students are urged to work harder and do more research” (F8 - advocate).

Some faculty cited their students and classroom as examples to improvements in students' learning: “In my class, which is statistics, I use simulation. I saw students are learning better than the lecture system. In the past, students would only listen to lectures and take notes. Now it is keeping students active student-centered. Students ask questions” (F7 - advocate). Apart from student learning, some implementers emphasized the policy’s partial



empowering of students. In other words, the QAA policy lets the students express their opinion, although not in the way they should be.

### **Perspective on QAA's Future**

**“Hopeful if...”** Many faculty members were hopeful only if they received the proper implementation of the policy demanded. One of them was, for instance, an online system where students and faculty could access specific information without involving the department: “It is an opportunity, but the approach needs to change. For example, students should give feedback directly online, and faculty should have access to it directly online, not through the third party and on documents. Dealing with documents will bring no change” (F3 - reformist). Challenges to implementing QAA and its limited outcome were acknowledged and owned by most of the participants. Most of them were hopeful despite the challenges they faced: “With the current pace and management, it is hard to think of a better future. However, change doesn't happen by magic. It needs patience, hard-working individuals, people who feel the needs and cater to the” F19.

Not having enough resources was another challenge to the ineffective implementation and outcome of the policy.

Every Faculty now has at least a strategic plan for five years. But they don't have enough resources to implement their strategic plan. For example, one of the priorities in our strategic plan in our faculty is curriculum revision. As a policy professor, I think to do a good curriculum revision. We need lots of meetings with stakeholders. However, we cannot afford to hold such meetings. The Ministry of Higher Education doesn't pay for such discussions (F11 - reformist).

Bringing change in the future was the hope of many faculty in implementing the QAA policy. They called the policy in its “infancy.” However, they were aware that the policy would continue to be ineffective without necessary change even if it reached its maturity. A

faculty member suggested that the policy should be based on a dependent entity decision, not the MoHE:

Decisions should not be made at the ministry. The minister should take the policy first seriously and believe in it. Policies and their implementations should be independent. If its building blocks are not taken seriously, we can't do anything even if the policy is at its maturity in the future (F17 - dismantle).

Although a few faculty members were hopeful the QAA would have a positive impact in the future, their hopefulness relied on a few "ifs." One of the participants said: "If the policy continues to implement like this, there are two possibilities: (a) if changes [we demand] come, it might be successful; (b) If we see more challenges on top of what we are experiencing, it might be unsuccessful" (F8 - reformist). Another faculty member deemed support of the MoHE leadership critical in QAA's successful mission: "If they [leadership] don't change, don't answer to [our] concerns, it will fail. Faculties cannot implement moving forward, as there is no self-autonomy. We are dependent on MoHE" (F12 - advocate). In addition, teacher training and preparing them to implement the policy correctly was a highlight among the participants. The majority of older generation faculty were teaching without knowledge and skills in technology. Disbelief in the policy has presented tremendous challenges, too.

On the other hand, some faculty members thought that QAA had created aspirations for change, which was considered a triumph:

I think it is a good beginning. At least the QAA words have been widespread, and every year, we see a little positive change. To improve it, we need MoHE's help and allocate enough budget to implement it correctly (F20 - reformist).

## **Summary**

The first sub-chapter of findings was QAA's technical aspect analysis, providing instruction to the QAA policy in Afghanistan higher education. Primary policy documents, such as ANDS, The Constitutions of Afghanistan, provided a brief explanation of the legal basis for the QAA policy in Afghanistan's higher education. Documents exclusive to MoHE provided information about the structure of the QAA within MoHE and higher education institutions. They broadly framed how and when a university will be reviewed for accreditation. However, none of the documents provided information on the internal administration of the QAA application and its implications at the universities. The policy's internal administration rules are clear from the participants' explanation; however, the researcher could not find a solid and consolidated document that notes and explains the procedures clearly. As the participants mentioned, specific rules are made within each Faculty and department by the QAA Committee, which was also ever-changing and inconsistent.

Afghanistan's higher education structure has constantly been changing through the involvement of other nations in its affairs. It has seldom operated autonomously in this sense. The involvements of different regimes from France, Germany, Great Britain, Russia, America, etc., have caused the system to change over time. For instance, the Russian administration had altered higher education because it seemed necessary, centralized, and hierarchical. The U.S.-backed donor agencies attempted to change the Russian influence on the system. Although Americans are not directly or overtly involved with altering the higher education system, international aid organizations, like the World Bank and UNESCO, represent American higher education models. Afghanistan's higher education leaders willingly adopted and adapted the policy provision of such organizations in an "illusion" (Niroo and Glass, 2021) to enhance the system and quality of higher education.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This chapter summarizes the entire study and draws essential conclusions from the previous chapter's presented data. This chapter also provides a discipline-specific discussion and implications for the professionals in the field. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research. The significant contribution I make is unpacking the relationship dynamics, the hierarchy of labor, and value for the work and its results, which to the literature. After discussing these contributions, I highlight the findings juxtaposed to similar previous studies. Next, I pay sufficient attention to neocolonial perspectives, focusing on the technical aspects of the policy and politics around it.

Based on findings, I argue that QAA enforced a stricter hierarchical system among higher education leaders and policy implementers. Among local actors, higher education leaders instilled more power and control over the country's universities. The findings indicated local actors' dissatisfaction with the policy and how MoHE officials treated them. Aside from a few conservative voices, other implementers were cynical about the policy and MoHE leaders' actions. Niroo and Glass' (2021) study paid close attention to this matter and highlighted the three different voices of the implementers, MoHE leaders, and donor agencies.

Years have been spent developing and translating the policy into the Afghan system. Higher education laws have been amended to accommodate its implementation. An entity within the ministry of higher education has been formed to manage and observe the policy's implementation. Faculty members are too busy providing documentation and proof of implementation of the policy in their daily activities. However, the bigger question is to what extent this policy has helped enhance teaching and learning quality? Do the Afghanistan

higher education system and faculty members have the capacity to implement this policy?

What is the way forward? This study has tackled these questions that are often dismissed in a handful of scholarly studies in the field.

Utilizing a qualitative method, this study undertook a single case study approach with a social constructivist paradigm. The technique included professional literature plus government policies and regulations related to the formulation and implementation of quality assurance and accreditation policy in Afghanistan's postsecondary education. The aim of reviewing documents was to find the legal basis for the formulation of QAA and highlight the technical aspects and any concerns regarding its implementation. The documents were from the post-Taliban era when the QAA policy began.

The researcher collected 29 one-on-one interviews from faculty members at University X. The interviews were conducted online as the researcher could not travel internationally due to the global pandemic and political climate in Afghanistan and the U.S. The researcher transcribed the interviews in Dari and then translated them into English. Using thematic and other coding methods, different categories and themes were identified. The data were narrated in the findings section. Despite unexpected discoveries, findings were related to the literature review, which alluded to the study's richness. Expected and unexpected results will be presented in this chapter.

### **Unpacking The Relationship Dynamics of Labor and Value**

Findings indicated a distinction between who ordered the job and who did it at University X. As discussed by a few participants of the study, the leadership of the policy, who were in the category of advocate group, were detached from the implementation shortfalls. According to faculty members, the administration looked at the abstract without realizing what had caused the policy's shortcomings to succeed. On the other hand, the implementers were detached from the leadership because their viewpoints were subjective

rather than objective. From the participants' points of view, both parties looked at the policy and believed in its outcome subjectively, e.g., implementers thought the leadership did not believe in the procedure, but they acted as they did. The implementation process at the university demonstrated correlations between the concept of "labor and power" (Marx, 1919 [1995]). In other words, the QAA leadership overwhelmed the implementers as they held power through their granted positions. Control over labor became the management privilege, in Marxian explanation. Yet, layers of hierarchy and elements, such as relationships, relatedness, gender, and generation, within the implementers of the QAA policy at University X complicated the implementation labor even more.

**Relationships.** In Afghanistan, everything is based on relationships, as it is everywhere in the world. However, in Afghanistan, labor is manipulated through social relationships in the workforce. People ask for favors through connections, assert their personal opinions, gain domination over colleagues, and avoid doing the ordered labor by MoHE. For example, the three sets of participant ideas were separated based on their relationship to the policy. Those who were QAA advocates, for example, were either the heads of the committee at their respective schools or were within the leadership of the University. Also, they oversaw implementing or observing QAA in the University. Those in the dismantling and reform category did not have a positive relationship or close friendship with the university and QAA leadership.

**Relatedness.** The concept of ethnicity or race in the implementation of QAA was an unexpected finding that intrigued the researcher to dig deeper into the issue. This concept is deeply embedded in Afghanistan's social structure. To coin this with Carsten's (2000) definition of relatedness, Afghans relate themselves based on ethnicity, the spoken language of a particular group of people, the geographical location where people belong or identify themselves, and similar political and religious ideologies. For instance, some people are allies

based on the common language they the same applies to geographical locations and political groups. It is worth mentioning that political groups are also formed based on ethnicity and geographical areas. University X was not independent of social relatedness, which resulted in the policy implementation. In some instances, the policy was an excuse for different groups to highlight the racial division. For example, the feedback students provided was not received well by the faculty members. They thought students were not impartial in their responses and scored the teachers with whom they shared the same related values.

**Generation.** The Gap between ages among faculty members was highlighted throughout the data collection phases. The clash of generations negatively affected the proper implementation of the QAA policy at University X since its performance requires specific skills that the older population has not acquired (Hayward, 2015). These skills include developing strategic planning, course policies, and primary use of computers and smartphones. Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, younger populations have gained computer, language, and other technology skills. They studied abroad and returned from migration to Pakistan, Iran, and Western countries with skills.

Both older and younger generations returned to the workforce after the International Community's involvement in 2001. In contrast, older generations remained isolated in Afghanistan without further education or gaining skills in language and technology (Hayward, 2015). As a result, the country's more aging population has been directly disapproved by the younger people in the job market. Therefore, according to my participants, the older people at University X were resentful of the positive outcome of QAA although they were in the leadership positions and some of them in parts of authorizing the implementation of QAA however without belief.

**Gender.** The workforce manipulated relationship impacted the laborers overall; however, female faculty members were affected differently. For instance, many participants

said that because of good relationships with the head of a department and QAA committee, some teachers did not implement the policy correctly and did not bother to go through the process step by step but to copy and paste from other teachers. Based on those participants' reports, the committee, department heads, monitoring, and evaluation team did not reflect on those individuals' shortcomings because they were connected. However, this matter harmed female faculty members because, in Afghanistan culture, it is immoral if male and female members have a closer friendship relationship in public. Due to cultural and social barriers, women could not have close relationships with their male colleagues.

Thus, the process, according to participants, was relationship-based. Women could not realize the same level of relatedness as men did, thereby structurally disadvantaging their capacity in both the process and future opportunities (Madsen, 2011). Women had to try their best to implement every policy element to avoid tension with the department heads, QAA Committee, and the monitoring and evaluation team. Female faculty members believed that women worked harder than their male counterparts and fulfilled all the requirements of QAA in their duties, like preparing their reports on time. For example, one of the participants voiced how a female teacher faced problems while submitting her application for promotion when she had previously confronted her male colleagues against a personal comment. Therefore, the relationship-based implementation of QAA had created more unequal performances among male and female faculty members within the university and inverted the entire process's intended goals (Afzali, 2017; Hayward & Karim, 2018).

### ***Value in Social Relationships***

From a Marxist perspective, the relationships, relatedness, generation, and gender illustrate the connection between value and labor. In Marxist literature, labor and commodity go hand in hand. The purpose behind involving in any labor is to yield a thing. The QAA process had excessive work on the faculty members without benefit. Consequently, most of



the participants did not value doing the policy work. Marx's (1995 [1867]) labor theory of value can add more perspective on how and why the work was not appreciated. Labor is a collective and social activity in all societies (Sayers, 2007). In other words, labor cannot be done without involving others. Sayers (2003; 2007) argues that labor creates social relationships with others in the same vein. In the case of Afghanistan higher education, the policy implementation labor added another layer on the existing social relationship bonds in the workplace. Even though the social relationship added value to skipping the assignments and receiving favors for male implementers. On the contrary, female implementers were disadvantaged due to social norms with authority figures. The social relationship was one way that added value on some and devalued others.

#### ***Value in the Application of the Policy***

As the findings indicated, the policy's value among the implementers in their teaching duties was invisible. Some of the participants did not value the policy for different reasons: (a) because there was no context for employing the policy within the university; (b) implementers did not believe in the policy; (c) it was claimed that leadership did not believe in the policy; (4) some faculty were not treated fairly because of disparity in relationships; (d) the policy did not increase student learning capacity; and (e) to some, it had "deteriorated" the quality of teaching. As discussed, essential resources were not available, such as toilets, fresh drinking water, heating systems in the departments and classrooms. A professor deliberately said that this policy was already a "disaster" and will keep creating "headache" or *dard e sar* for teachers and students at the University X. It was also said that the policy development and implementation were project-based or *projaee*. According to implementers, the policy will likely continue to fail. The policy implementation and its attempt to enhance higher education quality were ridiculed with all these shortcomings.

*Dard e sar* -- Headache. To create extra problems on top of what is already experienced.

*Projaee* -- Project based on the contract. Contract-based activities to receive money from internal and external donor agencies.

### ***Value in the Outcome of the Policy Implementation***

The value of the outcome of the labor was further decreased because there was a minimal positive outcome. The typical, expected results were enhancing the faculty capacity and improving the learning for students. Some implementers believed that implementing the quality assurance policy has decreased teaching and learning quality because teachers are occupied with preparing documents that would prove to higher education reviewers. They spent the maximum time and energy for a minimum outcome and no material benefit. In other words, there was no price for their production (Slack, 2020). In Marx's terms, in the first volume of Capital I (1867), labor is measured in time units, which adds value. Slack (2020) explores more on the concept of labor and value. In the author's explanation, there are two kinds of labor value: value in use and value in exchange. There was an exchange for their labor for the implementers at University X, and they thought it was of no use. As doers of the labor, faculty members felt exploited for no result by higher education leadership, as within the hierarchy, they would count as the lower class (Marx, 1867). Therefore, teachers did not value the labor they had been putting forward.

### **Unpacking Neo-colonial Perspectives**

Adopting and implementing QAA in Afghanistan higher education was a national and international development goal. The findings supported Mwangi's (2017) argument about power relationships between national and international developmental actors. In other words, an unequal relationship "between Western and non-Western" (Lewis, 1974, p. 582) countries created an imbalance of power relationship. Basically, in developing countries, the hierarchy

in imported policies, like QAA, is twofold: the external stakeholders and the doers. The stakeholders in the field of education are often the World Bank, United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), USAID, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the doers in the higher education system in a specific country (Gounko & Smale, 2007; Mwangi, 2017). Since higher education in developing countries is already grappling with limited resources, this inferior position automatically pressures it to accept the funding organization demands. Higher Education becomes the consumer of funding, structure, and ideology (Mwangi, 2017).

QAA is often a Process exerted from an outside higher education system into developing countries, involving power and control (Blanco and Berger, 2014, p. 92, citing Knight, 2007). In such cases, local actors have less freedom in incorporating their ideas while adopting or implementing the policy (Mwangi, 2017). “The power structure of the colonial system” directly or indirectly had affected higher education to uphold “the values of Western industrialized society as an ideal” (Lewis, 1974, p. 583). In the course of history, Westerners showed the Third World “as seriously lacking in advancement, which would make a case for their betterment through colonial administration” (Lewis, 1974, p. 583). Social science (especially anthropology) workers of Western nations have often approached the natives to instill their “civilizing impulses” (Degerando, 1969, p. 103). These notions of “barbarism” and human progress entered public conscience and government policy. Said (1979) argued that the colonial state had reinforced and legitimized the ideology of the “Other.” In Said’s (1979) argument, “...knowledge reinforced by the colonial encounter” and their “widespread interest in the alien and unusual” exploited the third world countries (p. 40).

Western nations justified their treatment of colonized peoples by making the paternalistic argument that they were helping “immature” societies develop (Degerando, 1969, p. 103). Colonial authorities asserted that the forceful introduction of Western forms of

law, education, social behavior, economics, and political structure was in the colonizer's best interests. Colonized peoples were associated with barbarism and even animalism, making them less fully "human" in colonial administrators' eyes. As Said (1979) argued, the colonial officials' general doctrine has streamlined that stripped-down humanity in the colonized nations. Scholars of social scientists say that Westerners had often expressed a sense of moral and intellectual superiority over colonized people (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Ajayi, 1996; Basu, 1989; Said, 1979).

Throughout colonialism, reinforcing knowledge and asserting certain beliefs and policies have been justified activities. A similar approach occurs in Western countries' post-industrialized process, although in a different format. Although currently, colonial forces are less likely to attempt to implement their policies in the colonized nation directly, their process in doing so with a lack of knowledge of the social structure of the people" (Asad 1998, p. 267) continues. Local actors are often galvanized to transform their system to the Western way of doing things under the pressure of the power structure that comes with it. The QAA adoption, adaptation, and implementation processes were no different from a colonialist approach.

### **Connections and Disconnections to the Literature Reviewed**

This research uncovered different outcomes and demonstrated the implementer's varying perspectives. The study results contradicted some literature presented in chapter two, supported others, and added new arguments. For instance, contrary to some scholar statements, the policy had not transformed Afghanistan's higher education due to lack of capacity, lack of conceptualizing the policy approach, and granting a proper definition. The policy has been implemented in the past eight years; however, it remained an undefined phenomenon, and its purpose was not apparent to most faculty. Also, Human Recourses ended their responsibilities with a few broad workshops about QAA at the beginning.

### ***Higher Education Not Transformed***

As elaborated in the findings, the dismantlers and reformists believed that the policy did not tackle its problems. While reformists thought the change in leadership and implementation methods was a must to yield a positive result in the future, the dismantlers advocated for policy's revocation from the system. For instance, the reformists and dismantlers thought that the policy had not enhanced teaching and learning quality. For teachers, seemingly, preparing the reports and documentation diverted their attention from improving teaching quality. One of the participants said that this policy had diminished the quality of teaching, and some called it a "quality-less" policy.

The findings complicated Hayward's (2015) statement about QAA as a transformational tool in Afghanistan's higher education. Implementation of QAA yielded some positive results in increasing the number of female students, employees, and faculty members. In line with Blanco and Jahirul Haque's (2016) study about Bangladeshi private institutions, this study also found exaggerated attention to the bigger pictures or points attractive to the international community and donor agencies. However, from the bottom up, things had not changed. Also, this study complicated Mussawy and Rossman's (2018) findings regarding the positive attitude of the faculty members toward QAA.

**Undefined Phenomenon.** The findings from University X are in line with Mishra's (2006) arguments that the concept of QAA worldwide has remained unclear. It is called quality control, quality assurance, accreditation, quality monitoring, quality assessment, quality control, quality management, and quality enhancement in different parts of the world (Anderson, 2018; Damme, 2002; Wilkinson & Gollan, 2017; Ryan, 2015). At University X, too, QAA's definition, aims and scopes, and objectives were unclear to many implementers. Broadly, the clear central aspect to the implementers and the leaders of the QAA at the university was the credit system and a way to recognize their respective university as an

accredited institution. As an example, the QAA policy has been explained in the Afghanistan developmental and higher education documents; however, no clear and specific procedures were presented to implement it internally. The internal design was left up to the university, and the heads of the departments had not created a standard practice in collaboration with relevant department heads. The department and the QAA Committee head had less to say in creating one traditional way to implement it at the Faculty or university level.

Most of the reflections were on the foreign nature of the policy and its adoption and development by the World Bank. In the same vein with Mussawy and Rossman's (2020) findings, this study showed that the implementers at a specific university tried to create meaning and make sense of the policy in their ways. The only sense-making was that they had to implement the policy; hence, they did it suitably. Due to unclarity in its purpose and inconsistent regulations for the internal implementations, each Faculty and school made their ways of documenting. In a way, they made sense based on their understanding and agreement. They agreed that they did not give their students any sensible doing the policy in the classroom.

**Lack of Human Resources.** Many members believed that older generation teachers lacked enough knowledge about policy mandates, their long-term outcome, and belief in the policy. Higher education and the university's Human Resources were not involved in their employees' knowledge and skill development (Brewer & Brewer, 2010). Also, the participants believed that older teachers could not use computers and smartphones even, let alone PowerPoint and other technologies. Instead, more senior faculty members used their age and position in power as shields to avoid policy implementation (Kaifi & Mujtaba, 2010). It was also reported that each department's younger teachers helped complete the older teachers' QAA implementation documents. A few participants openly admitted that they had prepared PowerPoint slides and course policies for their more senior colleagues, which had

doubled younger teachers' responsibility and burdened on their capacity. Consequently, the system created an exhausting labor force instead of "knowledge workers" (Brewer & Brewer, 2010, p. 331). In their lower positions, younger professors had been exploited to coin Marx's (1867) term in labor value theories.

### **Summary**

The World Bank-led QAA policy in Afghan higher education has faced critical challenges in its implementation, enhancing teaching and learning quality and overall system structure. The World Bank's involvement initially presented the idea, funding, and technical support. However, currently, the Bank is less involved in offering help to address some of the implementers' challenges. The World Bank was interested in flourishing the policy without considering the foreseeable difficulties it might face. Problems with Afghanistan higher education, especially with the QAA policy, is multilayered structure, e.g., inadequate financing, independence, shortage of qualified staff and faculty, technological equipment and skills, the need for a contextually understood system. Given these challenges, it is challenging to take a more comprehensive step toward *transformation* without tackling the elephant in the room. To that end, the implementers at University X had remained puzzled.

### **Conclusions**

This study was focused on the internal QAA policy implementation in Afghanistan higher education. The participants were faculty members who were the sole implementers of the policy. The implementers' perspectives on the policy implementation, its effectiveness, the capacity of the teachers, and future opportunities and challenges have been discussed. Through this dissertation, I urge higher education leaders not to be overly excited by neo-colonialists ideas. Instead, they should consult their peers, implementers, and policymakers on the ground to develop a policy that meets the needs and realities of the country's social, economic, and political circumstances. Current QAA policy has come with Western system

ideas, like the independence of colleges and universities, which contradicts Afghanistan's centralized higher education structure. Higher education leaders can build their version of QAA owned, appreciated, and honored by the implementers, improving teaching and learning.

### **Implications for Scholars and Professionals**

This study has implications for scholars and practitioners of higher education at the international and national levels. The study alludes to the existing literature about QAA policy in developing countries for discipline-specific scholars. For higher education practitioners, this study is a tool to facilitate strategic actions to ease the fault-lines in implementing QAA and create a plausible and effective implementation strategy. In addition, this study has implications for international NGOs such as the World Bank, USAID, and other donor agencies that attempt to help Higher Education in developing countries. Findings from this study offer a possible explanation for taking future developmental steps, like deciding about the future of this unpopular policy and whether it is viable as it needs to be amended based on the social context of the country's demands. This study provides new proposals to the government entities, non-governmental support systems, and university leaders and implementers to think about when tackling the problems QAA presented around the issues of ethnicity. There is some evidence to suggest that the social-political and economic contexts should be widely applicable when adopting and implementing a policy. However, the problem of resources is likely to limit this approach.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Although this study illuminated one university's "complicated" QAA policy. More relevant studies will validate my highlighted arguments and voices. By presenting this study, I call on scholars in higher education to dig into the issues of QAA and its implications deeper in other universities. Scholar remote universities. Also, it is critical for the community



of scholars to amplify the voices of marginalized universities like those in the provinces. For instance, if one of the powerful and successful universities in Afghanistan faces a tremendous number of problems with the successful implementation of the policy, one could imagine the challenges this policy might have posed in universities in provinces. As mentioned repeatedly, Afghanistan's higher education is centralized, and the universities, to some extent, are without power and autonomy. I recommend that universities in areas be studied thoroughly in qualitative and quantitative studies to operationalize this concept and tell the untold stories related to QAA. The research community must study the outcome of policy implements that need to be explored at University X and all other universities. Understanding how the policy shapes student learning from personal experiences is critical. Education leaders and international agencies must know the impact of the policy implementation on their learning capacities.

Similarly, it is essential to direct future studies to coherently focus on gender and ethnicity issues that have not been studied about the implementation of the policy. This study shed some light on the existing issues; however, a more in-depth research is necessary to highlight the matter, as women are the marginalized group within the university. The exclusion of women from the policy is not new in Afghan higher education settings; however, it further marginalized them. Therefore, this study urges more scholarly research in this area.

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