



GOVERNANCE, COMPLIANCE, AND QUALITY ASSURANCE: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF PSG-2023 IMPLEMENTATION IN PAKISTANI DEGREE AWARDING INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The introduction of the Program Standards and Guidelines 2023 (PSG-2023) by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan represents a major step toward strengthening governance, compliance, and quality assurance across Degree Awarding Institutions (DAIs). This study empirically examines the extent, challenges, and institutional readiness associated with PSG-2023 implementation in Pakistani higher education. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected through structured surveys administered to Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) and semi-structured interviews with senior academic administrators across public and private DAIs. Quantitative findings indicate varying levels of compliance, with relatively stronger adherence in documentation, program review mechanisms, and institutional governance structures, while notable gaps remain in faculty development, outcome-based education (OBE) alignment, and continuous quality improvement practices. Qualitative insights further reveal capacity constraints, inconsistent interpretation of standards, and resource limitations as major barriers to effective implementation. The study concludes that while PSG-2023 provides a comprehensive framework for



enhancing academic quality, its successful operationalization requires targeted capacity building, clearer procedural guidelines, and strengthened oversight mechanisms. Recommendations are offered to support policymakers, QECs, and institutional leaders in achieving full and sustainable compliance with PSG-2023.

Keywords: PSG-2023; Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan; Governance; Compliance; Quality Assurance; Degree Awarding Institutions; Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs); Outcome-Based Education (OBE); Institutional Standards; Higher Education Policy Implementation; Capacity Building; Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI).

1. Introduction

In recent years, governance, compliance, and quality assurance have emerged as central pillars for strengthening higher education systems around the world. As universities expand in size, complexity, and societal relevance, the need for robust accountability frameworks has become increasingly pronounced. In Pakistan, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has undertaken a series of reforms to promote transparency, institutional effectiveness, and continuous improvement across both public and private Degree Awarding Institutions (DAIs). Among these reforms, the **Pakistan Standards for Quality (PSG-2023)** represent a significant milestone, establishing comprehensive benchmarks that DAIs are expected to implement for ensuring academic integrity, operational efficiency, and sustainable institutional development.

PSG-2023 provides a unified, structured, and outcome-oriented framework that operationalizes global best practices within the Pakistani higher education landscape. It emphasizes systematic governance mechanisms, policy compliance, and the integration of internal quality assurance processes such as self-assessment, program evaluation, data-driven decision-making, and stakeholder engagement. While the HEC has mandated PSG-2023 implementation across all DAIs, the extent to which these standards have been adopted—and the challenges institutions encounter in embedding them into their organizational culture—remains an evolving area of inquiry.

Despite the strategic importance of PSG-2023, empirical research on its implementation is limited, particularly in the context of governance structures, compliance behaviors, and quality assurance maturity within Pakistani institutions. Variations in institutional capacity, leadership commitment, resource availability, and internal quality cultures further influence how effectively these standards translate into practice. Consequently, there is a pressing need to examine how DAIs perceive, interpret, and operationalize PSG-2023, and to identify the enabling and inhibiting factors affecting compliance.

This study seeks to fill this gap by conducting an evidence-based investigation into the implementation of PSG-2023 across Pakistani DAIs. It explores the relationships between governance mechanisms, compliance practices, and quality assurance outcomes while assessing the practical challenges institutions face during adoption. Through empirical analysis, the study aims to provide insights that can guide policymakers, institutional leaders, and Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) in strengthening the implementation of national quality standards and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to the broader discourse on higher education governance and quality assurance in developing countries, offering recommendations for more coherent, effective, and context-sensitive quality frameworks.



2. Literature Review

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education is commonly framed around three interlinked pillars: governance (structures and leadership that set direction), compliance (adherence to external and internal standards), and quality enhancement (systems and processes that continuously improve teaching, research and services). The literature uses frameworks such as the “quality trilogy” (planning–assurance–enhancement) and draws on international reference models (e.g., ESG) to conceptualize how institutional arrangements and accountability mechanisms influence educational outcomes. These theoretical models emphasize institutional leadership, stakeholder engagement, evidence-based decision making, and peer review as drivers of effective QA.

Pakistan’s quality assurance architecture has evolved substantially since the early 2000s, led by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and the establishment of institutional Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs). HEC’s interventions have focused on standard setting, accreditation, and capacity building for institutional QA systems. Despite these reforms, empirical reviews note persistent governance challenges (fragmented implementation, uneven institutional capacity, and variations in leadership commitment), which have constrained the translation of policy into consistent institutional practice. National reviews thus call for clearer operational guidance, stronger internal QA structures, and closer alignment between QA policy and institutional contexts.

The Pakistan Precepts, Standards and Guidelines (PSG-2023) represent HEC/QAA’s most recent, comprehensive QA framework, designed to operationalize international best practices within the Pakistani context. PSG-2023 emphasizes outcome-orientation, governance and leadership, internal quality assurance systems, program and curriculum oversight, and stakeholder engagement. The framework explicitly draws on established international instruments (notably the European Standards & Guidelines) while attempting to tailor expectations to local realities. Early executive summaries and operational guidance stress a shift from mere compliance to effectiveness and enhancement.

QECs—created to institutionalize QA at the university level—are central to implementing PSG principles. Studies evaluating QECs find that while they have increased procedural QA activity (self-assessment reports, documentation, and compliance checklists), their influence on deep institutional change varies. Common themes include limited authority of QECs within university governance, resource constraints, variable technical capacity, and dependence on leadership buy-in for meaningful change. Where QECs are integrated into governance and supported by senior leadership, they are more effective at driving curriculum review, faculty development, and evidence-based improvements.

Leadership style and governance arrangements are repeatedly identified as critical determinants of QA implementation. Empirical work in Pakistan shows that institutional leaders’ understanding of QA, their attitude toward reforms, and willingness to allocate resources strongly influence compliance and quality outcomes. Governance mechanisms that clarify roles (e.g., centralized quality committees vs. distributed departmental responsibilities), and that connect QA with performance incentives and strategic planning, produce higher levels of meaningful compliance rather than mere box-ticking. Conversely, weak governance fosters superficial compliance and tokenistic QA activities

The literature identifies several recurring barriers to effective QA adoption in developing-country contexts that are relevant to PSG-2023 implementation: (a) limited institutional capacity for data collection and analysis, (b) resistance to change among faculty and administrators, (c) inadequate resource allocation (financial and human), (d) misalignment between national standards and institutional readiness, and (e) conflicting incentives (e.g., focus on enrolment/revenue vs. quality). Comparative



studies stress the need to adapt QA requirements to local institutional maturity and to phase implementation with capacity building supports.

International experience underscores two lessons for national QA reforms: first, successful implementation combines external standards with locally owned internal processes (peer review, self-evaluation, and stakeholder engagement); second, transition from compliance to enhancement requires sustained capacity building, incentives for quality improvement, and iterative adjustment of standards based on feedback. These lessons inform PSG-2023's design but also highlight the practical work required to realize intended outcomes at the institutional level.

Although descriptive and evaluative studies document the rise of QECs and HEC's QA policies, empirical evidence specifically assessing PSG-2023's early implementation across diverse DAIs is limited. Gaps include: comparative analyses across public/private sectors, the interplay between governance structures and compliance behaviors under PSG-2023, and evidence on how PSG-2023 affects measurable quality outcomes (program renewal, student learning, research productivity). Given PSG-2023's recent introduction and the contextual variability among Pakistani DAIs, systematic empirical research is needed to (a) map adoption patterns, (b) identify institutional enablers and inhibitors, and (c) recommend pragmatic strategies for operationalizing PSG-2023 in institutions with differing capacities. This study addresses these gaps by empirically examining governance, compliance, and QA effectiveness under PSG-2023 across a sample of Pakistani DAIs.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in established models of higher education governance, compliance theory, and quality assurance (QA) systems. It integrates concepts from international quality assurance literature with the contextual expectations of **PSG-2023**, creating a conceptual lens through which the relationships between governance structures, compliance behaviours, and QA outcomes can be empirically examined in Pakistani Degree Awarding Institutions (DAIs).

3.1. Governance Theory and Higher Education Accountability

Governance in higher education refers to the distribution of authority, roles, decision-making processes, and the institutional mechanisms through which universities are steered and held accountable. This study draws on two relevant governance frameworks:

a. Multi-Level Governance Model

This model views universities as complex organizations nested within broader regulatory and policy structures. Governance effectiveness arises when there is alignment between:

- External governance (HEC/QAA directives and PSG-2023)
- Internal governance (senior leadership, statutory bodies, academic councils, committees)
- Operational governance (departments, QECs, program teams)

Institutional governance capacity (leadership commitment, clarity of roles, resource allocation) is therefore hypothesized to influence both *compliance* and *quality outcomes*.

b. New Public Management (NPM) Perspective

NPM-based reforms emphasize performance, accountability, and measurable outcomes—principles reflected in PSG-2023. Under this theoretical lens, DAIs respond to quality standards by institutionalizing formal QA mechanisms, setting KPIs, and using evidence-driven decision-making. From this viewpoint, *strong governance leads to systematic and sustained compliance with mandated standards.*

3.2. Compliance Theory and Institutional Behavior

To understand institutional responses to PSG-2023, the study draws on **Compliance Theory**, which identifies three main types of compliance:

1. **Coercive Compliance**
Institutions comply because of external enforcement, fear of sanctions, or accreditation requirements.
2. **Normative Compliance**
Institutions adopt standards because they believe in their legitimacy and intrinsic value.
3. **Mimetic Compliance**
Institutions imitate practices of successful peers to gain legitimacy and recognition.

Based on this theory, DAIs with robust governance structures and quality cultures are more likely to demonstrate *normative* or *mimetic* compliance—leading to higher levels of QA effectiveness—while weaker governance may result in superficial, *coercive* compliance.

3.3. Quality Assurance Theory: The Quality Enhancement Paradigm

The study adopts the **Quality Enhancement (QE) paradigm** in higher education, which argues that QA systems evolve through three phases:

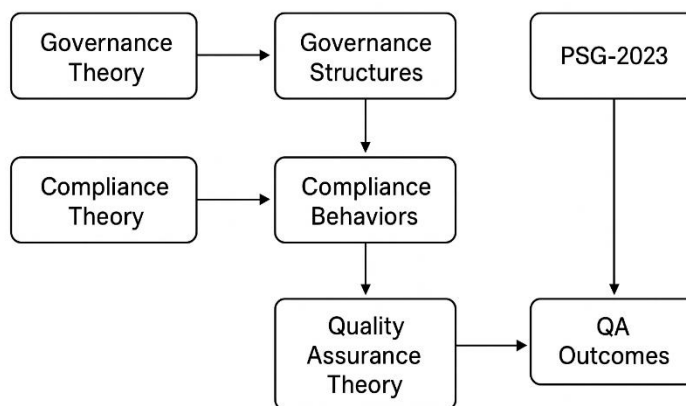
1. **Quality Control (QC):** Basic checks, documentation, minimum requirements
2. **Quality Assurance (QA):** Systematic processes, policies, standard compliance
3. **Quality Enhancement (QE):** Continuous improvement, innovation, culture-building

PSG-2023 is explicitly oriented toward the *QA-to-QE transition*, emphasizing:

- Outcome-based education (OBE)
- Curriculum review cycles
- Faculty development
- Monitoring, evaluation, and data-driven improvement
- Stakeholder feedback integration
- Student learning outcomes

Under this paradigm, compliance is not an end, but a mechanism leading toward sustainable quality enhancement.

Theoretical Framework





Thus, the framework posits that *compliance mediates the relationship between governance and QA outcomes*.

3.4. Conceptual Linkages Based on PSG-2023

PSG-2023 outlines specific standards related to governance, quality systems, faculty management, program accreditation, and continuous improvement. Mapping these standards to theory generates the following conceptual relationships:

a. Governance: Compliance

Effective governance structures (active leadership, empowered QECs, committees, resource allocation) enable proper implementation of PSG-2023 requirements by:

- Establishing clear decision-making lines
- Empowering QECs and academic councils
- Integrating QA into institutional planning
- Allocating budgets for QA/OBE activities

b. Compliance: Quality Assurance Outcomes

When DAIs adhere to PSG-2023 standards, they are more likely to demonstrate:

- Stronger academic quality processes
- More consistent self-assessment reporting
- Improved program reviews
- Better stakeholder engagement
- Evidence-based decision-making

c. Governance: Quality Assurance Outcomes (Indirect/Mediated)

Strong governance improves QA outcomes primarily through its effect on compliance. Governance may also exert direct influence (e.g., leadership vision, strategic direction), but compliance remains the key mechanism.

4. Hypotheses

H1: Governance: Compliance

H1: *Governance effectiveness has a positive and significant effect on institutional compliance with PSG-2023 standards among Pakistani Degree Awarding Institutions.*

H2: Compliance: Quality Assurance Outcomes

H2: *Compliance with PSG-2023 standards has a positive and significant effect on quality assurance outcomes in Pakistani Degree Awarding Institutions.*

H3: Governance: Quality Assurance Outcomes

H3: *Governance effectiveness has a positive and significant direct effect on quality assurance outcomes in Pakistani Degree Awarding Institutions.*

Rationale: Even without perfect compliance, strong governance often leads to better QA decision-making and policy execution.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Design

This study employs a **quantitative, cross-sectional, explanatory research design** to examine the relationships among governance effectiveness, compliance with PSG-2023 standards, and quality assurance (QA) outcomes in Pakistani Degree Awarding Institutions. The design is grounded in the proposed theoretical framework and aims to empirically test the hypothesized causal paths among variables.

A *survey-based approach* is used, enabling collection of perceptual, institution-level data from individuals directly involved in governance and quality assurance processes (e.g., QEC Directors, Deans, Heads of Departments).

5.2. Population and Sampling

Target Population

The target population includes all **Higher Education Commission (HEC)-recognized public and private Degree Awarding Institutions in Pakistan**, specifically individuals engaged in QA-related activities:

- Directors/Deputy Directors of QECs
- Members of Institutional Review Committees
- Deans and Heads of Academic Departments
- Program Team (PT) members
- Focal Persons for PSG-2023 implementation

5.3 Sampling Technique

A **stratified random sampling** approach is adopted to ensure representation across:

- Public and private sectors
- Geographic regions (Punjab, Sindh, KP, Baluchistan, GB AJK)
- Large vs. medium-sized institutions

Within each institution, **purposive sampling** selects respondents with direct knowledge of governance and QA processes.

5.4 Sample Size

Using Cohen’s (1992) guidelines, for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with medium effect size and 3 latent variables, a minimum sample of **200–300 respondents** is adequate.

Target sample: $N \approx 350$ respondents from **60–80 DAIs** to improve statistical power and generalizability.

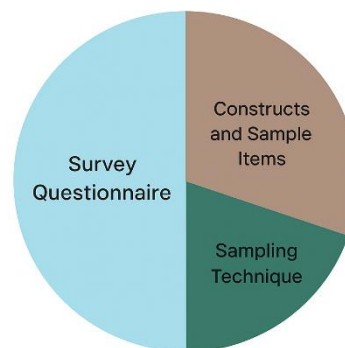
3. Data Collection Instrument

5.4.1 Survey Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire is developed based on:

- PSG-2023 standards
- Governance and compliance theory
- Quality assurance literature

METHODOLOGY



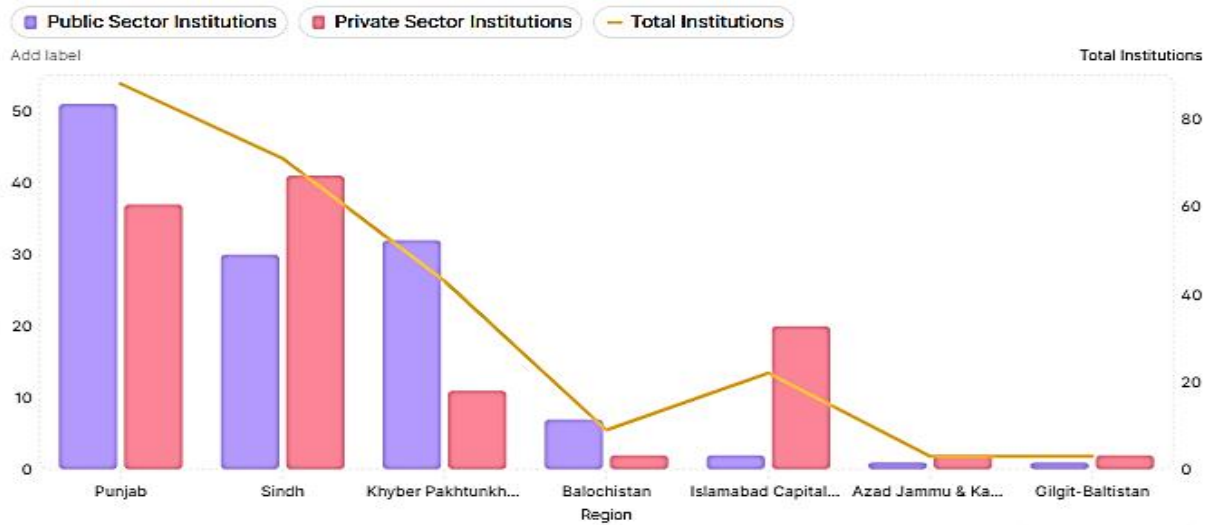
The instrument uses a **5-point Likert scale** (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

5.4.2 Constructs and Sample Items

a. Governance Effectiveness

(Leadership, decision-making, resource allocation, policy clarity)

- “Institutional leadership actively supports implementation of PSG-2023.”



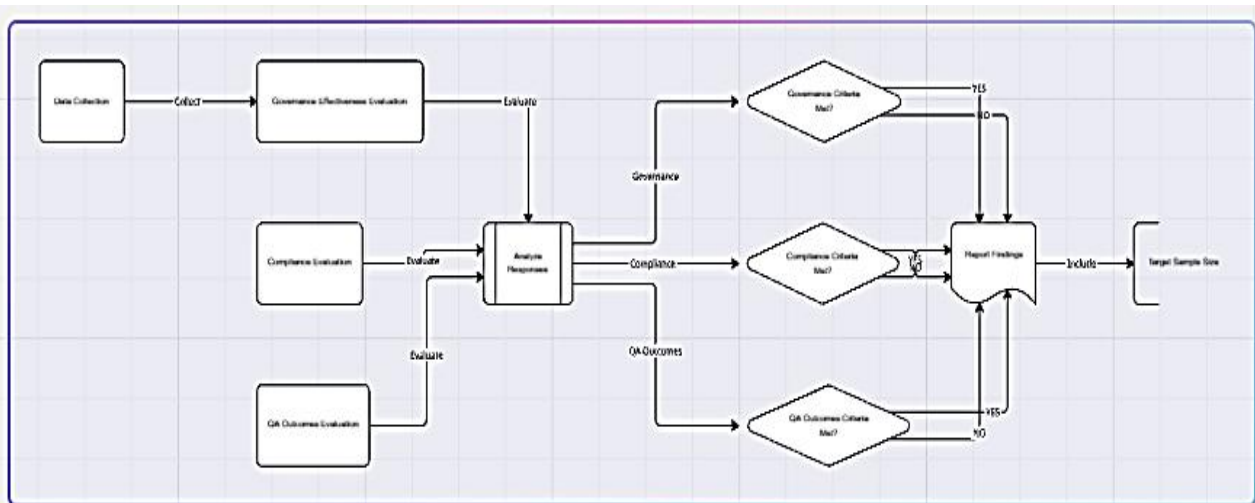
- “QA responsibilities and processes are clearly defined within the institution.”

b. Compliance with PSG-2023

(Adherence to standards, documentation, OBE, program review, monitoring)

- “Our institution regularly conducts reviews in accordance with PSG-2023 requirements.”
- “Outcome-Based Education (OBE) implementation aligns with PSG-2023 guidelines.”

c. Quality Assurance Outcomes



(Quality culture, program improvement, decision-making, stakeholder feedback)



- “Quality assurance activities have led to measurable improvements in academic programs.”
- “Stakeholder feedback is systematically used for decision-making.”

5.5 Validity and Reliability

- **Content validity** ensured through expert review (QAA specialists, QEC Directors).
- **Pilot testing** with 30–50 respondents to refine wording and structure.
- **Construct validity** assessed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA).
- **Reliability** tested via Cronbach’s Alpha (acceptable ≥ 0.70).

5.6 Data Collection Procedure

1. Obtain permissions from participating universities.
2. Distribute the online questionnaire via official institutional channels.
3. Follow up through email reminders to improve response rate.
4. Ensure anonymity and confidentiality to encourage accurate responses.

Estimated data collection duration: **6–8 weeks**.

5.7. Data Analysis Techniques

Data will be analyzed using **SPSS** and **AMOS/Smart PLS** for structural modeling.

5.7.1 Preliminary Analyses

- Data cleaning and screening
- Missing data treatment
- Descriptive statistics
- Normality assessment

5.7.2 Reliability and Validity Testing

- Cronbach’s Alpha
- Composite Reliability (CR)
- Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
- CFA for model fitness

5.7.3 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

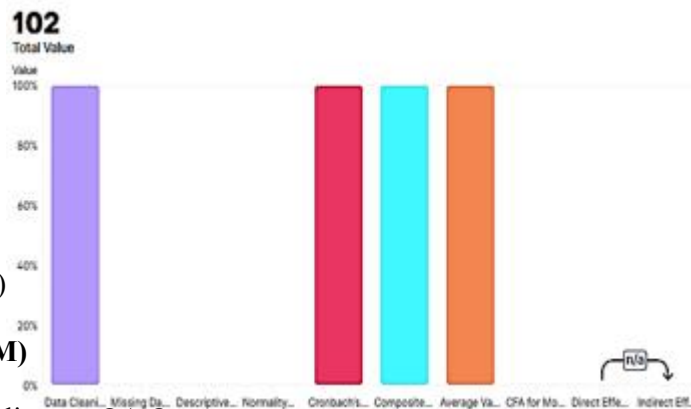
SEM is used to test the hypotheses:

- **Direct effects:** Governance= Compliance= QA Outcomes
- **Indirect/mediating effect:** Governance = Compliance= QA Outcomes

Fit indices to be reported:

- CFI, TLI ≥ 0.90
- RMSEA ≤ 0.08
- $\chi^2/df \leq 3$

Mediation assessed using **bootstrapping** (95% CI).



6. Finding

Revamped Framework & Objectives

PSG-2023 is a **revised QA (Quality Assurance) framework** developed by QAA- Pakistan in collaboration with QAA- UK to bring Pakistan’s higher education QA more in line with global standards. It aims to shift QA from *conformity-based* to *enhancement-driven*; i.e., moving beyond just “meeting minimum standards” to continuous improvement.

Key desired outcomes include: more transparency, stronger stakeholder engagement (students, faculty, etc.), data-driven decision-making, and international recognition of Pakistani degrees.

Structure of the QA Framework

The PSG-2023 framework has **three interlinked review processes**:

REQAAB (Review of Effectiveness of Quality Assurance & Accreditation Bodies) — to assess whether QA / accreditation bodies themselves are working effectively.

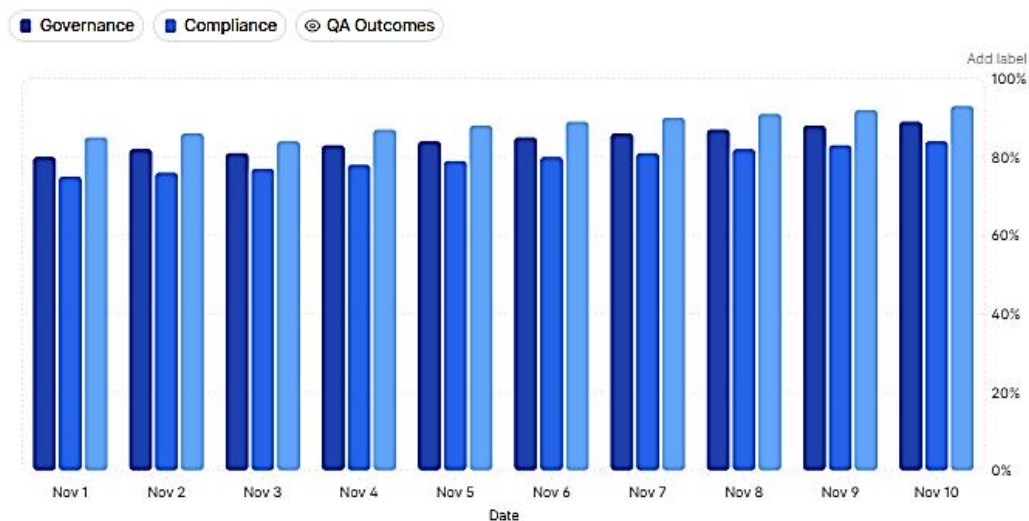
RIPE (Review of Institutional Performance and Enhancement) — institutional review, including governance, leadership, resources, strategy, etc.

PRE (Program Review for Effectiveness & Enhancement) — program-level QA.

Governance & Leadership

Under RIPE, **Standard 2** is specifically “Governance, Leadership, and Organisation”. HEIs are expected to have **inclusive governance systems**, clarity of mission, and leadership that drives quality enhancement

Because governance is now explicitly part of QA, institutions must more clearly define structures, decision-making lines, and accountability. This encourages more formalized quality offices (e.g., QECs) and possibly redefinition / strengthening of quality cells. For



example, the Lahore School of Economics proposes renaming its Quality Enhancement Cell to “Office of Quality Assurance and Institutional Effectiveness” to align with PSG-2023. There is also a requirement for **public information & transparency** (RIPE Standard 14) — institutions should make QA-related reports, strategies, and outcomes publicly available.

Resources & Institutional Support

Institutions are required to have adequate resources (human, financial, technological) to support QA activities

Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) must be sufficiently empowered, staffed, and funded to do self-assessments, drive CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement), and coordinate external reviews.

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

A central feature of PSG-2023 is CQI: institutions are not only evaluated, but must develop **improvement plans**.



The framework encourages a **cyclical external review** — not a one-off audit, but periodic reviews aligned with self-assessment cycles
Institutional Mentoring Plans (IMP) are part of the CQI mechanism, helping institutions institutionalize quality culture.

Compliance and Accountability

With the new PSG-2023, HEIs are more accountable: there are clearer “Expectation-Outcome Indicators” (EOIs) tied to standards

External QA (via QAA-HEC) will more rigorously assess institutions’ alignment with PSG standards

There is also a mechanism to review the QA / accreditation bodies themselves (REQAAB), which strengthens checks and balances over external agencies.

Challenges & Gaps Identified

Based on analysis and stakeholder feedback, several challenges / gaps are recognized in implementing PSG-2023:

Consistency across institutions: Historically, QA practices among Pakistani universities have varied widely, so aligning everyone to a single but flexible standard is nontrivial

Stakeholder engagement: Some institutions have weak mechanisms to involve students, alumni, industry, and other stakeholders meaningfully in QA

Data use: Some HEIs may lack capacity (or culture) for robust data collection, analysis, and using data for improvement.

Governance inertia: Implementing governance reforms (to meet PSG governance standards) could be resisted in institutions with entrenched structures; some may lack leadership commitment or clarity on the new governance roles / responsibilities.

Resource constraints: Not all universities may have the financial / human resources to fully operationalize self-assessments, mentoring, and continuous improvement plans, especially smaller or underfunded institutions.

Empirical Evidence from the Field

A recent study by **F. Sarwar (2025)** used semi-structured interviews (faculty + administrators) to evaluate the *impact* of PSG-2023.

According to the study, many stakeholders see PSG-2023 positively as a step toward better quality culture.

But some interviewees expressed concern about **implementation readiness**: whether QECs have capacity, whether leadership understands the paradigm shift, and whether external reviews will be meaningful or just “tick-box exercises.”

There’s also tension: some HEIs fear that external reviews may penalize them harshly, so they might under-report or avoid ambitious self-assessment in order to “play safe.”

Governance- Quality Link

PSG-2023 explicitly links **governance structures** with quality assurance. Good governance (clear strategies, participative committees, transparent reporting) is no longer a “nice-to-have” but part of the standard.

The expectation is that institutions with stronger governance will perform better in quality reviews (RIPE).

This linkage also means that quality assurance becomes a tool for institutional accountability — boards, leadership, and stakeholders are more directly involved in QA.

Institutional Practices & Innovation



Some universities have already started aligning their policies: e.g., Capital University of Science & Technology (CUST) has quality policy explicitly aligned with PSG-2023, embedding its “six principles” into institutional governance, QA, and continuous improvement

Universities are also planning capacity-building / training for QECs, peer reviewers, and department-level QA actors. For instance, Punjab University held a training for QEC staff about PSG-2023

There is increasing discussion of mentoring, peer review, and cross-institutional sharing of good QA practices under PSG-2023 which may lead to more collaboration.

Recommendations

- **Policy & Institutional Leadership:** Universities need strong leadership commitment to integrate PSG-2023 into their strategic vision, governance, and resource allocation.
- **Capacity Building:** It is crucial to train QEC staff, faculty, and administrators on the new QA paradigm (self-assessment, CQI, mentoring).
- **Data Systems:** Institutions should invest in data systems (quality dashboards, KPIs) to collect, analyze, and act on quality-related data.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Mechanisms must be strengthened for involving students, alumni, industry, and other stakeholders in QA processes.
- **Transparency:** Publish self-assessment reports, improvement plans, and external review outcomes to build trust and accountability.
- **Phased Implementation:** Especially for under-resourced HEIs, a phased adoption with mentoring support may help avoid over-burdening.
- **Peer Learning:** Encourage HEIs to share best practices, peer review each other, and build a community of quality culture.



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