

# Quality Enhancement in Business Education through Accreditation Policies: An Empirical Study of Public and Private Universities in Sindh, Pakistan

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## Abstract

Accreditation and internal quality enhancement mechanisms have become central to improving the standards of higher education, particularly in business education. This study explores how accreditation frameworks, in conjunction with Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), contribute to improving program quality and graduate attributes in higher education institutions. Employing a qualitative research design, the study draws insights from key stakeholders, including representatives from accreditation bodies and QEC directors. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and were analyzed thematically using qualitative analysis software. The findings indicate that although accreditation councils and QECs are established to ensure quality assurance, their effectiveness remains constrained by several institutional and systemic challenges. These include limited influence on curriculum development, insufficient alignment with industry requirements, gaps in faculty development, and external interferences affecting institutional autonomy. The study highlights the need for stronger integration between accreditation policies and QEC practices to enhance program quality and graduate competencies in business education. The findings offer practical implications for policymakers, accreditation bodies, and university administrators in strengthening quality assurance systems in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Accreditation, Quality Enhancement, Business Education, Higher Education, Graduate Attributes, Pakistan

## Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education refers to the processes and systems that ensure academic programs meet predefined standards of excellence. It encompasses both internal and external mechanisms designed to monitor, evaluate, and improve educational outcomes

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Khan, M. S., 2024. In contemporary higher education systems, quality assurance is no longer limited to compliance; instead, it has evolved into a continuous improvement process aimed at enhancing institutional performance and student learning outcomes.

Accreditation represents a key external quality assurance mechanism, typically conducted by independent bodies through peer-review processes. Over time, accreditation has shifted from a purely evaluative function to a more developmental role, emphasizing continuous improvement, accountability, and alignment with global standards Khan, M. S., 2024. Alongside accreditation, internal quality enhancement mechanisms within universities play a critical role in sustaining academic quality.

Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) function as internal units responsible for implementing quality assurance policies at the institutional level. They work to align academic programs with national standards, monitor teaching and learning processes, and promote a culture of continuous improvement Khan, M. S., 2024. Together, accreditation bodies and QECs form a complementary system in which external evaluation and internal improvement reinforce one another.

In Pakistan, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has established a structured quality assurance framework that integrates both internal and external mechanisms. Universities are required to establish QECs to ensure internal compliance with quality standards, while accreditation councils assess program-level quality through external reviews Khan, M. S., 2024. Despite these structured mechanisms, challenges persist in achieving consistent quality outcomes across institutions, particularly in business education programs offered by public and private universities.

### **Problem Statement**

Although Pakistan has developed a formalized quality assurance system involving accreditation bodies and QECs, the overall quality of higher education, particularly in business education, remains inconsistent Khan, M. S., 2024. Rapid expansion of universities and academic programs has further complicated the effective implementation of quality standards. Existing evidence suggests that accreditation and internal quality mechanisms have not fully achieved their intended objectives in enhancing program quality and graduate competencies Pathan, M. S. K.,2021.

This raises critical questions regarding the effectiveness of accreditation councils and QECs in ensuring meaningful quality improvements. There is a need to empirically examine how these mechanisms operate in practice, particularly in terms of their coordination, challenges, and impact on academic standards. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the interplay between accreditation policies and internal quality enhancement practices in public and private universities in Sindh, Pakistan.

### **Research Objectives**

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The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the role of accreditation bodies in ensuring the quality of business education programs and the development of graduate attributes.
2. To identify the challenges faced by accreditation bodies in maintaining program quality standards.
3. To evaluate the contribution of QECs in enhancing program quality and graduate competencies.
4. To explore the challenges encountered by QECs in implementing quality enhancement initiatives across universities.
5. To assess the extent of coordination and alignment between accreditation bodies and QECs in quality assurance practices.

### **Research Questions**

1. What role do accreditation councils play in ensuring the quality of business education programs in Pakistan?
2. What challenges do accreditation bodies face in maintaining program standards and graduate quality?
3. How do QECs contribute to improving academic quality and graduate attributes in universities?
4. What challenges do QECs encounter in implementing quality enhancement practices?
5. To what extent do accreditation councils and QECs collaborate in ensuring effective quality assurance?

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of accreditation and quality enhancement practices in higher education institutions. A phenomenological approach was employed to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of stakeholders involved in quality assurance processes.

### **Sampling Strategy**

A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select participants. The study focused on two major accreditation bodies in Pakistan: one representing teacher education and another representing engineering education Pathan, M. S. K.,2021. From these bodies, three representatives from each were selected through convenience sampling. Additionally, 21 QEC directors were selected randomly from a range of public and private universities.

The participants included individuals with substantial professional experience in their respective domains Pathan, M. S. K.,2021. The accreditation body representatives had extensive experience in academic and professional fields, while QEC directors had varying levels of administrative experience in managing quality assurance units within universities.

### **Data Collection**

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Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over a defined period. The interview protocol was designed to explore participants' perspectives on accreditation practices, internal quality assurance mechanisms, program quality, and graduate attributes. Interviews allowed for flexibility in responses while maintaining consistency across key themes.

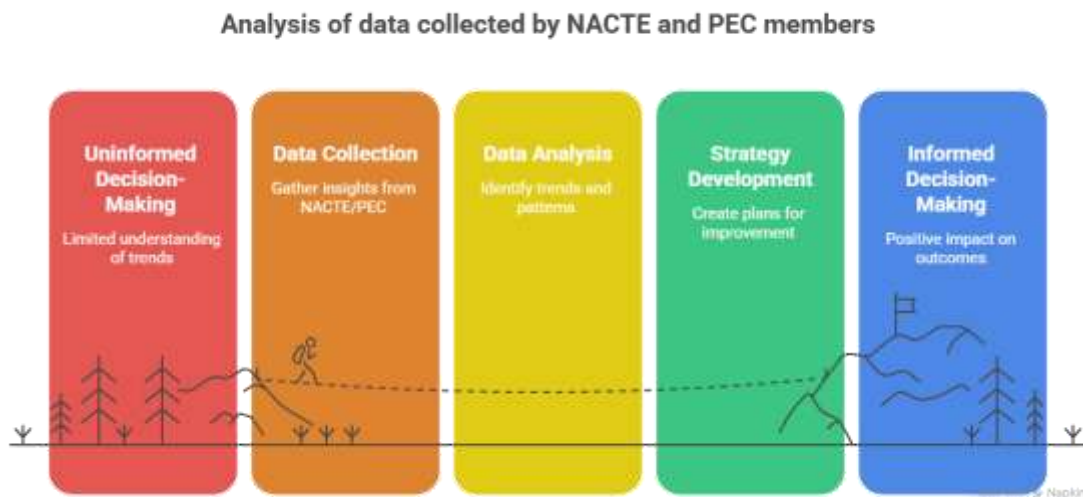
### Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed for systematic analysis. The data were organized and analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques, supported by NVivo software. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and relationships between accreditation practices and internal quality enhancement efforts.

### Summary of the Study

Overall, this study investigates how accreditation frameworks and internal quality assurance mechanisms operate together to influence the quality of business education in Pakistan Pathan, M. S. K.,2021. By examining both public and private universities, the research provides insights into the effectiveness, limitations, and coordination of accreditation bodies and QECs. The findings aim to contribute to policy discussions and institutional strategies for strengthening quality assurance systems and improving educational outcomes in higher education.

### Analysis of data collected by NACTE and PEC members



**Figure 1. Word label cloud to display commonly used words in different models**

To align the discussion with the study titled “Quality Enhancement in Business Education through Accreditation Policies: An Empirical Study of Public and Private Universities in Sindh, Pakistan,” the analytical process and findings can be presented in a more coherent and

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academically refined manner as follows:

In the initial phase of analysis, the researchers employed word cloud techniques to gain a preliminary understanding of the most frequently recurring terms in the interview data Pathan, M. S. K.,2021. The visual representation highlighted key concepts such as accreditation, program quality, education, faculty, institutional standards, and related attributes, indicating the central themes emphasized by the respondents. This exploratory step helped in identifying dominant patterns in participants' perceptions regarding accreditation and its role in enhancing academic quality.

Subsequently, the data were organized into hierarchical coding structures to facilitate a more systematic interpretation. The frequency and intensity of coding references were examined across different thematic nodes, allowing for a comparison of how often specific issues were discussed and the relative importance assigned to them Pathan, M. S. K., 2023. Among these nodes, challenges associated with accreditation bodies emerged as the most prominently discussed theme. Respondents frequently highlighted concerns related to accreditation processes, particularly in relation to institutional constraints and operational difficulties.

In addition to challenges, several other interconnected themes were identified, including the perceived strengths of accreditation frameworks, curriculum standards, input from regulatory bodies, faculty qualifications, and the extent to which accreditation mechanisms contribute to program quality improvement. Other important dimensions included the role of accreditation authorities, the effectiveness of self-assessment processes, the employability and competencies of graduates, and broader issues such as academic integrity and conflicts of interest within accreditation practices Pathan, M. S. K., 2023. These themes collectively occupied a moderate level of emphasis in the overall coding structure, indicating their shared relevance in shaping perceptions of accreditation in both public and private universities.

A comparative analysis of coding references, as illustrated in the coding matrix, further revealed differences in the level of engagement between stakeholders associated with different accreditation bodies. The matrix coding queries provided insights into the duration and depth of discussions across various themes. The findings suggest that members associated with NACTE tend to discuss issues more extensively than those linked with PEC, particularly in areas such as accreditation challenges, conflicts of interest, the influence of academic misconduct on accreditation outcomes, and the perceived impact of accreditation on graduate quality and characteristics Pathan, M. S. K., 2023; Zardari, H., & Ali, S. J., 2023. Overall, the comparative patterns indicate that while both accreditation bodies address similar thematic concerns, the intensity and focus of discussions vary, reflecting differences in institutional experiences and priorities within the accreditation landscape of Sindh's higher education sector.

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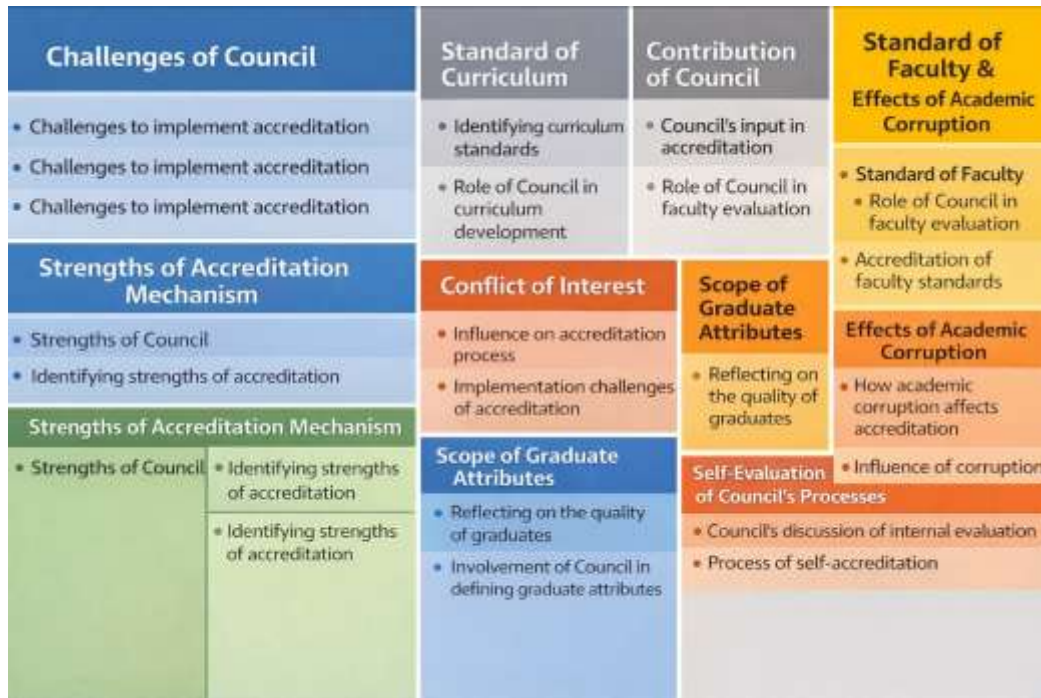


Figure 2. Hierarchical nodes vs. extension of coding references based on the number of coding references

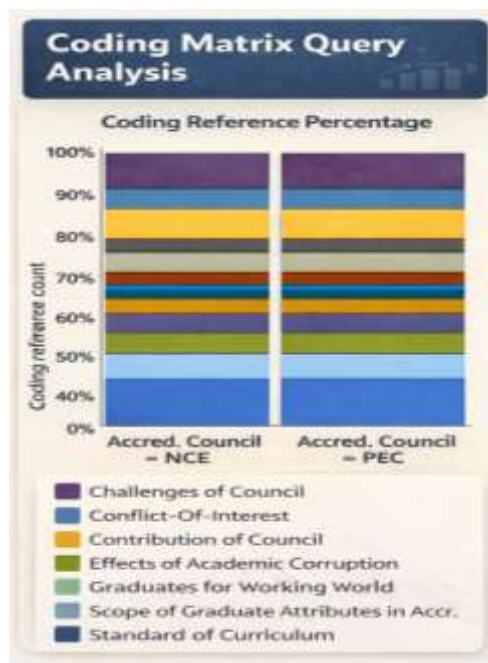


Figure 3. Encoding Matrix Request to Compare the Scope of Coding References

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The findings indicate notable differences in the perspectives of accreditation bodies, particularly between members associated with PEC and those linked with NACTE. Participants from PEC placed stronger emphasis on the development of graduate competencies relevant to the labor market, highlighting the importance of industry readiness as a central outcome of the accreditation process. They also stressed active stakeholder involvement in accreditation activities, along with rigorous attention to curriculum quality and the qualifications and performance of teaching staff Pathan, M. S. K., 2022; Zardari, H., & Ali, S. J., 2023. In contrast, discussions among NACTE members reflected a comparatively broader focus on institutional self-assessment and the internal mechanisms of quality assurance within the accreditation framework. Both groups acknowledged the significance of accreditation councils in promoting academic standards; however, their approaches differed in terms of prioritization, with PEC leaning more toward outcome-based graduate attributes and NACTE emphasizing process-oriented self-accreditation practices.

An examination of data obtained from Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) directors further reinforces these observations. Initial qualitative analysis using word cloud visualization revealed that frequently mentioned terms appeared in larger font sizes, indicating areas of greater emphasis among respondents Pathan, M. S. K. (2022). This suggests that certain themes, particularly those related to quality assurance and institutional challenges, were more prominently discussed during interviews. Subsequent analysis employing node hierarchy based on coding frequency demonstrated varying levels of importance across identified categories. Among these, challenges faced by QECs emerged as a dominant theme, reflecting the complexity of implementing quality assurance mechanisms within higher education institutions. These challenges also point toward broader issues such as the alignment of QEC practices with international standards and the consistent enhancement of graduate quality Pathan, M. S. K., 2022; Zardari, H., & Ali, S. J., 2023. Overall, the analysis highlights that while accreditation frameworks contribute significantly to improving academic standards, their effectiveness is influenced by institutional capacity, stakeholder engagement, and the ability of QECs to operationalize quality assurance practices across diverse academic environments.

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Figure 4. Word tag cloud to display commonly used words in different models

The discussion also highlights several dimensions related to the role of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) within higher education institutions. QECs are primarily responsible for monitoring and evaluating the quality of academic programs at the institutional level Khan, M. S., 2021; Zardari, H., & Ali, S. J., 2023. Their functions extend beyond internal assessment, as they contribute to external program evaluations, support continuous quality improvement initiatives, and help ensure that program outcomes are effectively reflected in the competencies of graduates. In addition, the effectiveness of QECs is closely linked to the level of collaboration they maintain with institutional leadership, as well as the extent to which their recommendations are implemented. During interviews, QEC directors also shared practical suggestions aimed at overcoming institutional challenges, indicating the breadth and depth of their engagement in maintaining and enhancing academic standards.

To further analyze the data, a coding matrix was developed to compare the distribution of thematic references across respondents from public and private higher education institutions. The results, as illustrated in the analysis, reveal distinct patterns in the way principals from different institutional sectors perceive accreditation-related processes Khan, M. S., 2021; Zardari, H., & Ali, S. J., 2023. Principals from public universities tended to focus more on institutional constraints, operational challenges, collaboration mechanisms with QECs, and the practical aspects of quality assurance assessments. They also provided more detailed suggestions for strengthening internal quality systems. In contrast, principals from

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private higher education institutions placed greater emphasis on the alignment of QEC practices with international standards, as well as on the role of accreditation in shaping graduate attributes and continuous quality improvement. Despite these differences in emphasis, both groups demonstrated a comparable level of recognition regarding the contribution of QECs to enhancing overall academic quality. The findings suggest that while perceptions vary across institutional types, accreditation frameworks play a consistently important role in guiding quality assurance practices and supporting the improvement of academic standards in business schools across Pakistan.



Figure 5. Hierarchical nodes are compared based on the number of encoding references and show the scope of those references.

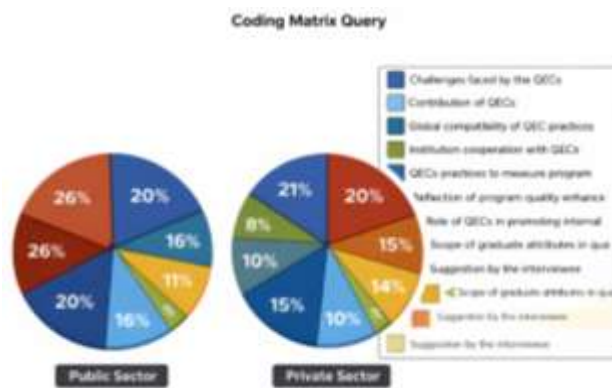


Figure 6. Encoding Matrix Request to Compare the Scope of Coding References

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### **Research Findings**

The qualitative analysis conducted in this study highlights the multifaceted role of accreditation frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms in shaping academic standards within business schools in Pakistan Khan, M. S. (2021). Data collected through interviews with representatives of NACTE, PEC, and QEC directors revealed key themes related to program quality assurance, institutional practices, graduate outcomes, and implementation challenges Khan, M. S. (2021); Zardari, H., & Ali, S. J., 2023. The findings are presented across several thematic areas derived from the interview discussions.

### **Strengths of Accreditation Frameworks (NACTE and PEC)**

Participants from NACTE emphasized that their accreditation framework plays a significant role in strengthening teacher education programs by providing structured guidelines for program evaluation and improvement. Similarly, respondents associated with PEC highlighted that their accreditation system contributes effectively to enhancing the quality of engineering education through well-established evaluation mechanisms ; Zardari, H., & Ali, S. J., 2023. PEC's recognition as a fully signatory to international agreements was also viewed as a factor that strengthens its credibility and effectiveness.

Overall, both accreditation bodies were regarded as having structured and experience-based mechanisms supported by specialized committees. However, respondents from QECs noted that while their systems are broadly aligned with international quality assurance standards, the practical implementation of these frameworks remains inconsistent across institutions Khan, M. S., 2021; Zardari, H., & Ali, S. J., 2023. This suggests that the strength of accreditation frameworks lies not only in their design but also in their effective execution within higher education institutions.

### **Contribution of Accreditation Bodies to Program Quality**

NACTE respondents identified the establishment of minimum academic standards as their most significant contribution to improving program quality. These standards have helped institutions maintain a baseline level of consistency in teacher education programs. Likewise, PEC representatives emphasized that their accreditation criteria serve as benchmarks for engineering education, ensuring that programs meet defined quality thresholds.

QEC directors, on the other hand, described their role as supporting institutions in aligning with national quality standards set by the Higher Education Commission (HEC). Their contribution primarily lies in facilitating internal quality assurance processes and promoting continuous improvement within institutions. However, their effectiveness depends largely on institutional cooperation and compliance with recommended practices.

### **Reflection of Program Quality in Graduates**

The findings reveal differing opinions regarding the extent to which accreditation frameworks influence graduate outcomes Khan, M. S., 2019; Zardari, H. A., 2023. NACTE participants expressed concerns that improvements in program quality are not always clearly reflected in the competencies of graduates. In contrast, PEC respondents believed that

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their accreditation standards contribute more directly to shaping graduate skills and ensuring alignment with professional expectations.

QEC directors also indicated that despite efforts to enhance academic quality, the translation of these improvements into measurable graduate outcomes remains limited in practice Khan, M. S., 2019; Zardari, H. A., 2023. This suggests a gap between accreditation processes and their tangible impact on student learning and employability, highlighting the need for stronger outcome-based evaluation mechanisms.

### **Graduate Attributes within Accreditation Processes**

In terms of defining graduate attributes, NACTE respondents acknowledged that their accreditation framework primarily focuses on program-level quality rather than explicitly defining or tracking graduate competencies. Conversely, PEC has adopted internationally recognized graduate attribute frameworks, particularly those aligned with global engineering standards, to guide curriculum development and assessment.

Despite these differences, both frameworks demonstrate an awareness of the importance of graduate attributes, although the level of integration and implementation varies across sectors Khan, M. S., 2019. This indicates that while accreditation frameworks aim to influence graduate outcomes, their effectiveness depends on how systematically these attributes are embedded in academic programs.

### **Conflicts of Interest and Academic Integrity**

A recurring theme in the findings relates to the presence of conflicts of interest within accreditation processes. Respondents from both NACTE and PEC acknowledged that personal, institutional, or regional affiliations can potentially influence decision-making if not properly managed Khan, M. S., 2019; Zardari, H. A., 2023. This raises concerns about transparency and impartiality in accreditation practices.

Similarly, issues related to academic integrity were highlighted as factors that may affect the credibility of accreditation outcomes. Some participants suggested that subjective judgments and external influences could undermine the fairness of evaluations. These concerns point to the need for stronger governance mechanisms, clearer ethical guidelines, and greater accountability within accreditation systems.

### **Self-Assessment and Internal Review Mechanisms**

Both NACTE and PEC incorporate internal review processes to evaluate their own performance; Zardari, H. A., 2023. NACTE conducts periodic reviews and reporting mechanisms, while PEC utilizes formal structures such as annual general meetings to assess accreditation activities. However, respondents suggested that these self-assessment processes could be further strengthened to ensure greater transparency, consistency, and institutional accountability.

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### **Curriculum Quality Assurance**

The study found that both accreditation bodies emphasize curriculum standards as a key component of quality assurance. NACTE focuses on aligning teacher education curricula with professional standards, while PEC regularly reviews engineering curricula and provides recommendations for improvement during accreditation visits.

Despite the existence of defined standards, participants noted that curriculum revision and updating remain ongoing challenges Khan, M. S., 2019; Zardari, H. A., 2023. This indicates that while frameworks exist to guide curriculum quality, their effectiveness depends on continuous monitoring and institutional responsiveness.

### **Quality of Teaching Faculty**

The quality of teaching staff emerged as another important factor in accreditation processes. NACTE respondents indicated that although standards for teacher qualifications exist, gaps remain in recruitment practices and faculty development. Similarly, PEC enforces strict criteria regarding faculty qualifications, experience, and professional engagement; however, challenges persist in maintaining consistency and addressing resource constraints across institutions. Zardari, H. A. (2023).

### **Link Between Academia and Industry**

The findings suggest that neither NACTE nor PEC plays a direct role in bridging the gap between academic institutions and industry Khan, M. S., 2019. While PEC incorporates certain industry-related competencies within its framework, formal mechanisms for industry collaboration remain limited. NACTE respondents similarly indicated that industry linkage is largely outside the scope of their accreditation mandate and is often influenced by broader governmental policies Muhammad, S. K. P., 2023.

### **Challenges in Accreditation and Quality Assurance**

The study identifies several challenges faced by accreditation bodies and QECs. For NACTE, these include limited resources, lack of awareness among institutions, resistance to change, and difficulties in implementing accreditation standards across a large number of institutions; Zardari, H. A., 2024. PEC faces challenges related to managing program growth, maintaining consistency in standards, addressing conflicts of interest, and ensuring sufficient numbers of qualified accreditors.

QEC directors highlighted additional challenges at the institutional level, including limited administrative support, a lack of coordination with academic departments, insufficiently trained staff, and low awareness of quality assurance practices Muhammad, S. K. P., 2023; Zardari, H. A., 2024. Organizational culture, leadership support, and institutional commitment were also identified as critical factors influencing the effectiveness of QEC operations.

### **Relationship Between Accreditation Bodies and QECs**

The findings reveal that there is minimal direct interaction between accreditation bodies and

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QECs. QECs primarily function as internal facilitators of quality assurance, while accreditation bodies operate at an external evaluation level, Muhammad, S. K. P., 2023; Zardari, H. A., 2024. This lack of coordination creates a disconnect between internal quality assurance processes and external accreditation requirements, potentially limiting the overall impact of quality enhancement initiatives.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The study concludes that accreditation frameworks in Pakistan play an important but uneven role in improving academic standards within business and related disciplines. While NACTE and PEC provide structured systems for program evaluation and quality assurance, their effectiveness is influenced by implementation challenges, institutional cooperation, and governance issues.

QECs serve as a critical internal mechanism for quality enhancement; however, their impact is constrained by limited authority, resource shortages, and weak coordination with accreditation bodies Muhammad, S. K. P., 2023; Zardari, H. A., 2024. The absence of strong integration between accreditation frameworks and internal quality assurance systems results in fragmented efforts toward academic improvement.

Overall, the findings suggest that although accreditation frameworks contribute to setting standards and guiding institutional practices, their full potential in improving academic outcomes and graduate competencies remains underutilized due to structural, operational, and contextual challenges.

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