



Key Challenges Facing Pakistan's Higher Education Sector

Summary of 4 International + 1 National Reports



HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION, PAKISTAN

Executive Summary

Key Challenges Facing Pakistan's Higher Education Sector

A Synthesis of Five Independent Diagnostic Reports on Governance, Quality Assurance, Teaching Quality and Leadership Development

5

Diagnostic
Reports

60+

Universities
Consulted

1000+

Stakeholders
Engaged

“Five independent reviews. One consistent diagnosis. A shared evidence base for reform.”

Purpose & Context

Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC), with support from the British Council, commissioned a series of independent diagnostic studies — delivered by Advance HE, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) UK, and the Higher Education Development Project (HEDP) — to assess the state of governance, quality assurance, teaching quality, and leadership development across the country's higher education institutions (HEIs).

This document brings together the executive summaries of five such reports into a single, consolidated briefing. It is intended to give senior HEC management, university leadership, and government and political stakeholders a shared, evidence-based understanding of the structural challenges facing the sector — and to point toward the long-term reform pathway already underway through HEC's revamped Quality Assurance Framework, PSG-2023.

How to read this document

Each of the five sections that follow presents the key challenges identified in one report, drawn directly from that report's findings and executive summary. A cross-cutting synthesis follows, before the closing section on PSG-2023 as the sector's long-term solution.

REPORT-1**Review of Higher Education Governance**

Source: Review of HE Governance — John Rushforth, Advance HE (commissioned by HEC with British Council support)

“Autonomy without accountability infrastructure is not autonomy — it is exposure.”

This review assessed the effectiveness of governance arrangements across Pakistan's publicly funded HE institutions, based on a baseline visit, stakeholder engagement, and a survey completed by 68 respondents across 29 institutions.

KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

- The existing legal and cultural framework does not support fully autonomous, effectively governed institutions in line with recognised international standards.
- The infrastructure needed to develop and support independent, effective governors does not currently exist.
- There is no clear, sector-wide agreed set of values underpinning governance processes.
- Institutions show no evidence of an established learning culture around governance.
- Students are absent from most, if not all, university decision-making bodies, despite being recognised as a valuable asset where present.
- Governing bodies meet infrequently (an average of twice a year, versus four-to-eight times in comparable UK institutions), limiting their ability to provide effective oversight.
- Transparency gaps are significant: roughly 20% of institutions do not publish board minutes, 25% do not publish board membership, and nearly 50% do not publish terms of reference.
- Board Chair appointments are frequently made by the Vice-Chancellor or external bodies rather than by the governing body itself, weakening independent oversight of the Executive.

The report identifies HEC as central to closing these gaps — through developing sector-wide practice notes on good governance, facilitating training and development programmes for governing body members and board secretaries, and supporting communities of practice for governance practitioners.

REPORT-2

Quality of Higher Education Teaching

Source: Quality of HE Teaching — The Islamic Republic of Pakistan — Professor Barbara Dexter, Advance HE (commissioned by HEC with British Council support)

“Pockets of excellence exist. The system does not yet reward or replicate them.”

This audit explored perceptions of teaching quality across Pakistan's HE sector using a mixed-methods approach: a survey of 748 respondents across 31 universities, together with focus groups and interviews with HEC senior staff, university staff and students.

KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

- Consistency, access and availability of high-quality teaching and assessment vary considerably across institutions, despite pockets of strong innovative practice.
- Staff report a clear need for additional pedagogic training and support — formal training in teaching methods remains limited, including at the PhD level.
- There is a lack of reward and recognition for excellent teaching, and appraisal systems are seen as lacking openness.
- The sector lacks a national Professional Standards Framework for HE teaching staff and generic codes of conduct.
- Use of technology in teaching is inconsistent and not systematically disseminated across institutions.
- There is limited structured peer observation practice and a comparatively weak student voice in shaping teaching quality.
- Links between HEIs and industry/employers remain underdeveloped, limiting the relevance and employability outcomes of teaching.

The report notes that HEC has a key role in promoting and supporting the changes needed to modernise and enhance learning and teaching nationally, including through a national Professional Standards Framework and structured Continuous Professional Development (CPD).

REPORT-3**Review of HE Leadership Development Activities**

Source: Review of HE Leadership Development Activities — Steve Outram, Advance HE (commissioned by HEC with British Council support, as part of the PAK-UK Education Gateway)

“Satisfaction is high. Impact is inconsistent. Leadership development needs a system, not events.”

This study assessed the impact — not merely the satisfaction — of existing leadership development activities across Pakistan's HE sector, drawing on a survey of 87 respondents (Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Heads of Department and senior QA staff), focus groups with Vice-Chancellors, and visits to three universities in Islamabad.

KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

- Leadership development in Pakistan's universities has largely been ad hoc and stand-alone, with little systematic, sector-wide provision — many respondents reported having received no formal leadership training at all, acquiring skills only through on-the-job experience.
- While satisfaction with leadership development activities is consistently high, actual impact on changed behaviour and institutional results is far more variable — participants often return energised but find learning is not embedded in the prevailing system or followed up.
- Training and its impact are weakest in precisely the strategic functions senior leaders need most: financial planning, commercialisation, entrepreneurship, managing strategic partnerships and stakeholders, and estates/IT leadership.
- Provision is highly uneven across the sector — some institutions (e.g. through dedicated centres) run structured, planned leadership development, while others, especially small rural campuses, offer none at all.
- There is no national framework of leadership standards, no structured 'leadership development journey' or pipeline linking development to succession planning, and no system for accrediting leadership development activities — despite strong survey support for one.
- Generic, supply-led programmes (including overseas study tours) were seen by senior leaders as not addressing the specific, highly variable needs of Pakistan's diverse HE institutions — 'one size does not fit all'.
- Respondents' preferred leadership style is strongly 'engagement-focused' (building trust and enabling others), yet this is in tension with the 'turnaround' and achievement-focused leadership capabilities increasingly needed to manage institutions under financial and quality pressure.

The report recommends HEC lead a sector-wide consultative process to establish national leadership standards, build a tiered leadership development framework (from self-leadership through to enterprise leadership), create leadership 'pipelines' linked to succession planning, and introduce accreditation and fellowships to recognise good leadership — alongside developing 'turnaround leadership' capability for institutions under strain.

REPORT-4**Governance Study — Bottleneck Analysis Report & Recommendations**

Source: Improving Governance in HEIs through Responsible Exercise of Autonomy — Higher Education Development Project (HEDP) (national diagnostic covering 42 universities)

“The flaw is not effort — it is architecture. Fix the design, and capacity follows.”

This national diagnosis, covering 42 universities across every province and territory of Pakistan, identifies the procedural, institutional and structural bottlenecks that impede effective decision-making, autonomy and accountability in HEIs, tracing them to five root causes.

KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

- Design and statutory flaws: powers over Vice-Chancellor appointment, Statutes, and Board composition are concentrated in the Chancellor, embedding political influence at the apex of university governance; governing bodies are dominated by ex-officio government appointees; university acts are silent on accountability for governing bodies themselves.
- Capacity and process deficits: core administrative roles (Registrar, Treasurer, QEC, ORIC) are often filled on 'additional charge' by academics rather than trained professionals; core processes remain manual and paper-based; approvals move sequentially through multiple committees, causing cumulative delay.
- Incentive and accountability gaps: faculty incentives are tied almost exclusively to research output and seniority, with little reward for teaching excellence or innovation; performance appraisal (ACR) is largely ceremonial; Vice-Chancellors are rarely appointed against measurable KPIs or formally reviewed by the Senate.
- Data and systems deficiencies: most universities lack an integrated Management Information System; governing bodies and leadership operate without real-time performance dashboards; tracer studies, employer feedback and student satisfaction data are rarely collected or used systematically.
- The external interface: political and bureaucratic interference persists in VC appointments, tuition-fee setting and staffing approvals; universities are treated as subordinate government departments and bound by public-sector finance, procurement (PPRA) and hiring (NOC) rules ill-suited to academic institutions; the overall system rewards compliance over performance.

The report's recommendations centre on depoliticising university leadership, securing institutional autonomy in finance and HR, clarifying the regulatory environment, and building a sector-wide culture of performance and accountability.

REPORT-5**Quality Assurance — Research & Gap Analysis**

Source: Reviewing and Revamping Quality Assurance in Pakistan — Ian Welch & Kevin Kendall, QAA UK (Going Global Partnership, in collaboration with HEC)

“A system built to check compliance cannot, by design, drive enhancement.”

This study mapped Pakistan's existing quality assurance standards and processes against the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), drawing on documentation review and five stakeholder workshops involving HEC/QAA staff, university leadership, Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) staff, faculty and students.

KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

- Pakistan's QA standards are written from an institutional perspective, while international standards (ESG) are student-focused — students have limited influence over programme quality and are rarely part of QA processes.
- The current QA system is built around compliance rather than enhancement, despite clear stakeholder preference for a stronger enhancement focus.
- Standards do not explicitly promote internal quality assurance processes with cross-institutional participation, so QA is not embedded institution-wide; faculty often work in silos, distanced from HEC.
- Good practice identified through external review is not systematically disseminated within or across institutions.
- Standards do not explicitly address admissions, delivery, assessment, certification, information management or public information as quality assurance processes.
- The relationship between research and teaching quality is not addressed within existing QA Standards.
- External and internal quality assurance processes are not well aligned; follow-up after external review is inconsistent, and there is no clear complaints or appeals process.
- HEC and the QAA lack academic and stakeholder representation in their developmental and deliberative committees, and there is no formal evaluation process for either body.

The report recommends a new QA framework prioritising stakeholder engagement, an enhancement culture, explicit standards aligned with ESG 1–3, and systematic dissemination of good practice — directly informing the design of PSG-2023.

Cross-Cutting Synthesis

“Five Reports, one root cause: a sector engineered for compliance, not for enhancement — and PSG-2023 is designed to solve it end to end”

Read individually, each report diagnoses a distinct problem — a governance gap, a quality assurance gap, a teaching gap, a leadership gap. Read together, they describe one underlying condition observed from six vantage points: an HE sector built to demonstrate compliance, not to be held accountable for performance. The table below sets out that pattern for each dimension, why it matters for HEC's decisions, and — critically — how HEC's revamped QA Framework, PSG-2023, has been purpose-built to resolve it.

#	DIMENSION	PATTERN OBSERVED	WHY IT MATTERS FOR HEC	HEC'S QA FRAMEWORK / PSG PROVIDES SOLUTION
01	Governance Rpts 1 2 3 4 5	Statutory power over leadership appointments sits with political figures, not institutions; boards lack independence, capacity and accountability.	Reforms to institutional autonomy will not hold unless the legal architecture behind them changes first.	PSG's QA architecture is designed to build shared values and a sector-wide vision for evolutionary capability-building — embedding change inside legal instruments for a durable, long-term solution.
02	Quality Assurance Rpts 1 2 3 4 5	QA is built around institutional compliance, not student-centred enhancement; follow-through on external review findings is inconsistent.	PSG-2023's enhancement-led model is the direct, designed response to this gap.	PSG-2023 provides the system and institutional mechanism to move HEIs away from rote compliance toward genuine institutional ownership of quality.
03	Teaching & Learning Rpts 1 2 3 4 5	Pedagogic quality is inconsistent across institutions; CPD, recognition and reward for good teaching remain limited or absent.	Without a national standards framework, good practice stays local instead of becoming systemic.	PSG's QA system sets exclusive standards requiring HEIs to embed CPD that strengthens teaching, research and service effectiveness institution-wide.
04	Leadership Development Rpts 1 2 3 4 5	No formal standards, framework, or succession pipeline exists; where training happens, its impact on real institutional performance is inconsistent.	Leadership capability is being left to chance at the exact moment the sector is expanding fastest.	PSG provides scaffolding by embedding succession leadership planning indirectly through well-defined responsibilities in the QA system. HEC should build a national CPD system to empower and guide HEIs — drawing on established models such as AKU's CPD practice.
05	Data & Systems Rpts 1 2 3 4 5	Most institutions operate on fragmented, manual, paper-based processes with no integrated MIS or real-time performance dashboards.	Leadership at every level is making decisions without the evidence base to act on them.	PSG's QA system makes institutional intelligence and data governance a core QEC/IQAE responsibility — with QAA guidance and the forthcoming Q-CIRCLE digital platform embedding data governance sector-wide.
06	Culture Rpts 1 2 3 4 5	A pervasive culture of compliance and risk-aversion crowds out learning, innovation, and genuine enhancement sector-wide.	Structural fixes alone will not succeed without a parallel shift in institutional mindset and incentives.	PSG's QA system brings innovative tools and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) solutions that scaffold institutional transformation — building a genuine quality culture across Pakistan's HEIs.

KEY 1 Governance 2 Teaching Quality 3 Leadership Development 4 Bottleneck Analysis 5 QA Gap Analysis

Three implications follow directly from this synthesis. First, isolated fixes will not hold unless the underlying legal, data, and cultural architecture changes with them. Second, the same enabling conditions recur across every dimension: clearer standards, independent and capable governance, reliable institutional data, and a shift from compliance to enhancement as the sector's operating principle. Third, HEC does not need six separate reform agendas to act on these findings — it needs one coordinated one, purpose-built around exactly these gaps. That is precisely the role PSG-2023 is designed to play, as this section sets out.

The Long-Term Solution: PSG-2023 (Precepts-Standards-Guidelines)

“The diagnosis is complete. The Solution framework to act on it already exists.”

“Lesson from Two Decades of Quality Journey: 2002 – 2026.”

Key Lesson: — Regulations that demand mature behaviour from less mature institutions produce compliance leading to sophisticated dishonesty at institutional scale – Responsive Regulations to the Institutional Ownership & Maturity under PSG provides the Solution.

SECTOR VOICES · HE EXPERTS ON PSG-2023

What HE Sector Leading Academia think about PSG

“PSG is the way forward for higher education — and our job is to bring every institution on board.”

Dr. Sohail Naqvi, Ex ED, HEC · Ex VC, LUMS

“PSG can be a hope for Pakistan's higher education sector.” (HEDP-Review).

VC LUMS, Dr. Ali Cheema

“PSG is a true paradigm shift for higher education in Pakistan.”

Prof. Dr. Fazal A. Khalid · VC, GIK Institute

“A great transformation — we want to teach this transformation journey to our students (Faculty of Education).”

Prof. Dr. Tayyaba Tamim · Dean, LUMS

“PSG is far more than a revised Quality Framework; it signals a transformation in institutional thinking.”

Prof. Dr. M. Mukhtar, Former VC, Skill University

“PSG will transform higher education; I engaged our entire faculty on PSG approach for enhance institutional capacity.”

Prof. Dr. Saeed Ahmad · VC, University of Bhakkar

HEC's revamped Quality Assurance Framework, PSG-2023 — developed in collaboration with the National and International Stakeholders consultation — was designed specifically to address the gaps and challenges documented across these five reports. It marks a deliberate shift in Pakistan's HE quality architecture: from institution-centred compliance toward student-centred enhancement.

PSG-2023 directly responds to the challenges identified above by:

KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

- Shifting the sector from a compliance-driven to an enhancement-driven quality culture, addressing the core finding of the QA Gap Analysis.
- Placing students at the centre of quality assurance, giving them a substantive role in programme review — addressing the absence of student voice raised across the governance, teaching, and QA reports.
- Making institutional intelligence and data governance a core QEC/IQAE responsibility, reinforced by the forthcoming Q-CIRCLE digital platform — addressing the data and systems deficiencies identified in the Bottleneck Analysis.
- Embedding succession and leadership planning indirectly through clearly defined institutional responsibilities within the QA system, with scope for HEC to build a dedicated national leadership CPD offer on this foundation.
- Bringing innovative CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement) tools that scaffold institutional transformation and build a genuine quality culture across HEIs.
- Promoting systematic dissemination of good practice and evidence-based, data-driven institutional performance analytics — addressing the data and systems deficiencies identified in the Bottleneck Analysis.
- Encouraging contextual, proportionate application of standards across a diverse university landscape, rather than a uniform compliance checklist.
- Aligning Pakistan's quality standards with international benchmarks (ESG), supporting institutional autonomy exercised responsibly and accountably.

While each report identifies distinct, specific gaps in governance, leadership infrastructure, teaching quality and quality assurance, PSG-2023 provides the unifying, long-term mechanism through which HEC, university leadership, and government stakeholders can systematically close them — moving the sector from fragmented compliance toward sustained, sector-wide enhancement.

PSG-2023 offers a well thought-out, innovative solution to every challenge identified across these six reports — and, implemented consistently, has the potential to establish world-leading institutions in Pakistan's higher education sector over the long term.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Key Terms & Abbreviations

This glossary defines the institutional bodies, frameworks, and technical terms referenced throughout this executive summary, for ease of reference by HEC senior management, university leadership, and government stakeholders.

TERM	DEFINITION
HEC	Higher Education Commission of Pakistan — the statutory body responsible for HE funding, oversight, and quality assurance nationally.
HEI	Higher Education Institution — a general term for any public or private university or degree-awarding college.
PSG-2023	The revamped national Quality Assurance Framework for Pakistan's HE sector, developed by HEC in collaboration with QAA UK and the British Council. Available at www.hec.gov.pk/site/rqf .
QAA-UK / QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK) — the UK body that partnered with HEC on the QA Gap Analysis and the design of PSG-2023. / Quality Assurance Agency Pakistan
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area — the international benchmark against which Pakistan's QA standards were mapped.
BoG	Board of Governors — the apex governing body of a university, responsible for strategic oversight and accountability.
QEC	Quality Enhancement Cell — the internal quality assurance unit within each HEI, responsible for self-assessment and enhancement activity.
IQAE	Office of “Institutional Quality Assessment and Effectiveness— a new title for QEC.
RIPE	Review of Institutional Performance and Enhancement — the institutional-level review mechanism introduced under PSG-2023.
Q-CIRCLE	PSG-2023's forthcoming digital platform for institutional data governance and quality analytics, enabling evidence-based decision-making across the sector. Quality- Continuous Institutional Review, Classification, Learning Ecosystem.
CQI	Continuous Quality Improvement — an enhancement-led, cyclical approach to raising institutional and programme quality, central to PSG-2023.
CPD	Continuous/Continuing Professional Development — ongoing training and skills development for academic and administrative staff.
HEDP	Higher Education Development Project — authored the national Governance Bottleneck Analysis covering 42 Pakistani universities.

Further detail on PSG-2023 is available at:

- ✓ www.hec.gov.pk/site/rqf

Further detail on International Studies is available at:

- ✓ <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/services/universities/QAA/Pages/GAP-Studies-by-Advance-HE-&-QAA-UK-.aspx>

