

# Exploring Problems Related to Adoption and Implementation of ISO 21001:2018 at Higher Education in Pakistan

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## Abstract

**Objective:** The overarching objectives of this research were firstly to explore the problems related to adoption of the ISO 21001: 2018 standard by the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan for continuous improvement of HEIs and secondly to find out the issues and challenges in implementation of the ISO 21001:2018 standard at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan.

**Materials and methods:** This is purely a qualitative research study. Both Primary and Secondary data have been used. In order to carry out this research, the 'purposive sampling technique' has been used. Samples were drawn with one set of respondents from the Higher Education Commission Pakistan and the second set of respondents from various higher education institutions across Pakistan. Data was collected through online interviews from each set of respondents separately. The interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis was used to draw results.

**Results:** It is revealed that the HEC already has a 'Quality Assurance' framework in place through 'Internal Quality Assurance' and 'External Quality Assurance' mechanisms prescribed for the Higher Education Institutions / Universities. The HEC has developed 'Institutional Performance Evaluation Standards (IPES)' which are evaluated independently by trained panels / committees against the 11 (Eleven) standards of the IPES. The combined scores on the matrices of these panels form the basis of rankings of HEIs. On the other hand, a system like ISO21001:2018 is not considered by the HEC for implementation in as is form.

**Conclusion:** The study reveals that there is scope for improvement in the overall quality assurance framework of the HEC. The respondents have hinted on acceptability of an internationally recognized system such as the ISO21001:2018;

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however, for any system to work there is a need to sustain policies and go away with the bureaucratic red tapping not just at HEC level but also at an independent institutional level.

**Keywords:** Adoption, ISO, Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Institutional Performance Evaluation Standards.

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The Pakistani Universities or Higher Education Institutes are not ranked in the top 100 Universities of the world. The different international ranking bodies for universities rank the Pakistan HEIs at a relatively lower level which devalues the qualifications despite a relatively high cost at the level of HEIs and high expenditure at the sector level. This creates problems in terms of equivalence of degrees & qualifications at individual level and credibility of the education itself at the institution level who often find it difficult to collaborate with globally renowned institutions. Adoption of an internationally accepted standard like the ISO 21001:2018 can be perceived as a possible remedy to this problem. This research looks into exploring the problems related to adoption and implementation of ISO 21001:2018 – Educational Organizations – Management Systems for educational organizations.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The overarching objectives of this research were to:

- i. Explore the problems related to adoption of the ISO 21001: 2018 standard by the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan for continuous improvement of HEIs.
- ii. Find out the issues and challenges in implementation of the ISO 21001:2018<sup>1</sup> standard at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Scope**

The scope of this research covers the Higher Education Regulatory body in the form of Higher Education Commission at Pakistan as well as the regime of Quality Assurance in form of the ISO System (i.e. the ISO 21001:2018 standard) and the applicability of the same at the level of Higher Education Institutes / Universities across Pakistan.

### **Sampling Framework**

In order to carry out this research, the ‘purposive sampling technique’ has been used. There are two sets of respondents in this study. The sample of one set of respondents consists of the policy makers and implementers at the Quality Assurance wing of the Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan. The sample of the second set of respondents consists of the Vice Chancellors and the heads of Quality Enhancement Cells from two universities from each province of Pakistan selected on convenient basis, one from public sector and one from private sector. Hence, two separate interviews have been conducted from the two sets of respondents.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iso.org/standard/66266.html>

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### **Methodology**

This is purely a qualitative research study. Both Primary and Secondary data have been used. Reports of QS and HEC have also been analyzed. Online interviews have been conducted to gather data. The interview questions are provided herewith as **Appendix-A**. Accordingly, thematic analysis technique has been used for data for concluding results.

### **Data generation**

The interviews were conducted online in two phases; firstly, five (05) interviews were conducted with representatives from Higher Education Commission (HEC) with each interview of around 30 minutes' duration (on average). In the second phase, fourteen (14) interviews of representatives from various universities were conducted on the second part of the interview questionnaire with each interview lasting to around 25 minutes' duration (on average).

### **Data handling and analysis**

Only the audio of the Interviews could be recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The interviews were transcribed along with references of field notes and accordingly a code book was developed using anecdotes and references from interviews. The transcriptions were analyzed on Microsoft Excel. The use of MS Excel provided convenient handling of data, which was not of a large volume, so manual analysis of the content in terms of repetitions and emphasis was done and accordingly, themes were identified for further analysis.

## **RESULTS**

### **Part one (from HEC's representatives)**

#### **Current policies and practices at HEC**

The interviews reveal that there is a body of Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan called the 'Quality Assurance Agency' (QAA), which has developed a framework for 'Institutional Performance Evaluation' for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) / Universities for the purpose of their evaluating the quality standing of the institutions. The framework is aligned with the 'National Qualifications Framework (NQF)' which defines roadmaps and structures of academic programs. There are two sections under QAA, namely 'Internal Quality Assurance' (IQA) and 'External Quality Assurance' (EQA). IQA works for the development of 'Quality Enhancement Cells' (QECs) at institutional level while 'Institutional Level Evaluations' (ILEs) are carried out by EQA panels nominated by HEC.

*.... IQA and EQA is the current standard in which all the essential requirements are included... (R1)*

*...through Statistics and IQA/EQA implementation and their peer evaluation... (R4)*

*... IQA and EQA is the mechanism and NQF is the benchmark for reviewing policies... (R5)*

The interviews also reveal that the combined scores of IQA and EQA against the IPE's 11 standards' framework form the basis of the ranking of the institutions.

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**Scope for improvement of Quality Assurance (QA) mechanism at HEC for HEIs**

The interviews point out that the 'Quality Enhancement Cells' play the most important role in quality assurance at the university level. The HEC has already issued a 'Manual' (guidelines for evaluation) for the Institutional Performance Evaluation (IPE). The IPE guidelines define the major areas to be focused on by the HEIs for evaluation of their effectiveness and future development. These standards, as prescribed by the HEC, are given below:

1. Mission Statement and Goals
2. Planning and Evaluation
3. Organization and Governance
4. Integrity
5. Faculty
6. Students
7. Institutional Resources
8. Academic Programs and Curricula
9. Public Disclosure and Transparency
10. Assessment & Quality Assurance
11. Student Support Service

The HEC offers rigorous trainings to QEC of universities and has defined the entire process and roadmap of the evaluation which consist of pre-visit checks, on site compliance monitoring and post-visit follow ups of the panel selected by the HEC for evaluation (Quality Audit) of a HEI.

It is also revealed that currently, ISO 21001:2018 standard is not on the priority list of the HEC. Currently, the NQF and the QAA derive standards from the National Priorities.

It was also mentioned in one interview that even if the HEC were to adopt an internationally recognized standard like ISO21001:2018, this may only be able to roll out and implemented in the private sector universities, while public sector universities still lag behind in terms of responsiveness to quality standards prescribed by the HEC.

*...Private sector would be possible because the improvement chances are there to be implemented to entered in the International criteria... (R3)*

**Part two (from HEI's representatives)**

**Current policies and practices at HEI/University**

The interviews point out that the HEIs currently are just following what is being prescribed by the HEC. The IPE is the main framework followed by the HEIs in assuring quality across different areas of the institution as prescribed by the HEC in its eleven (11) standards for performance evaluation.

*... strategic Planning, implementation, quality management and continuous quality improvement are the procedure to implement and aligned policies with HEC standards... (R8)*

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Interviews with QEC heads also reveal that the Quality Standing of an institution is also linked to the sensitization of the senior administration of the institution towards the QA standards of HEC and the focus given to the QEC for compliance of the HEC's guidelines. The HEC provides ample inputs and builds capacity of the staff of universities on their own IPE and IQA / EQA system. However, the training itself is limited to the implementation of the prescribed system only with no explicit room for experimentation.

*...challenges at HEIs include the implementation and alignment of SDG's... (R12)*

When it comes to competing with global standards, a respondent pointed out that alignment of Quality Assurance standards with the focus areas of SDGs is also a challenge. According to him, the system needs to be more responsive and dynamic.

*...improving the quality overall by accreditation and then go towards ISO. HEC has always promote the good quality practices and yes HEC will accept... (R16)*

Surprisingly, the overall cohort of representatives seemed satisfied with how HEC was managing the Quality Assurance front. One of the reasons can be that they had little or no knowledge of a system like ISO21001:2018. But, generally, the respondents also seemed opened to trying the new system with an aim to enable their HEI compete at the international level in terms of its rankings rather than only focusing on meeting the compliance requirements of HEC.

**Scope for adoption of a system like ISO 21001:2018 at HEIs after 18th Constitutional Amendment**

The interviews revealed that the readiness of the HEIs to accept another standard is low. Though the willingness may be there, but it is rather out of adventurism than a systematic paradigm shift.

*... Most of the HEI's are not on the standard as planned by the HEC it will take time to consider such practices where the tools for improving quality and follow the protocols in terms of academic excellence, criteria, curriculum etc... (R15)*

The respondents were also aware of how the international rankings of universities are worked out. Apparently, the 'QS' rankings are the most renowned and widely accepted rankings of HEIs in the international arena.

*...they are in collaboration with AACSB, QS and TIMES ranking for adopting the standards and mechanism they were used to evaluate HEI's... (R19)*

The respondents also revealed that the QS system worked on simpler parameters than that of the standards defined in the HEC's guidelines. However, the research indices and the quality of academic outcomes was something which has to be more focused by the HEC rather

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than infrastructure and faculty qualifications, very generally speaking.

On the other hand, the respondents also criticized the role of the provincial higher education authorities saying that this is another red tape for the varsities in terms of getting funds released and having another charter for quality checks.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Overview of the findings**

The overall findings reveal that the respondents at HEC as well as those at HEIs / Universities are well aware of the international ranking system of the universities <sup>i</sup>, and the systems adopted and implemented by the Higher Education Commission Pakistan <sup>ii</sup>. It is also evident that there have been various experiments with developing and adopting quality standards at HEC in the past as well <sup>iii</sup>. It is also evident that persistence and sustainability of policies has been a challenge at all levels of education, including the HEC where policies shifts have been triggered with the change of leadership over the past many years <sup>iv</sup>.

The findings suggest that the social and political dynamics of higher education commission has also a role to play in improving the overall standings of the HEIs of Pakistan at the international level <sup>v</sup>. Apart from that, at the provincial, sectoral and institutional level, there also exist a mélange of challenges that hinder a large scale standardization of quality inputs and outputs for the higher education <sup>vi</sup>. Despite that there are silver linings of a few institutions which have outshines others and performed well at national as well as international level by way of developing indigenous policies and evolving smart practices enabling these institutions to compete with international counterparts in terms of their rankings <sup>vii</sup>. It is also evident that a system like the ISO which has been largely linked to the quality standards of manufacturing and other service industry has not been perceived as an option for improving higher education standards at HEIs in Pakistan <sup>viii</sup>. According to the HEC: *"A total of eleven standards are defined in the IPE document and all the eleven standards are equally important to be met by the HEIs to achieve the desired certification to quality provision in higher education, international visibility and significant place in the regional and international rankings of the HEIs."* <sup>ix</sup>

The compliance to these standards has a very clear process prescribed by the HEC as well. However, despite compliance to the HEC's standards and scoring well in the evaluations of the HEC, the international ranking of Pakistan's HEIs is still very low. This makes a case of something going wrong with the system of quality assurance itself. Such loopholes were again exposed when the pandemic broke out. The supporting infrastructures of the virtual classes, the learning management systems, and readiness to migrate to fully online classes, and the technological paraphernalia were found to be a weakness in many HEIs <sup>x</sup>. The issues and challenges seemed to be more concentrated at the public sector universities as compared to the private sector universities across Pakistan which is why, apparently, some of the private sector institutions rank higher in international rankings, as compared to public sector institutions <sup>xi</sup>.

### **Limitations and delimitations**

The limitation of this study is the on-site visit and one-to-one meetings at the universities and



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HEC. Adoption of convenient selection of universities is also perceived to be a limitation for this study on the assumption that the Private Sector HEIs may or may not have been willing to participate as this study may require access to their systems and processes.

### **Implications for Policy**

Provided that the Higher Education Commission only assesses the IPE standards that it has prescribed, there is a window of opportunity for the HEIs to experiment with a system like ISO21001:2018 and implement it at their own level through a permission from HEC. A policy for such a 'No Objection Certificate' (NOC) to be issued by the issued can be evolved through which the HEC would also find leverage in learning from what HEIs can do at their own level should they aim at higher quality rankings internationally.

### **CONCLUSION**

Literature is filled with notion that there is massive scope for improvement of the existing system of the HEC's Quality Assurance and Rankings of HEIs / Universities <sup>xii</sup>. One example that Pakistan can follow is that of China. Lately, the Chinese HEIs have been improving drastically with innovative approaches and adoption of context oriented policies and practices <sup>xiii</sup>. Perhaps, there is no harm for HEC to transcend its role and create spaces for self-improvement by HEIs through adoption of innovative models and standards like ISO21001:2018. This study also makes a case for a more detailed research into the reasons of why HEIs, despite scoring well on the HEC's criteria, fail to make it big on the international ranking front. This can perhaps be done through a case study of the top performing institutions as per the HEC's criteria.

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