



Stakeholders' Perspectives on Higher Education Quality Assurance Policies: Exploring Vision, Governance, and Teaching Practices in Advancing SDG-4 in Pakistan



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Abstract

The study aimed to delve into the views of different stakeholders on the quality assurance (QA) policies in the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-4) in Pakistan. The study reviewed the institutional vision, mission, and strategic planning for equitable access to tertiary education, the governance, leadership, and organizational structures that fostered equitable quality education, and the teaching and learning approaches that provided equitable quality learning experiences. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used, and data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and document analysis with the university administration, faculty members, Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) officials, and policy makers of selected universities in Pakistan. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. The findings showed that institutions started to engage with SDG-4 via inclusive policies, involving stakeholders, integrating SDG-4 into curriculum, and using student-centered approaches in teaching. But quality assurance mechanisms in higher education institutions were not effective due to various challenges, including limited resources and policy inconsistencies.

Key Words

Quality Assurance, Higher Education, SDG-4, Governance, Pakistan

Introduction

It is very well recognised that higher education plays an important role in national development, social change, innovation, and national economic growth. Education plays an important role in the global development agenda, as it is targeted in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), which seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). The SDG-4 in Pakistan needs to be strengthened by improving the quality of education, governance, accessibility, and effectiveness of higher education institutions (HEIs). Accordingly, the quality assurance (QA) policies of higher education have become more significant as instruments to enhance academic standards, accountability, and performance of higher education institutions (Rini et al., 2025).

Quality assurance in higher education can be defined as a series of activities, standards, policies, and evaluation systems that help to ensure the maintenance and improvement of the quality of education, research, governance,

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and management of the institutions (Shoukat et al., 2024). Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan has introduced the concepts of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), accreditation systems, self-assessment systems, and institutional review systems to foster a culture of quality enhancement in universities (Tanveer et al., 2021). More recent changes in the quality assurance system for higher education underscore inclusive, innovative, institutional responsibility, and sustainable educational development with SDG-4 targets.

This current study has three areas of quality assurance policies that are examined, namely vision, mission, and strategic planning; governance, leadership, and organizational structures; and teaching and learning practices. First, vision, mission, and strategic planning are institutional direction, policies, and long-term planning processes that steer universities towards equitable access, academic excellence, and sustainable development goals. The strategic planning process provides for the alignment of institutional priorities with the goals and objectives of education at the national and international level, specifically SDG-4 (Fazil & Ahmad, 2023). The second variable, governance, leadership, and organizational structures, encompasses systems of decision-making, leadership practices, accountability for administration, and organizational structures that facilitate the effective implementation of quality assurance policies and equitable educational opportunities. The third is teaching and learning practices, which include instructional approaches, curriculum development, pedagogical strategies, assessment systems, and a learning environment that can ensure inclusive and quality learning experiences for students. Advancement of SDG-4 is the dependent variable, which means contributions of higher education institutions towards equitable access, quality education, inclusiveness, lifelong learning, and sustainable educational development in Pakistan.

The study is based on the Stakeholder Theory constructed by R. Edward Freeman in 1984, which states that organizations are effective and sustainable if they take into account the concerns and viewpoints of all their stakeholders. Stakeholders in higher education can be students, faculty, university administrators, policymakers, employers, accreditation organizations, or quality assurance experts. Their involvement is crucial to the implementation and evaluation of the policy for quality assurance. This study is also based on the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM), which focuses on the issues of continuous improvement, accountability, satisfaction of the stakeholders, institutional effectiveness, and the quality culture in the educational institutions (Tanveer et al., 2021). These theories serve as a basis to understand the perception of stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of the QA policies in promoting SDG-4 in HEIs in Pakistan.

The existing literature shows that despite the establishment of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education institutions, Pakistan is still grappling with challenges to provide due and quality education to all. Research and studies have found problems like non-unity in governance, the lack of effective implementation mechanisms, insufficient institutional capacity, unresponsiveness of stakeholders, and the gap between policy formulation and implementation (Muhammad Kabeer Khan & Mian Muhammad Azhar, 2024). In addition, it has been found that the effective teaching and learning practices, digital learning integration, and institutional leadership are important factors in attaining SDG-4 targets in higher education institutions (Sain et al., 2024).

While there are a number of studies available on the issue of educational governance, quality assurance systems, and SDG-4 implementation in Pakistan, there are gaps in the literature. A majority of the previous studies have concentrated on quantitative evaluations, policy analysis, or institutional comparisons, and very few qualitative works have explored the aspects of the stakeholders' reality and their perception of the degree of effectiveness of quality assurance policies. Moreover, the existing literature lacks in-depth studies on the role of institutional vision, governance mechanisms, and pedagogies as integrated factors in achieving equitable quality education and sustainable development in higher education institutions in Pakistan (Shoukat et al., 2024). The

studies that have been conducted on the topic are also fragmented and lack an in-depth and stakeholder-centered view of policy implementation, involving administrators, faculty, students, and even policymakers.

The need for this study stems from the growing interest in assessing whether the higher education quality assurance policies are contributing to SDG-4 in a meaningful way in Pakistan. The issues of inequality in education, access to quality tertiary education, inefficient governance, and institutional capacity remain issues in Pakistan. Knowing stakeholders' viewpoints about the institutional vision, governance, and teaching practices can give valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of existing quality assurance policies as well as provide information on the challenges of implementation (Saani & Saeed, 2025). In this regard, this study is important as it provides qualitative evidence in a context-based way to add to the policy and academic debates on the role of QA policies in the promotion of equitable quality education. The results can provide valuable insights to policymakers, university management, and quality assurance agencies for strengthening the practices of institutions, engaging with stakeholders, and increasing the alignment between higher education policies and the SDG-4 goals in Pakistan.

Research Objectives

The following were the objectives of the study:

- ▶ To study the vision, mission, and strategic planning of the higher education institutions with regard to equal access to tertiary education. (Equitable Quality Education)
- ▶ To assess the level of equality in the quality of education in universities in terms of governance, leadership, and organizational structures. (Equitable Quality Education)
- ▶ To understand the planning of teaching and learning to provide quality learning experiences. (Equitable Quality Education)

Significance of the Study

The study is remarkable because it explores the role of quality assurance policies in higher education towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) in Pakistan. The study analyzes the stakeholders' perception of institutional vision, governance, leadership, and teaching practices, which enables the understanding of the challenges and opportunities in implementing the QA policy in higher education institutions. The results could inform the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and other stakeholders about the "strengths and weaknesses of policy implementation, governance and participation" in existing QA frameworks (Beerkens, 2015; UNESCO, 2017).

The study is also relevant for university managers, teachers, and students as it draws attention to the significance of the role of planning, leadership, and pedagogy in providing inclusive and quality education in universities. Moreover, this study brings in an academic contribution as very limited qualitative research for QA and SDG-4 in Pakistan is found. In this study, the authors employ the principles of the Stakeholder Theory and Total Quality Management (TQM) to provide a theoretical basis for the role of stakeholder involvement and the components of institutional quality management in sustainable educational development (SED) (Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014). The study could offer practical suggestions for enhancing the quality assurance systems and educational quality in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

The research method of this study was qualitative research to understand the viewpoints of the stakeholders regarding the quality assurance (QA) policies of higher education and their contribution to the achievement of

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Pakistan, particularly SDG-4 "Quality Education". A qualitative approach was deemed suitable as it enabled the researcher to deepen his understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the participants concerning institutional vision, governance, leadership, and teaching practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was not quantitative in nature, but rather aimed to explore the social and institutional aspects of the implementation of QA.

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was used to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of stakeholders about the policies of QA in HEIs. Phenomenology was deemed appropriate as it enabled the examination of the participants' understanding and experience of the nature of educational quality, governance processes, and institutional accountability in relation to SDG-4 (Patton, 2015).

Population

The population of this study comprised the key stakeholders in the governance and implementation of QA policies in HEIs in Pakistan. It is important to involve these stakeholders in order to gain a view on the contribution of QA mechanisms to SDG-4 goals like equitable access.

The university administrators comprised vice-chancellors, deans, and department heads who made strategic decisions, provided quality assurance, and planned for the institution. The support of administrative decisions and input into vision and mission and strategic plans with regard to SDG-4 is very useful.

Faculty Members: Professors and lecturers who were in charge of teaching courses, designing curricula, and assessing students. Faculty members share information about teaching and the role of teaching in enabling all students to access.

Quality Assurance Officers: These were the people responsible for the management and monitoring of the implementation of the QA policies in the institutions. They were the main sources of information regarding the structure of the QA framework and its relation to SDG-4 goals.

Qualitative Sample

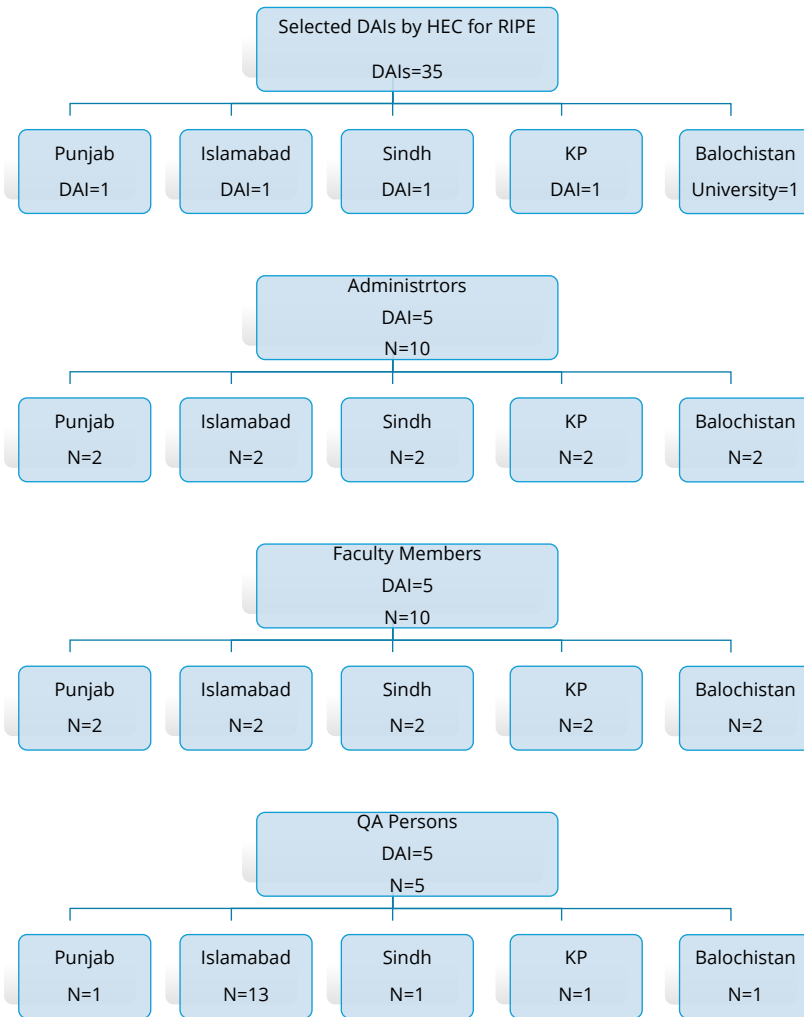
Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was applied in the selection of the sample in the qualitative phase, as participants were chosen based on their relevance to the research objectives. By using a purposive sample, participants experienced or had expert knowledge about quality assurance and its contribution to SDG-4 (Figure 1).

The administrators were selected from various public and private universities of Pakistan, with about 7-10 administrators (Vice-chancellors, Deans, Department heads) selected from each university. These people gave strategic input on the design and implementation of QA policies in line with SDG-4.

Faculty Members: Between 8 and 10 faculty members were chosen from various academic departments and fields to reflect various teaching practices and attitudes towards inclusive education and quality assurance.

Quality Assurance Officers: About 5-7 QA officers were chosen from an institutional setup where they have QA frameworks. These officers shared in detail the formal QA processes in the institution and how aligned these are to SDG-4.

Figure 1
The Samples were Distributed in the Qualitative Phase



Sampling

Purposive sampling, which involves selecting participants based on certain factors or experiences that are significant to the research questions, is a type of non-random sampling. For the qualitative phase of the research, purposive sampling was used, which involved selecting participants who have experience with the quality assurance processes or participate in governance and decision-making on SDG-4.

Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

The qualitative phase started with semi-structured interviews with the key stakeholders, including key administrators, faculty members, and QA officers from the university. The interviews highlighted the connection between vision, mission, and strategic planning in HEIs with SDG-4 and the role of governance and leadership in improving access to education.

Focus Group Discussions

To gain an understanding of students' experiences and perceptions of inclusivity and quality of education in relation to QA policies, focus groups were held with students. These conversations assisted in determining obstacles to equitable access.

Document Analysis

Key institutional documents, including vision and mission statements, strategic plans, and QA reports, were analysed. The document analysis gave insights into formal statements of commitment to SDG-4 in institutions, as well as into whether or not institutional policies and strategies are aligned with the global SDG-4 goals on inclusive education and equitable access.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative phase consisted of interview transcripts, focus group discussion notes, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, which is a widely used qualitative data analysis technique that aims to identify and interpret patterns or themes in the data.

Thematic Analysis

All interview recordings, focus group transcriptions, and documents were transcribed and read several times to get to know the content in the first step:

Familiarisation with the data: This step allows researchers to become familiar with the data prior to formal coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Coding: The data were coded by marking the significant parts of text, phrases, or ideas, which are meaningful to the research questions. This is a process of assigning code to parts of data that are related to a meaning or idea (Saldana, 2016). Codes were inductively generated, i.e., codes came out of the data and did not have to be predicted in advance.

Theme Development: Once initial codes were determined, the next task was to further categorize those codes into larger themes or patterns. A theme is a major pattern or idea that is found throughout the data and is related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For instance, the analysis might uncover themes about inclusion, access to, and equity in education and lifelong learning.

Review & Refinement of Themes: Themes identified were reviewed and refined to make sure they reflect the data and are internally consistent. This step also includes looking to see if the themes are distinguishable and significant to the research questions (Nowell et al., 2017).

Thematic analysis involved the last step of interpreting the themes within the context of the research objectives and literature search. This interpretation may provide insights into how QA practices align with SDG-4 goals, such as inclusivity, equitable education, and lifelong learning.

Document Analysis

Content analysis will also be used to analyze documents like institutional reports, vision and mission statements, and strategic plans. This method could be to look for keywords or themes that may relate to SDG-4 in the documents. Some of the terms, for instance, inclusive education, equity, and access, were coded and analysed for their congruence with the goals of the institution.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the data obtained through in-depth interviews and document analysis with the key informants, carried out with the stakeholders of the Pakistani Higher Education Institutions, is discussed in this section. The main objective of this section is to delve into the perception and experience of university administrators, faculty members, and quality assurance officers on the compatibility of the quality assurance policies in relation to the goals of SDG-4. The data gathered is analyzed using thematic analysis to identify the

main ideas and understandings about the importance of quality assurance to ensure access to education that is not equitable. The section outlines the key themes and patterns that surfaced from the data, and offers a detailed narrative of the strengths, challenges, and opportunities that exist in the existing quality assurance mechanisms in Pakistan's HE system.

Document Analysis

Thus, to evaluate the coherence of Pakistan Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) principles with the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan's Pakistan Precepts, Standards, and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (PSG-2023), a document analysis was conducted in this study, particularly on the Revised Institutional Performance Evaluation (RIPE) framework. A detailed analysis was conducted to compare the components of SDG-4 with the standards and guidelines of RIPE and to undertake an in-depth analysis of key components. This section will seek to draw attention to the extent to which HEC's policies align and implement SDG-4 world education objectives as expressed in institutional documents such as vision and mission statements, strategic plans, and quality assurance reports. The results of this document analysis are very important in understanding how much Pakistani HEIs are integrating the pillars of SDG-4 into their quality assurance processes.

Content Analysis of Comparing Two Documents

The standards are divided into four categories: Equitable Quality Education, Standard 2: Governance, Leadership, and Organization.

Ensuring equitable access to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education is SDG-4's Target 4.3. It states:

Ensure access to affordable, quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university, for all women and men by 2030, with equal access.

Meanwhile, Standard 2 of RIPE is concerned with governance and leadership structures with a focus on inclusive leadership as a way of fulfilling the mission of the institution. It states:

The institution has an inclusive system of governance that supports the achievement of its mission, vision, and objectives, and enhances institutional effectiveness and integrity. Leaders have a clear and stretchy vision of what they want to achieve in providing high-quality, inclusive education and training for all.

This encompasses the institution's commitment to transparency and inclusiveness in governance processes and making quality education available for everyone, inclusive of disenfranchised groups. The institutional governance (Standard 2) is a key component in the process of ensuring strategic plans are translated into actionable policies that can facilitate equitable access to education and quality learning experiences. This underscores the importance of governance in ensuring leadership of the institutions is consistent with the SDGs' objectives on equitable quality education. St-2 ensures good governance and leadership, which enables institutions to provide quality education and contributes to SDG-4's commitment to providing equitable access to education for all learners, particularly girls and those in underrepresented groups.

The documents analysed (governance charters, statutes, and regulations) demonstrate how the leadership and organisational framework can directly influence the access to and the quality of the education provided in the institution, and therefore support the goals of SDG-4, which are related to equitable education.

The interviews were analysed thematically.

The thematic analysis of the interviews with key stakeholders, such as Higher Education Commission (HEC) officials, University Management Boards (UMBs), and quality assurance officers, is also provided in this section to

highlight the effect of quality assurance policies on the promotion of SDG-4 (Quality Education) in the Higher Education Sector in Pakistan. The analysis seeks to recognize and examine the common issues that arose from the interviews and to reflect on the views of the interviewees on the extent to which current quality assurance systems are in line with the SDG-4 principles of equitable quality education. This section gives insights into the practical consequences of these policies and into what needs to be done to make them even more in line with the global education goals by looking at the experiences, problems, and recommendations of the interviewees. Thematic analysis will identify existing strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities that can be identified in the current quality assurance mechanisms and how they can be improved.

Theme 1: Inclusive Vision, Mission & Strategic Alignment with SDG-4

Table 1

Thematic Summary of Theme 1

Sub-Themes	Category	Codes / Nodes	Freq.
Institutional Commitment to Inclusivity	Merit-based Access	Academic merit system	1
	Financial Inclusion	Scholarships, Financial aid	4
	Outreach to Underrepresented Groups	Community outreach	1
Policy-Based Inclusion	Gender Equality	Gender-neutral policies	1
	Religious Inclusion	Religious spaces	1
Strategic Alignment with National Frameworks SDG-4 Integration	Regulatory Compliance	HEC curriculum & QA compliance	1
	Curriculum Integration	Sustainability & global citizenship	1

This theme reflects the process of implementing inclusiveness in institutional vision, mission, and strategic planning frameworks consistent with Higher Education Commission (HEC) standards and United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-4), which underscores inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The analysis shows that inclusivity is not just expressed rhetorically, but is a practice in the institution, which can be seen in admissions policy, financial support system, regulatory compliance, and curricular inclusion.

Strategic Alignment with National Frameworks

The participant states:

"Our effective learning principles are internationally recognised, and we work within the framework of the HEC curriculum and QA policies. (P-9, Dean)

This indicates conformity to the Higher Education Commission (HEC) regulatory structure. A strategic plan seems to be incorporated into the national quality assurance standards. Compliance with the guidelines of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) is a key component of institutionalizing inclusivity. Institutions that will follow the HEC curriculum, academic structure, and quality assurance (QA) policies will ensure that principles of inclusion are not an ad hoc approach but incorporated into the strategic planning of the institution. This conformity with national regulatory standards ensures inclusivity is not a matter of personal opinion but becomes a controlled and accountability-driven task. Furthermore, QA frameworks serve as essential instruments for converting the universal goals of SDG-4 (Quality Education) into attainable benchmarks. In addition, QA frameworks help to make the SDG-4 (Quality Education) global objectives measurable. In this context, regulatory compliance is not only a formal requirement but a tool that is used to reinforce sustainability and accountability, ensuring that

inclusivity is pursued and measured in an institutional, systematic manner. Strategic alignment with national policies on quality assurance, therefore, ensures that inclusivity is woven into all aspects and is now a reality, rather than something only dreamed about.

Incorporating SDG-4 into the Curriculum

One of the participants says:

Themes of sustainability and global citizenship are embedded in course content. (P10, Dean)

This reflects explicit curricular connections with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-4). Sustainability and global citizenship education are an inclusive development that goes beyond access to values-based education.

Empowering access to education is not enough; the curriculum is designed to enable value-based learning through sustainability and global citizenship incorporation. It means that the great majority of the institutions' strategic vision is connected with the global development frameworks, especially those oriented towards sustainable development and global citizenship. Institutions, in this sense, are an important channel through which to produce socially responsible graduates who are knowledgeable not only in academic knowledge but also in values that can be used to make a positive contribution to society.

This integration is a paradigm shift in understanding inclusivity. Rather than just saying that the structural aspect must be taken care of and that access to education must be ensured, it is extended here to the content of what is learned as well. The institutions' embedding of sustainability and global citizenship recognises that education is not only about preparing students for their own success, but about preparing them to play a meaningful role in the world around them. This approach embodies a transformative vision of education, the teaching and learning of which equips students with the skills and knowledge necessary to survive, but more importantly, to flourish in, and contribute to, equitable and sustainable societies. All in all, the incorporation of these themes in the curriculum enables students to be technically prepared and also ready to face the global challenges in the future, fulfilling the core aims of SDG-4.

Governance, Leadership & Organizational Structures for Equity

Governance structures are measured by relating to stakeholders, complying with regulations, and using systematic evaluation processes that reflect procedural inclusivity. Leadership is focused on accountability and equitable delivery of education. This theme emphasizes that equity in higher education is not just an ideal they strive for, but a reality they achieve through the governance frameworks, leadership, and organizational processes of the institutions.

Table 2

Thematic Summary of Theme 2

Sub-Themes	Category	Codes / Nodes	Freq.
Inclusive Governance Structures	Disability Support Unit	Dedicated disability office	1
	SOP Implementation	HEC SOPs for differently abled	1
Participatory Evaluation	Stakeholder Involvement	Faculty, students, and employers' involvement	1
Monitoring Mechanisms	Performance Indicators	Graduation rates, employment outcomes	1
Internal Accountability	Internal & External Audits	Program reviews & audits	2

This theme highlights governance systems and leadership practices that realize equity in higher education institutions. The results show that the concept of inclusion is not seen as an abstraction, but is part and parcel of institutional setup, regulation, participatory practice, and accountability systems. Governance becomes the 'operational bridge' between institutional vision and equitable educational delivery. Equity is realised through four interwoven governance processes, as indicated by the participant's answers: structural inclusion, regulatory compliance, participatory decision making, and systematic monitoring.

Findings

The result of this study showed that most of the policies of higher education quality assurance (QA) in Pakistan were in line with the purpose of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), especially on inclusive and equitable quality education. Thematic analysis showed that the institutional vision, mission, governance, leadership, and teaching practices were instrumental in the realization of inclusivity in the HEIs. Participants highlighted that QA processes were not only administrative requirements but also embedded in the strategic planning, curriculum development, and institutional governance processes.

The analysis also revealed that institutions fostered inclusivity through merit-based admissions, merit scholarships, financial aid, and outreach for underrepresented groups. Compliance with Higher Education Commission (HEC) quality assurance procedures was considered a key process for bringing equity and accountability into practice. Further, SDG-4-related themes on sustainability and global citizenship have been integrated within educational curricula to implement SDG-4 targets.

The results also suggested that governance and leadership frameworks facilitated equitable education by fostering participation in decision-making, engaging stakeholders, having monitoring systems, and internal accountability systems. Participants noted, however, that there are challenges such as limited resources, inconsistent implementation of policies, and institutional capacity gaps that impact the effective achievement of the goals for quality assurance in some institutions.

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that the quality assurance (QA) policies of higher education institutions began to shift towards the goals of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-4) more and more in Pakistan, especially towards inclusive and equitable quality education. The study found that vision, governance, leadership, and teaching in HEIs had a significant role in the operationalization of inclusiveness in HEIs. This study agrees with Beerkens (2015), who claimed that good quality assurance plays an important role in institutional accountability, educational quality, and sustainable development in higher education. The findings also revealed that universities encouraged inclusivity by providing merit-based admissions policies, merit-based scholarships, financial aid, and outreach to marginalized groups. This is aligned with UNESCO (2017), which stressed that inclusive education and equitable access to education are core elements of SDG-4. Likewise, Shah and Nair (2014) noted that quality assurance systems are stronger if they are embedded in the strategic planning and governance processes of institutions that incorporate equity and accessibility.

The study also showed governance and leadership structures improved the educational equity by involving stakeholders, establishing monitoring systems, and internal accountability procedures. The result is in line with the findings of the study by Harvey and Williams (2018) that participatory governance and ongoing evaluation are one of the key ingredients of sustainable quality assurance programmes in HEIs.

Also, the incorporation of sustainability and global citizenship issues in the curriculum demonstrated a growing awareness of the quality of education beyond grades and marks. This result is similar to that of Leal Filho et al. (2021), who pointed out that there is a need to transform the curriculum at higher education institutions to inculcate sustainability values and to prepare socially responsible graduates.

But the study also identified problems like weak institutional capacities, weak implementation of policies, and weak capacity-building mechanisms. Lim (2018) also reported similar issues, highlighting that while quality assurance is well established in developing nations, its implementation is restricted in practice due to a lack of resources and personnel, as well as inadequate protocols for identifying and addressing issues, resulting in limited impact on educational equity.

In general, the discussion reveals greater efforts being made towards integration of QA policies with the SDG-4 goals in the Pakistan context, but the focus needs to be more on policy implementation, institutional capacity building, stakeholder involvement, and sustainable policy governance for the realization of SDG-4 and ensuring equitable and good quality education for all.

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