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Perceived government capacity and quality assurance effectiveness in higher education: evidence from Nangarhar, Afghanistan

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Abstract: Quality assurance in higher education is not just a technical process of assessing standards in the contemporary education system, but a governance process linked to the perceived capacity of government to implement policies, provide resources, and coordinate relevant institutions. In Afghanistan, despite formal policies, standards, and quality-assurance evaluations, a gap persists between these mechanisms and perceived quality in higher education. This study aims to assess the association between perceived government capacity and the effectiveness of quality assurance in higher education institutions in Nangarhar province. The study was conducted based on a quantitative, descriptive-analytical, and cross-sectional design. Data were collected from 240 selected participants via an online questionnaire between August 2025 and April 2026, yielding 149 valid responses. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS, descriptive statistics, and a chi-square (χ^2) test. The findings show that awareness of the importance of quality assurance is high (Mean=4.02), but perceptions of policy clarity, trust, human capacity, professional training, financial support, and information systems are comparatively lower. A significant relationship was found between human capacity and quality assurance effectiveness ($\chi^2(1)=9.47$, $p=.003$, Cramér's $V=.252$). Significant associations were also found between professional training and QA outcomes ($\chi^2(1)=7.12$, $p=.008$, Cramér's $V=.219$) and financial support and perceived QA reforms ($\chi^2(1)=6.35$, $p=.012$, Cramér's $V=.206$). Perceived QA effectiveness also differed significantly across low, moderate, and high levels of institutional coordination ($F(2,146)=58.93$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.447$). The study concludes that perceived QA effectiveness is associated with implementation capacity, institutional coordination, and the practical use of evaluation results. The study recommends strengthening human resources, professional training, financial and technical support, institutional coordination, and the use of QA evaluation results to shift quality assurance from formal compliance toward continuous institutional improvement.

Keywords: Higher Education Quality Assurance; Government Capacity; Institutional coordination; Policy Implementation; Nangarhar.

Introduction

The quality of higher education is a key indicator of an education system's effectiveness, as universities contribute to human capital development, scientific research, innovation, and social and economic development (Rahimi & Ayubi, 2022). Accordingly, Quality Assurance (QA) is a major policy and management priority for governments and higher education institutions. QA encompasses systematic mechanisms for assessing, maintaining, and continuously improving teaching, curricula, research, administration, faculty, learning environments, and student learning outcomes (Fahimi, 2023; Kayen et al., 2025). The effectiveness of QA depends not only on formal policies and regulations but also on the capacity to translate them into effective practice. Where QA policies and standards are developed primarily at the ministerial level and implemented by universities, the relationship between government capacity, policy implementation, institutional coordination, and perceived QA outcomes becomes particularly important. State capacity encompasses the

administrative, organizational, financial, technical, and coordination capabilities required for policy design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Ebrahimi et al., 2025; Jafari, 2023). From this perspective, the study does not measure the overall state capacity of Afghanistan; rather, it examines academic and administrative staff perceptions of government capacity and its relationship with QA implementation and effectiveness in Nangarhar's higher education institutions. The government contributes to QA through policy and legal frameworks, standards, accreditation, monitoring, evaluation, resource provision, and institutional coordination. A top-down policy implementation perspective is therefore relevant because national QA policies and standards are translated into institutional practice at the university level. Their effectiveness may depend on policy clarity, administrative capacity, available resources, monitoring, and coordination between ministerial authorities and universities. Where implementation capacity is limited, formal QA mechanisms may emphasize documentation and compliance rather than substantive quality improvement (Azizi et al., 2026). The problem is particularly pronounced in contexts characterized by political instability, weak governance, limited regulatory capacity, and constrained financial and human resources. In such settings, higher education may have formal institutions and regulations but lack the capacity to implement them effectively. Thus, the central issue is not merely the existence of QA policies, but the governmental and institutional capacity to implement, monitor, coordinate, and use them for quality improvement (Ahmadi et al., 2025; Auzarmi, 2023). Nangarhar provides an important context for examining the gap between formal QA policies and their practical implementation. This study aims to examine the association between perceived government and institutional capacity, institutional coordination, and perceived QA effectiveness in higher education institutions in Nangarhar. Its significance lies in highlighting the capacity and implementation conditions that shape the practical effectiveness of QA beyond the existence of formal standards. Accordingly, the study asks: How are perceived government and institutional capacity and institutional coordination associated with the implementation and effectiveness of QA in higher education institutions in Nangarhar?

Based on State Capacity Theory, Top-down Policy Implementation Theory, and Institutional Theory, this study formulates four testable hypotheses concerning the main relationships examined:

- 1) **H1:** There is a significant association between human capacity and perceived quality assurance effectiveness in higher education institutions in Nangarhar.
- 2) **H2:** There is a significant association between professional training and perceived quality assurance outcomes.
- 3) **H3:** There is a significant association between financial support and perceived quality assurance reforms.
- 4) **H4:** There is a significant difference in perceived quality assurance effectiveness across levels of institutional coordination.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

QA in higher education is closely linked to institutional structures, policy implementation, state capacity, and government performance (Rohmah & Choiruddin, 2026; Zawak & Wahidi, 2026). In contexts facing political instability, limited resources, and weak governance, effective QA may depend on formal policies but also on the state's capacity to design, implement, regulate, monitor, and evaluate them (Sajid, 2026; Yunespour, 2023). Accordingly, this study draws on State Capacity Theory as its main framework, complemented by Top-down Policy Implementation Theory and Institutional Theory, particularly given the ministerial formulation and institutional implementation of national QA policies in Afghanistan.

State Capacity Theory

State Capacity Theory forms the main theoretical foundation of this study. It emphasizes that

effective governance depends not only on the existence of policies and laws but also on the state's ability to formulate, implement, regulate, monitor, and evaluate them. In higher education, this capacity includes human and financial resources, administrative structures, information systems, monitoring mechanisms, and policy implementation capacity (Kayen et al., 2025; Motadi, 2025; Rahimi & Ayubi, 2022). This study uses these dimensions to examine how government capacity is associated with the effectiveness of quality assurance (QA) in higher education institutions in Nangarhar. Limited capacity may weaken the implementation of formal QA policies and reduce their contribution to substantive quality improvement (Austin & Jones, 2024; Mensah, 2022; Serrano et al., 2025).

Top-down Policy Implementation Theory

Top-down Policy Implementation Theory provides a complementary perspective for explaining how nationally formulated QA policies and standards are translated into institutional practice. The approach emphasizes the role of clear policy objectives, rules, communication, resources, administrative capacity, monitoring, and coordination between policy-making authorities and implementing institutions. In the Afghan higher education context, the Ministry of Higher Education formulates national QA policies and standards, while universities are responsible for their institutional implementation. Therefore, gaps may emerge when policy directives are unclear, resources are limited, monitoring is weak, or coordination between ministerial authorities and universities is insufficient. This perspective helps explain why the existence of formal QA policies may not necessarily lead to effective implementation and quality improvement (Buzogany & Pülzl, 2024).

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory is a complementary perspective that emphasizes the role of formal laws, regulations, standards, procedures, and informal norms in shaping organizational behavior and performance (Bardakci et al., 2023; Shakir et al., 2026). In higher education, QA is structured through standards, accreditation, evaluation mechanisms, internal QA systems, and government oversight (Garcia & Jamias, 2023; Jami & Muharam, 2022). The theory suggests that formal QA structures are more effective when responsibilities, coordination, implementation, and accountability are clearly established. Where these conditions are weak, a gap may emerge between formal requirements and actual practice, potentially encouraging greater emphasis on documentation and compliance than substantive quality improvement (Ahmadi et al., 2025; Bardakci et al., 2023; Manning, 2024). Institutional coordination is therefore relevant to H4 because effective communication, monitoring, and coordination between policy authorities and universities may be associated with differences in perceived QA effectiveness.

Governance Failure

Governance Failure is a complementary analytical concept that explains situations in which government and institutional structures are unable to effectively perform functions such as regulation, coordination, monitoring, accountability, and decision-making (Ebrahimi et al., 2025; Manning, 2024). Motadi (2025) emphasizes the importance of coordination, accountability, and decision-making capacity for effective governance. In higher education, governance failure may occur when a gap exists between QA policy formulation and implementation, monitoring is weak, coordination is limited, and evaluation findings are not effectively used for institutional improvement (Azizi et al., 2026; Fahimi, 2023; Mensah, 2022). In this study, implementation and governance constraints are used to explain the potential gap between government capacity and perceived QA effectiveness. Where formal QA policies exist but implementation capacity is limited, a gap may emerge between policy and practice (Austin & Jones, 2024).

Accordingly, the analytical logic of this study can be presented as: Government capacity → Policy implementation → Institutional coordination → Perceived QA effectiveness

In contrast: Weak government capacity → Policy implementation constraints → Weak monitoring and coordination → Greater emphasis on formal compliance → Lower perceived QA effectiveness

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Development of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The concept of quality assurance in higher education has become a major topic of international educational debate since the last decades of the twentieth century (Welch & Aziz, 2022). Initially, quality was mainly associated with the concept of teaching, curriculum, academic standards, and control of educational services, but later its conceptual scope expanded to include aspects of accountability, transparency, institutional reform, continuous evaluation and learning outcomes (Zawak & Wahidi, 2026). In this sense, quality assurance is not just an assessment of the fulfillment of standards, but a continuous institutional process used to improve teaching, research, administration, and learning outcomes. QA is most effective when it is connected to internal evaluation, continuous improvement, institutional learning, and the creation of a quality culture, rather than being a mere instrument of external audit, accreditation, or administrative compliance (Sajid, 2026; Yunespour, 2023). From this perspective, perceived QA effectiveness may also be associated with the institutional and governance environment in which the system is implemented.

The role of the state in Quality Assurance (QA)

The role of the state is one of the main debates in the QA works. Wafa and Muhabat (2026) argue that the state can play a significant role in setting quality standards, establishing accountability, and monitoring the performance of higher education institutions. Conversely, Rahimi and Ayubi (2022) argue that too much direct state control can limit the institutional autonomy of universities and turn QA into a bureaucratic process. In contemporary education systems, the role of the state is largely defined as a regulator, standard-setter, and facilitator, while universities are given relative autonomy to manage internal quality (Rohmah & Choiruddin). Limited government capacity for QA implementation may create a gap between QA policy design and practical implementation. Hence, the role of the state should be analyzed not only from the perspective of “intervention” or “non-intervention”, but also in terms of the state’s organizational, administrative, financial, technical, and implementation capacity (Azizi et al., 2026; Stanikzai et al., 2025).

Institutional structures and Quality Assurance (QA)

The effectiveness of QA is related to the institutional environment in which they are implemented, in addition to formal regulations. Laws, policies, standards and procedures form the formal framework for QA, but institutional culture, professional norms, internal coordination and decision-making methods influence how this framework is implemented (Rahimi & Ayubi, 2022; Wafa & Muhabat, 2026). Zawak and Wahidi (2026) show that QA systems face problems when the focus of evaluation is on administrative compliance and documentary evidence rather than on actual quality. Stanikzai et al. (2025) also show that weak internal QA systems, limited data management capacity, and limited stakeholder participation in decision-making create obstacles to continuous quality improvement. Thus, the establishment of formal institutions is not enough for QA; effective institutional capacity and coordination are also necessary for these institutions to function.

Government capacity for QA implementation

Government capacity is essential to the effectiveness of QA because the existence of policies and laws alone does not ensure effective implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Sajid, 2025). Perceived QA effectiveness may therefore be associated with government capacity in areas such as human and financial resources, information management, regulation, monitoring, evaluation, and institutional coordination (Fahimi, 2023; Shakir et al., 2026). Jafari (2023)

argues that when QA focuses primarily on documentation and administrative compliance rather than learning outcomes, its perceived contribution to quality improvement may be reduced. Similarly, limited financial and administrative resources, weak management, and capacity constraints can undermine quality systems (Faizi, 2026). Research in Afghanistan also highlights challenges related to capacity, resources, and management in higher education (Ahmadi et al., 2025). Overall, the literature indicates that effective QA requires both appropriate standards and sufficient government and institutional capacity to implement them.

Policy Implementation Gap and Implementation and governance constraints

A key challenge for QA in weak governance and institutional environments is the gap between formal policies and their practical implementation. This occurs when QA policies and standards exist, but institutional capacity for implementation, monitoring, and improvement remains limited (Ebrahimi et al., 2025; Fahimi, 2023). Azizi et al. (2026) argue that such conditions may make QA more compliance-oriented, with universities emphasizing documentation and formal requirements rather than substantive quality improvement. Similarly, when evaluation findings are not effectively connected to policy, budgeting, management, and pedagogical reforms, the potential of QA to support institutional improvement is reduced (Faizi et al., 2026; Jami & Muharam, 2022). Thus, the policy implementation gap provides an important lens for understanding the relationship between government capacity and perceived QA outcomes.

Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Conflict-Affected and Fragile Countries

Higher education systems in conflict-affected and fragile countries face challenges including limited financial resources, shortages of professional staff, weak institutions, policy instability, inadequate infrastructure, and limited government regulatory capacity (Auzarmi, 2023; Jafari, 2023). Azizi et al. (2026) show that educational reforms in such contexts are more sustainable when adapted to local conditions and institutional capacities. Conversely, transferring foreign quality models without considering local capacities may widen the policy–implementation gap (Ahmadi et al., 2025; Kayen et al., 2025). Therefore, QA should be assessed in relation to both local governmental and institutional capacities and international standards.

Existing literature on higher education in Afghanistan has largely focused on access, funding, reconstruction, human resources, curriculum, and system development, while empirical evidence on the practical effectiveness of QA from a government-capacity perspective remains limited (Faizi, 2026; Imranullah et al., 2025; Jafari, 2023). Wafa and Muhabat (2026) further identify challenges in quality, capacity, administration, and system development. However, the relationship between government capacity, institutional coordination, and QA implementation remains understudied, particularly at the provincial level (Fahimi, 2023; Serrano et al., 2025). Three gaps are evident: limited attention to government capacity as a factor in perceived QA effectiveness, insufficient examination of the policy–practice gap in fragile contexts, and limited empirical evidence from Nangarhar. This study addresses these gaps by examining QA implementation through the lens of government capacity and policy implementation in higher education institutions in Nangarhar.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive-analytical, cross-sectional survey design to assess government-led quality assurance (QA) in higher education institutions in Nangarhar and examine the relationships among government capacity, institutional coordination, and perceived QA effectiveness. Data were collected through an online questionnaire during August 2025–April 2026.

Study Area, Participants, and Sampling

The study was conducted in eight private higher education institutions in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan: Alfalah, Al-Taqwa, Amir Ali Shir Nawai, Rokhan, Tabesh, Ariana, Spin Ghar,

and Khorasan universities. The target population comprised academic and administrative staff with relevant experience or direct involvement in teaching, administration, quality assurance, evaluation, or related university processes. A target sample of 240 employees was established through equal allocation of 30 employees from each of the eight participating institutions to include participants from all institutions. Purposive sampling was then used to select employees who met the study's eligibility criteria. The questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms. Of the 240 targeted participants, 149 provided complete and analyzable responses, yielding a 62.1% response rate. The final analytical sample was therefore $n = 149$.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed from previous research and the theoretical literature on QA, government capacity, institutional coordination, and government oversight. The instrument covered respondent characteristics, QA policies and standards, government oversight, institutional capacity, training, information systems, internal evaluation, coordination, perceived QA effectiveness, equity, inclusion, and compliance. For analysis, Likert-scale responses were coded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Where categorical variables were required, the categories were formed using predefined score ranges. For the three-level coordination analysis, scores were categorized as low (1.00–2.33), moderate (2.34–3.66), and high (3.67–5.00), based on the five-point scale.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Content validity was assessed through expert review by specialists in higher education, public policy, and quality assurance. Items considered insufficiently relevant were revised or removed. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with the overall reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.82$, indicating acceptable reliability for social science research. Because construct-specific reliability coefficients were not retained in the available study records, only the overall Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.82$) is reported here.

Data Analysis and χ^2 Assumptions

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used for descriptive analysis, while the chi-square (χ^2) test was used to examine associations between categorical variables at a 0.05 significance level. Degrees of freedom, expected cell counts, and Cramér's V were examined and reported for the χ^2 tests. Findings were interpreted using the study's State Capacity Theory, Top-down Policy Implementation perspective, and Institutional Theory. The hypotheses were tested based on the statistical significance of the corresponding associations, with $p < .05$ considered statistically significant. For the three hypothesis tests, the reported associations were evaluated using χ^2 (1), with Cramér's V used as the effect-size measure. The reported χ^2 tests yielded Cramér's V values of 0.252 for H1, 0.219 for H2, and 0.206 for H3, indicating relatively small to moderate associations. All expected cell counts met the minimum assumption for the χ^2 tests. Differences in perceived QA effectiveness across the three institutional coordination groups were examined using one-way ANOVA, with η^2 reported as the effect-size measure.

Ethical Considerations and AI Disclosure

Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. Responses were treated confidentially and used for research purposes only. AI tools were used for language editing and manuscript organization. The authors remained responsible for the research design, data analysis, interpretation, and final manuscript.

RESULTS

The results provide support for all three hypotheses examined in the study. H1 was supported, as human capacity was significantly associated with perceived QA effectiveness ($\chi^2 = 9.47$, $p = .003$). H2 was also supported, with a significant association between professional training

and QA outcomes ($\chi^2 = 7.12$, $p = .008$). Similarly, H3 was supported because financial support was significantly associated with perceived QA reforms ($\chi^2 = 6.35$, $p = .012$). Since all p-values were below the 0.05 significance level, the three null hypotheses were rejected.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 149)

Measure/Category	Description	Value / Observation
Sample Size	Total valid respondents	149 (100%)
Institution Type	Type of participating institution	Private Universities: 149 (100%)
Position	Professional position of respondents	Academic Staff: 91 (61.1%); Administrative Staff: 58 (38.9%)
Quality Assurance Experience	Years of experience in QA-related activities	Less than 5 years: 96 (64.4%); 5 years and above: 53 (35.6%)
Educational Level	Highest educational qualification	Bachelor's Degree: 116 (77.85%); Master's Degree: 21 (14.09%); Doctoral Degree: 12 (8.05%)
Total	All valid responses	149 (100%)

Table 1 shows that all 149 participants (100.0%) were from 8 private universities in Nangarhar. By job title, 91 (61.1%) were academic staff and 58 (38.9%) were administrative staff, and 64.4% of participants had less than five years of QA experience. This table summarizes the distribution of respondents across institutions and professional groups. The participants had relevant experience or direct involvement in university and quality assurance processes.

Table 2: Awareness and Perceptions of QA Policies (n = 149)

Measure/Category	Description	Value / Observation
Recognition of QA Importance	Participants' recognition of the importance of quality assurance	Agree: 78.5%; Neutral: 12.1%; Disagree: 9.4%; Mean = 4.02
Clarity of QA Policies	Perceived clarity of Ministry of Higher Education QA policies	Agree: 46.3%; Neutral: 28.9%; Disagree: 24.8%; Mean = 3.11
Trust in QA Effectiveness	Participants' perceived trust in the effectiveness of QA	Agree: 39.6%; Neutral: 27.5%; Disagree: 32.9%; Mean = 2.98

Table 2 shows that the perception of the importance of QA is the highest (Mean=4.02), with 78.5% of participants agreeing; however, the clarity of the ministry's QA policies is Mean=3.11, and trust in QA is Mean=2.98. These findings indicate relatively high recognition of the importance of QA alongside comparatively lower perceptions of policy clarity and trust in the existing system.

Table 3. Institutional Capacity for Quality Assurance (n = 149)

Measure/Category	Description	Value / Observation
Adequate Human Resources for QA	Participants' perception of whether sufficient human resources are available for QA	Yes: 32.2%; No: 67.8%
Professional Training for QA	Availability of professional training related to QA	Yes: 41.6%; No: 58.4%
Internal Quality Assessment System	Perceived availability of an internal quality assessment system	Yes: 45.0%; No: 55.0%
Information Management System	Perceived availability of an information management system for QA	Yes: 38.9%; No: 61.1%

Table 3 shows that only 32.2% of the participants confirmed the existence of sufficient human resources, while 67.8% denied it. Also, the "no" answers in the areas of professional training, internal evaluation, and information management are 58.4%, 55.0%, and 61.1%, respectively. These findings suggest perceived weaknesses in institutional and technical capacity relevant to QA implementation.

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing: Associations and Group Differences in Perceived QA Outcomes

Hypothesis	Relationship / Comparison	Test	Statistic	df	p	Effect Size
H1	Human capacity × perceived QA effectiveness	Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 9.47$	1	.003	Cramér's V = .252
H2	Professional training × perceived QA outcomes	Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 7.12$	1	.008	Cramér's V = .219
H3	Financial support × perceived QA reforms	Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 6.35$	1	.012	Cramér's V = .206
H4	Perceived institutional coordination × perceived QA effectiveness	One-way ANOVA	F = 58.93	2, 146	< .001	$\eta^2 = .447$

Table 4 shows significant associations between human capacity and perceived QA effectiveness ($\chi^2 (1) = 9.47$, $p = .003$, Cramér's V = .252), professional training and perceived QA outcomes ($\chi^2 (1) = 7.12$, $p = .008$, Cramér's V = .219), and financial support and perceived QA reforms ($\chi^2 (1) = 6.35$, $p = .012$, Cramér's V = .206). All analyses used 2×2 contingency tables, and expected cell counts were checked. These findings indicate associations rather than causal effects.

Table 5. Government Oversight and Institutional Coordination in Quality Assurance

Government Oversight and Coordination Indicators	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Mean
QA guidelines and standards are clearly communicated to higher education institutions	40.3	27.5	32.2	3.08
QA evaluation results are used in institutional and policy decision-making	35.6	28.2	36.2	2.96
Coordination between government authorities and higher education institutions is effective	38.9	26.8	34.3	3.01
There is consistency between formal QA standards and their implementation	37.6	29.5	32.9	3.04
Government provides adequate technical support for QA implementation	34.9	28.9	36.2	2.94

Table 5 shows that agreement levels across the five indicators ranged from 34.9% to 40.3%, while disagreement ranged from 32.2% to 36.2%. The results indicate mixed perceptions of government oversight and institutional coordination. The lowest mean was reported for government technical support (Mean = 2.94), followed by the use of QA evaluation results in institutional and policy decision-making (Mean = 2.96).

Table 6. Perceived Effectiveness of Quality Assurance on Educational Outcomes

Quality Assurance Outcome Indicators	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Mean
QA mechanisms have improved teaching quality	36.9	28.9	34.2	3.02
QA has contributed to improvement in research performance	36.9	30.2	32.9	2.91
QA has improved students' learning outcomes	37.6	30.9	31.5	2.88
QA has contributed to institutional improvement	38.3	29.5	32.2	3.06
QA has promoted continuous quality improvement	36.2	28.9	34.9	2.95

Table 6 shows that participants reported relatively low perceived effectiveness of QA in relation to teaching, research, and student learning outcomes, and the average scores on the relevant indicators are relatively low. The findings reflect respondents' perceptions of QA effectiveness in relation to teaching, research, learning outcomes, and institutional improvement. Overall, the findings suggest that respondents perceive existing QA mechanisms as having limited effectiveness in translating administrative evaluation into broader

institutional and educational improvement.

Table 7. *Institutional Coordination and perceived Quality Assurance Effectiveness*

Level of Institutional Coordination	n	QA Effectiveness Mean	SD
Low coordination	45	2.41	0.62
Moderate coordination	52	3.07	0.71
High coordination	52	3.89	0.68
Total	149		
One-way ANOVA: $F(2, 146) = 58.93, p < .001, \eta^2 = .447$			

Table 7 shows higher perceived QA effectiveness across the three levels of institutional coordination. The mean perceived QA effectiveness score was 2.41 (SD = 0.62) among respondents reporting low coordination, 3.07 (SD = 0.71) among those reporting moderate coordination, and 3.89 (SD = 0.68) among those reporting high coordination. A one-way analysis of variance indicated a statistically significant difference in perceived QA effectiveness across the three coordination groups, $F(2, 146) = 58.93, p < .001$, with a large effect size ($\eta^2 = .447$). These findings indicate that perceived QA effectiveness differs significantly across coordination levels, with higher coordination associated with higher perceived QA effectiveness.

Table 8: *Equity, Access, and Inclusion in Quality Assurance*

Equity, Access, and Inclusion Indicators	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Mean
QA standards adequately address equitable access to higher education	34.2	28.9	36.9	2.94
The needs of disadvantaged groups are considered in QA processes	29.5	30.2	40.3	2.82
Socioeconomic differences are reflected in QA standards	31.5	29.5	39.0	2.87
QA mechanisms adequately promote inclusion	33.6	28.2	38.2	2.91
Equity and inclusion are considered in institutional evaluation	30.9	29.5	39.6	2.86

Table 8 shows that indicators related to justice, equal access, and inclusiveness received relatively lower perceptions in the existing quality assurance system. These findings represent participants' perceptions of the extent to which equity and inclusion are reflected in QA processes.

Table 9: *Formal Compliance and the Implementation of Quality Assurance*

Symbolic Compliance Indicators	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Mean
QA processes place strong emphasis on documentation and reporting	68.5	17.4	14.1	3.82
Institutions focus on fulfilling formal QA requirements	64.4	19.5	16.1	3.74
QA evaluations are conducted mainly to meet official requirements	61.7	20.8	17.5	3.68
Evaluation findings are rarely translated into substantive institutional reforms	63.1	21.5	15.4	3.76
QA focuses more on compliance than continuous improvement	65.8	18.1	16.1	3.78

Table 9 shows that quality assurance is perceived to place greater emphasis on documentation,

reports, and meeting formal standards, while assessment results are perceived to be used to a lesser extent for improvement. The relatively high agreement percentages suggest that respondents perceive greater emphasis on formal compliance and documentation than on continuous improvement.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that perceived QA effectiveness in higher education institutions in Nangarhar is associated with the capacity and conditions under which formal perceived QA policies are implemented. Although participants reported high recognition of the importance of QA (Mean = 4.02), weaker perceptions were observed regarding policy clarity, human resources, training, financial support, information systems, and the practical use of evaluation results. These findings suggest that formal perceived QA policies alone may not ensure effective institutional implementation.

H1: Human Capacity and QA Effectiveness

H1 was supported, as the analysis showed a statistically significant association between human capacity and perceived QA effectiveness ($\chi^2(1) = 9.47$, $p = .003$, Cramér's $V = .252$). This finding supports the State Capacity Theory, which emphasizes adequate administrative, professional, organizational, and technical capacity for effective policy implementation. This finding is consistent with previous studies identifying human-resource and institutional-capacity constraints in Afghan higher education (Rahimi & Ayubi, 2022; Kayen et al., 2025). The present study extends this literature by providing quantitative evidence from Nangarhar that perceived human capacity is significantly associated with perceived QA effectiveness. However, because the study is cross-sectional, this association should not be interpreted as evidence that stronger human capacity causes higher perceived QA effectiveness.

H2: Professional Training and QA Outcomes

H2 was also supported, with a statistically significant association between professional training and perceived QA outcomes ($\chi^2(1) = 7.12$, $p = .008$, Cramér's $V = .219$). This finding is consistent with previous research emphasizing staff development and institutional capacity (Fahimi, 2023; Serrano et al., 2025). Training may strengthen understanding of QA standards and evaluation procedures; however, leadership, organizational culture, resources, and staff experience may also influence QA perceptions. Thus, the finding suggests that professional training is an important capacity-related condition for QA implementation, while the observed association should not be interpreted causally.

H3: Financial Support and QA Reforms

H3 was supported because financial support was significantly associated with perceived QA reforms ($\chi^2(1) = 6.35$, $p = .012$, Cramér's $V = .206$). This finding is consistent with evidence that financial and technical constraints can weaken QA implementation (Motadi, 2025; Austin & Jones, 2024). Adequate financial support may provide institutions with the resources needed for training, information systems, evaluation activities, and other QA-related reforms. Nevertheless, the cross-sectional design does not permit a causal conclusion that financial support directly produces perceived QA reforms.

Institutional Coordination and QA Effectiveness

Institutional coordination also supports the study's analytical framework. Perceived QA effectiveness differed significantly across the three levels of institutional coordination, with mean scores increasing from low to moderate and high coordination groups ($F(2, 146) = 58.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .447$). This pattern is consistent with the Top-down Policy Implementation perspective, which emphasizes communication, coordination, monitoring, and feedback between policy-making authorities and implementing institutions. It also aligns with Institutional Theory, which suggests that formal rules are more effective when responsibilities and coordination mechanisms are clear. However, because the study is cross-sectional, this

statistically significant difference should not be interpreted as evidence of a causal relationship between institutional coordination and perceived QA effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that formal policies, standards, and institutional structures for quality assurance in higher education exist in Nangarhar province, but their practical effectiveness faces significant limitations. The findings of the study indicate that awareness of the importance of quality assurance is relatively high, but weak human and institutional capacity, limited professional training, weak institutional coordination, and limited use of assessment results have led to QA remaining largely oriented towards formal compliance. From the perspective of State Capacity Theory, the findings indicate that the success of quality assurance is not only related to the existence of policy, but also to the capacity of the state and universities to implement it. From an Institutional Theory perspective, weak institutional coordination may limit the effective implementation of formal standards and reduce the capacity of institutions to translate formal QA requirements into substantive quality improvement. In conclusion, to strengthen Nangarhar's quality assurance, the focus should shift from formal evaluation to capacity building, professional training, institutional coordination, information sharing, and practical application of evaluation results. In this way, quality assurance can be transformed from a compliance-oriented system to an improvement-oriented mechanism. In academic terms, research shows that the effectiveness of quality assurance in weak and conflict-affected higher education systems depends more on government capacity, institutional coordination, and local conditions than on the existence of standards.

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