

Exploring Stakeholder Perceptions and Implementation Challenges of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) 2015 in Pakistan

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Abstract

Introduction: The Pakistan Qualification Framework (PQF) is a mechanism for classifying qualifications based on learning outcomes such as skills, competence, and knowledge. It is levels-based and outcomes-focused, encompassing quality assured qualifications in Pakistan.

Methodology: This study used qualitative approach to evaluate and analyze reports, policies and studies for the PQF's alignment with international standards, stakeholder engagement, and its impact on quality assurance and educational reform through comparative analysis and stakeholder surveys.

Results/Findings: Misalignment with international standards and limited stakeholder awareness were identified as key challenges. Improved stakeholder engagement and alignment practices were recommended.

Future Direction: Further research will explore international best practices for PQF alignment and strategies to enhance stakeholder involvement and awareness.

Keywords: *Pakistan Qualification Framework, learning outcomes, quality assurance, international standards, stakeholder engagement.*

Background of the Study

The Bologna Process (1999–2010) established a comprehensive framework to drive reforms in European higher education, which has since been adopted by around 100 nations to align their systems with globally accepted standards (Akmal, Shahid, & Ahmed, 2022). This framework encompasses all levels of education, including basic, secondary, technical, vocational, and tertiary education. In 2009, Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC) initiated the development of a Qualifications Framework for Higher Education. This initiative aimed to standardize and enhance the quality of higher education across all public and private institutions with HEC charters (Ahmed, Ahmad, & Sarwar, 2021).

According to Mehmood, Malik and Jumani (2021) the framework's implementation tools include the semester system, National Curriculum Review Committees, and policies for assessment and grading. These committees, comprising experts from various disciplines, ensure the curriculum's rigor and relevance. Additionally, the framework outlines procedures for student admission, retention, and graduation in undergraduate and graduate programs. An extensive list of graduate degree colleges and chartered universities is also part of the Register of National Qualifications Framework (Shrestha, 2022).

Established by ordinance in 2002, the HEC's key functions include improving and promoting higher education, research, and development in Pakistan. Since its inception, the HEC has made significant strides in these areas, contributing to the country's educational advancement (Huma, Baseer, & Mahboob, 2020). Through these efforts, the HEC aims to enhance the quality of education, foster research and innovation, and align Pakistan's higher education system with international standards. The adoption and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework are critical steps toward achieving these goals, ensuring that Pakistan's higher education system meets global benchmarks and supports the nation's socio-economic development (Mohammad, et al., 2024).

According to Ahmad, et al. (2024) in recent years, the HEC has also focused on increasing stakeholder awareness and engagement. By collaborating with academic institutions, governmental bodies, and industry partners, the HEC aims to create a more inclusive and effective education system. These collaborations help address implementation challenges and ensure that the framework's benefits are widely understood and utilized. Future research will continue to explore best practices for aligning the framework with international

standards and enhancing stakeholder involvement, ensuring that the system remains dynamic and responsive to the needs of students and the broader community (Rehan, et al., 2024).

Overall, the Pakistan Qualification Framework represents a significant effort to standardize and improve the country's higher education system (Imran & Akhtar, 2023). By adopting a structured and outcomes-focused approach, the framework aims to provide a clear and comprehensive classification of qualifications (Phulpoto, Oad, & Imran, 2024). This effort not only supports academic excellence and workforce readiness but also strengthens Pakistan's position in the global education landscape. As the HEC continues to refine and implement this framework, it remains committed to fostering an environment of quality education, research, and development that benefits all stakeholders (Oad, Zaidi, & Phulpoto, 2023). Here's a summary of its key functions and amendments:

- The Commission is tasked with formulating policies, evaluating institutional performance, preparing development plans for higher education, and advising the government on educational matters.
- It sets standards for institutions, evaluates faculty performance, advises on curriculum design, and facilitates training programs, workshops, and symposia.
- The HEC also oversees financial matters, including budget allocation, funding approval, and financial support for research and development projects.
- It collaborates with national and international organizations to enhance research, promote educational programs aligned with market needs, and establish linkages between institutions and industry.

Amendments

- The HEC's ordinance has been amended multiple times, with changes in the tenure of the Chairperson and members, as well as modifications to the appointment process of the Executive Director.
- The amendments aim to streamline the functioning of the Commission, ensure efficient utilization of resources, and enhance its role in promoting quality higher education and research in Pakistan.

Summary of Recent Amendment

The most recent amendments, made in 2021, include changes to the tenure of the Chairperson and members, as well as alterations in the appointment process of the Executive Director. These amendments aim to strengthen the HEC's governance structure, improve accountability, and ensure continuity in its leadership while aligning its operations with

contemporary educational needs and standards (Imran, Zaidi, & Khanzada, 2023). Overall, the HEC plays a vital role in shaping the higher education landscape in Pakistan, striving to enhance academic quality, research output, and institutional effectiveness to meet the evolving demands of society and the economy (Imran, Sultana, & Ahmed, 2023).

National Qualification Framework of Pakistan

During its thirty-first meeting on January 11, 2016, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan approved the "National Qualifications Framework of Pakistan" to be posted on the HEC website for stakeholders to comment on until June 30, 2016.

Considered a method for classifying qualifications according to learning outcomes, such as skill, competence, and knowledge, is the Pakistan Qualification Framework. It is results-driven and level-based. The Pakistan Qualifications Framework (PQF) is an all-inclusive list of all qualifications in Pakistan that are quality assured. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan's approved higher qualifications and institutions are fully disclosed in the Pakistan Qualification Framework (Hafeez, Iqbal, & Imran, 2021).

Problem Statement

Despite the potential benefits of the NQF, its successful implementation in Pakistan faces various challenges. These challenges may include resistance to change, inadequate institutional capacity, lack of awareness among stakeholders, and discrepancies between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities. Furthermore, differing stakeholder perceptions regarding the NQF's objectives, benefits, and implications may further complicate its implementation process.

Understanding stakeholder perceptions and identifying implementation challenges are crucial steps toward addressing barriers and ensuring the effective implementation of the NQF in Pakistan (Imran, et al., 2023). Therefore, this research aims to explore stakeholder perspectives and implementation challenges associated with the NQF in Pakistan, focusing specifically on its introduction in 2015.

There are many obstacles Pakistan must overcome to implement the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), especially when it comes to matching industrialized nations' norms and practices. The NQF faces obstacles that prevent it from being effectively integrated into international educational systems, despite its establishment to foster transparency, consistency, and quality assurance in qualifications.

The principal difficulty is misalignment with International Standards: Pakistan's NQF is not synchronized with globally accepted qualification frameworks, which makes it difficult for foreign countries to recognize Pakistani qualifications. Inconsistencies in credit schemes, educational objectives, and certification requirements impede the smooth international movement of professionals and learners. Quality Assurance and Accreditation: It is still difficult to guarantee the caliber of education and training providers and to accredit their curricula (Khan, Hussain & Ahmad, 2023). The credibility of institutions and programs is weakened by variations in their quality.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives guiding this study are as follows:

1. To investigate stakeholder perceptions regarding the significance of the NQF for educational reform and quality assurance in Pakistan.
2. To identify key challenges encountered during the implementation of the NQF in Pakistan.
3. To explore potential strategies for addressing implementation challenges and enhancing stakeholder engagement in the NQF.
4. To evaluate stakeholders' perceptions of the extent to which the NQF should align with global best practices in education, training, and workforce development.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the significance of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) for educational reform and quality assurance in Pakistan?
2. What are the key implementation challenges faced in its introduction since 2015?
3. Why are we falling behind on international education standards when our policies follow the same criteria?

Significance and Scope

This research study aimed to assess the understanding of implementing Pakistan's National Qualification Framework (NQF) among private and public sector university stakeholders in Karachi. Stakeholders are essential to the development and implementation of the NQF. These stakeholders include governmental agencies, educational institutions, employers, and learners themselves (Imran, Zaidi, & Rehan, 2024). They see several benefits

from its implementation, including bettering the standard and applicability of education, advancing the recognition of credentials on a national and worldwide level, and encouraging lifelong learning.

This research focuses on exploring stakeholder perceptions and implementation challenges of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in Pakistan, with a specific emphasis on its introduction in 2015. The study will involve stakeholders from various sectors, including government agencies, educational institutions, employers, professional bodies, and civil society organizations. The research will primarily be conducted through qualitative methods, including interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis (Imran, et al., 2023).

The complete implication of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) could be a significant development in education and training development and implementation require active participation from various stakeholders such as governmental agencies, educational institutions, employers, and learners themselves. The implementation of NQF can bring numerous benefits such as improving the standard and applicability of education, enhancing the recognition of credentials on both national and international levels, and fostering lifelong learning (Ahmed, Ahmed & Buriro, 2023).

This study finds obstacles to completely embrace the NQF, though. Increasing adherence to international norms and practices, providing sufficient infrastructure and resources for implementation, and filling capacity shortages are some of these problems.

Operational Definitions

National Qualifications Framework (NQF): A comprehensive framework for organizing and recognizing qualifications across different levels and sectors of education and training.

Credit: A uniformly recognized measure of time and effort expended to acquire information, skills, competencies and recognition a learner has completed prior course of learning corresponding to the qualification at a given level.

Competence: The demonstrated ability to acquire and apply knowledge, skills, competencies, and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and professional and personal development. As applied in the European Qualifications Framework, competence is described with reference to the responsibility and autonomy at the level of the qualification.

Stakeholders: Individuals or groups with a vested interest in the implementation and outcomes of the NQF, including government agencies, educational institutions, employers, professional bodies, and civil society organizations.

Implementation Challenges: Barriers or obstacles encountered during the process of implementing the NQF, which may include issues related to policy alignment, institutional capacity, stakeholder coordination, and resource constraints.

Bologna Process Adoption: The Bologna Process is an important process of harmonizing various systems of European higher education that has the objective to create a European Area of Higher Education and to promote the European system of higher education on a worldwide scale in order to increase its international competitiveness.

Conceptual Framework

A comprehensive organizational system known as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is used to classify qualifications according to predetermined standards such as learning outcomes, levels, and credit accumulation. It is an essential tool for encouraging lifelong learning, making sure credentials are transparent and comparable, and enabling educational mobility and advancement. NQFs include paths for skill recognition and certification, credit systems, quality assurance procedures, descriptors, qualification levels, and pathways for skill recognition and certification within their conceptual framework. (ILO 2015)

Objectives of the NQF

The NQF has been structured to:

- Help learners to make informed decisions about the qualification required
- Help the employers to assess what qualification a candidate has achieved
- Help in establishing the national standards of qualifications
- Provide a basis for comparison of qualifications at national as well as international level
- Help in international recognition of academic qualifications
- Facilitate the trans-national mobility of graduates and learners
- Be used as an instrument for qualitative reforms in education system
- Help promote the linkages between industry and education system (NQF 2015 HEC of Pakistan)

Key Elements of Curriculum Framework followed by NQF 2015

PQF Levels

Pakistan Qualification Framework has eight levels. Levels are based on the Generic nomenclature used for the qualification in the country. The table below shows the different

qualification types which are classified and are used as quality assured qualification in the country.

National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Pakistan: Achievable Standards, Student Learning Outcomes of Level 5* Associate degree Graduation 2 years

Here's a summary of the key points: Knowledge: • Theoretical & Conceptual • Basic Level Practical • Knowledge of Urdu and English • Reflective Thinking • Social Context Awareness	Skills: • Cognitive & Practical • Problem Solving • Independent Study • Teamwork • Supervisory Skills • Critical Evaluation • Lifelong Learning	Competencies: • Independent Work & Responsibility • Learning Competence • Communication & Social Skills • Field-Specific Competence • Adaptability & Transferability • Ethical Values
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2.5 Achievable Standards, Student Learning Outcomes of Level 6 Graduate 4 years

Knowledge: • Higher level of theoretical and practical knowledge • Updated information from textbooks and resources • Bilingual proficiency in Urdu and English • Logical and critical expression • Reflective thinking for problem-solving	Skills: • Advanced cognitive and practical skills • Data interpretation and problem-solving • Independent study and research • Teamwork and leadership Effective communication and persuasion • Critical evaluation of knowledge and skills	Competencies: • Ability to work independently and take responsibility • Continuous learning and adaptation • Effective communication and social interaction • Field-specific competence and expertise • Utilization of advanced tools and technology • Ethical and social responsibility • Commitment to academic integrity
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2.6 Achievable Standards, Student Learning Outcomes of Level 7 Master/MS/ MPhil 30 credits maximum 4 years

Theoretical and Conceptual Knowledge: • Advanced and deepened knowledge in the same or different field • Understanding of interdisciplinary interactions • Awareness of recent developments in the chosen field • Ability to conceive cognitive, creative, and constructive research skills	Cognitive and Practical Skills: • Utilization of theoretical and practical knowledge at a high proficiency level • Integration of information from various disciplines to formulate new knowledge • Application of research methods and tools to solve complex problems • Independent conduct of studies requiring field proficiency	Competences: • Ability to work independently and develop new strategic solutions • Demonstration of leadership in problem-solving contexts • Application of methods and tools of inquiry to advance useful knowledge • Ethical use of knowledge and fidelity in data gathering and reporting • Presentation of research activities to peers and scholars using various techniques • Communication of current developments within the field to both professional and non-professional groups • Investigation and improvement of social connections with a critical view • Proficiency in using foreign languages and advanced informatics and communication technology skills
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		• Audit of data gathering and interpretation stages considering cultural, scientific, and ethical values • Development of strategies, policies, and implementation plans related to the field and assessment within the frame of quality processes • Top of Form
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2.7 Achievable Standards, Student Learning Outcomes of Level 8 PhD 48 credits maximum 7 years Min 3 yrs

Knowledge:	Skills:	Competences:
• Development and deepening of advanced knowledge in the field with original thought and research • Conception of interdisciplinary interactions and generation of original solutions • Substantial advanced knowledge to develop original new knowledge through research • Evaluation and systematic use of new information within the field	• Acquisition of advanced-level skills in research methods • Demonstration of intellectual autonomy to add new knowledge to the field • Utilization of expert creative, critical, and technical skills to design and implement research projects • Development of new ideas and methods in the field through creative and critical thinking	• Contribution to the progression of the field by producing innovative ideas, skills, designs, or practices • Broadening the borders of knowledge in the field through original work or publishing scientific papers • Demonstration of leadership in contexts requiring innovative and interdisciplinary problem-solving • Collaboration with senior and junior scholars to broaden the field and defend original views

		• Effective communication and discussion orally, in written form, and visually with peers using a foreign language • Contribution to the transition of the community to an information society and its sustainability process • Demonstration of functional interaction and strategic decision-making processes in problem-solving • Contribution to the solution-finding process regarding social, scientific, cultural, and ethical problems in the field • Adherence to professional codes of academic and research integrity
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Pathways to Further Education: PhD Admission Requirement

To be eligible for a PhD program, applicants must have a minimum CGPA of 3.0 (out of 4.0 in the Semester System) or a First Division (in the Annual System) in their M.Phil./M.S/Equivalent degree. The program requires a minimum of 18 credit hours of coursework, followed by a dissertation evaluated by at least two PhD experts from technologically or academically advanced foreign countries, in addition to local doctoral committee members. The level 8 program covers various subject areas including Biological Sciences, Business Studies, Physical Sciences, Computer Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities, culminating in the award of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree.

The purpose of the Doctoral Degree is to qualify individuals who can apply a substantial body of knowledge to research, investigate, and develop new knowledge in their field of expertise. Graduates will possess a deep understanding of their field, contributing original knowledge, and mastering research principles and methods. They will have the cognitive skills to critically evaluate theories, undertake systematic investigations, and generate new knowledge. Communication skills are emphasized, enabling graduates to explain, critique, and present complex research effectively. Graduates will also be equipped with expert technical and creative skills applicable to their field, and the ability to design, implement, and communicate significant research.

PhD graduates will demonstrate the application of knowledge and skills with intellectual independence, initiative, creativity, and accountability. They will be capable of planning and executing original research and generating new knowledge, including in professional practice contexts. Pathways to further education include post-doctoral research, while employment pathways involve academic and professional research roles in their areas of specialization.

Implementation of NQFs Globally

NQF adoption has been noted in several nations, each with unique goals, contexts, and challenges. Case studies from nations such as Turkey, South Africa, Australia, and the United Kingdom demonstrate effective implementations and provide insightful guidance for those starting comparable projects. The aforementioned case studies highlight the critical role that political commitment, institutional capacity building, stakeholder involvement, and alignment with international standards play in the effective formation and development of National Quality Frameworks (Allais, Stephanie, 2010).

The key constituents of this 'new architecture' for a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) consist of qualifications frameworks, cycles, learning outcomes, credits, recognition, and lifelong learning (Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Framework, 2005). Compatibility, coherence, measurability, and transparency are supposed to be attained by combining these. Politicians and higher education officials around Europe find this appealing. It is significant that practically every European country, both inside and outside the EU, is participating in the Bologna game, as stated by Ravinet. She contends, "Policy may not necessarily be the same," but "national higher education policies that are anti-Bologna are no

longer possible" (Ravi 2008, p. 353). Furthermore, the Bologna process serves as a pathway for higher education. (European Journal of Education, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2010)

National Qualifications Frameworks - Scotland, Germany and Denmark

Scotland has been at the forefront of European and international developments with regard to elaborating a national qualifications framework for higher education (Cubie, 2007). The process started in relationship with the work of The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) which was established in 1997. The framework is a parallel framework with the rest of UK whilst also a framing of their national profile and standards (www.qaa.ac.uk/academic_infrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF/Scottishworkinggroup.pdf).

Scotland offers a greater diversity of degrees and includes more levels than the three Bologna cycles. Higher education ranges from level 7-12 but the learning provisions offered within the different levels are defined to fit in the three Bologna cycles (ibid, p. 13). According to the report, the Scottish FQHE follows a learning outcomes-based structure centered on a consistent qualifications nomenclature; defined levels of qualifications; qualification descriptors; and credits. 'Each component is used as a measure of learning outcome, whether that be in terms of description, level or volume' (ibid). The qualification descriptors are generic statements of the characteristic learning outcomes of the study. The framework mirrors a political and proactive strategy emphasizing higher education as a public responsibility and an integrated part of lifelong learning (Hussain, et al., 2023).

The European Commission's initiative, the creation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), to which all national qualifications frameworks must conform, broadens the European understanding of quality. The EQF conceptualizes education levels as a continuously evolving sequence of learning and competency acquisition, operating within the context of lifelong learning. Eight stages of education are established, and each level is described in three dimensions: knowledge, skills, and competencies. The six to eight levels of higher education qualifications are equivalent to the bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees. Since these descriptors cover academic and professional activity, it is feasible to separate admission to higher education. Barbera M. (2010)

Stakeholder Perspectives on NQF

The lifetime of NQFs involves a wide range of stakeholders, including government agencies, educational institutions, employers, trade unions, students, and civil society

organizations. A number of challenges, including quality assurance procedures, acknowledging prior learning, alignment with labor market demands, and consequences for educational fairness and social inclusion, have been brought to light by earlier research that examined stakeholders' views, interests, and concerns about NQFs. Making inclusive and successful NQF policies and practices requires a thorough understanding of these many viewpoints.

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm and Design

The research methodology utilized in this study is qualitative, which is acknowledged for its efficacy in investigating intricate phenomena like stakeholder views and implementation obstacles of Pakistan's National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Qualitative approaches yield rich and contextualized data for analysis by enabling a comprehensive knowledge of participants' viewpoints, experiences, and interactions.

Population and Sample

A purposive sampling technique is employed to select participants from each stakeholder group. Criteria for selection include individuals with direct involvement or expertise in NQF-related activities, such as policymakers who have been instrumental in the NQF's development, educational administrators responsible for its implementation, industry representatives affected by its outcomes, educators engaged in curriculum alignment, students navigating through the framework, and representatives from civil society organizations advocating for educational reform.

Research Instruments

Data collection instruments include semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Semi-structured interview guides and focus group discussion outlines are developed based on the research objectives and questions. These instruments cover topics such as stakeholders' perceptions of the NQF, challenges encountered during its implementation, alignment with international standards, and suggestions for improvement. Additionally, document analysis involves reviewing policy documents, reports, and official publications related to the NQF to complement the insights gained from interviews and focus groups.

Data Collection:

Data collection is conducted through face-to-face or virtual interviews and focus group discussions, depending on participants' preferences and logistical considerations. Interviews and focus group discussions are audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Document analysis is carried out by reviewing relevant policy documents, reports, and publications obtained from official sources.

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis is employed to analyse the qualitative data collected from interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. This iterative process involves coding the data, identifying patterns and themes, and interpreting the findings. The analysis is guided by the research objectives and questions, with themes emerging organically from the data. Triangulation of data sources enhances the credibility and validity of the findings by corroborating insights from multiple perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles and procedures are adhered to throughout the research process to ensure participant confidentiality, informed consent, and respect for autonomy. Participants are provided with comprehensive information about the study objectives, procedures, risks, and benefits before obtaining their consent to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained during data collection, analysis, and reporting to safeguard participants' privacy. Any potential conflicts of interest are disclosed, and ethical approval is obtained from relevant institutional review boards prior to commencing data collection.

Research Analysis

Participant Demographic

The study encompasses participants from diverse stakeholder groups, reflecting a broad spectrum of perspectives and experiences. This diversity includes government officials, policymakers, educational administrators, industry representatives, educators, students, and civil society organizations. By collecting demographic information such as age, gender, educational background, and professional experience, the study aims to contextualize the findings within the varied landscape of stakeholders involved in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

Exploring Stakeholder Perspectives: Thematic Analysis of Pakistan's National Qualifications Framework

Codes:

- Education's Role in National Development
- Bologna Process Adoption
- Transition Challenges
- Implementation Gaps
- Alignment with Global Standards
- Curriculum Obsolescence
- Financial Independence of Students
- Stakeholder Suggestions for Improvement

The findings unearth a multitude of stakeholder perceptions concerning the NQF, shedding light on its perceived roles and impacts within the educational landscape. Stakeholders generally acknowledge the NQF's potential to drive educational reform, enhance quality assurance mechanisms, and facilitate the recognition of skills and mobility within and across sectors. However, amidst these positive perceptions, stakeholders also articulate concerns and reservations.

One of the key position official, Dean Social Science and Education, Dr. Riaz Shaikh (SZABIST University) shared his views “Thank you Mansura for your selection of this topic because this topic is very much relevant to our national needs. Ultimately if we have a quality education that is good, then we can do it. We are going to promote our exports, our economy and everything. Ultimately it will help human resources to compete with the global community”.

Relevance of Education to National Needs: Dr. Riaz Shaikh, emphasize the crucial role of quality education in promoting exports, boosting the economy, and enhancing human resources to compete globally

- a) **Adoption of Bologna Process:** The Bologna Process, originating in Europe, serves as a model for improving the quality of higher education. Pakistan's adoption of this process aims to standardize and streamline education programs, ensuring uniformity and international alignment.
- b) **Transition Challenges:** Despite the benefits, the transition to the new educational framework faces challenges, including resistance, capacity limitations in colleges and universities, financial constraints, and faculty shortages.

- c) **Implementation Gaps:** Stakeholders highlight the need for additional measures to support effective implementation of the framework, including enhancing faculty qualifications, infrastructure, and capacity building
- d) **Alignment with Global Standards:** Concerns are raised about the disparity between Pakistan's education system and international standards, leading to deficiencies and the need for remedial courses when studying abroad
- e) **Obsolescence of Curriculum:** Outdated course content and reluctance to update curriculum hinder Pakistan's education system from competing globally. Stakeholders stress the importance of adopting modern teaching methods and incorporating technological advancements
- f) **Financial Independence of Students:** Encouraging students to become financially independent in pursuing education and research projects is suggested to reduce dependency on external funding.
- g) **Stakeholder Suggestions for Improvement:** Stakeholders propose strict enforcement of policies by the Higher Education Commission (HEC), capacity-building initiatives for faculty and infrastructure, regular curriculum updates, and collaboration with international universities to learn best practices.
- h) **Understanding of the NQF Introduction:** Stakeholders demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the NQF introduced in Pakistan in 2016. They acknowledge its purpose in aligning the Pakistani education system with international standards to facilitate educational mobility and recognition abroad.
- i) **Role and Significance of the NQF:** Stakeholders perceive the NQF as a crucial reform initiative aimed at standardizing education levels and qualifications in Pakistan. The NQF's role in ensuring parity with international education systems, particularly through the standardization of bachelor's and master's degrees to four years each, is recognized as significant for enhancing the employability and academic mobility of Pakistani students globally.
- j) **Implementation Challenges: Resistance to Change:** One of the prominent challenges identified is the resistance to change from stakeholders accustomed to the previous education system. Stakeholders, including educational institutions and students, faced difficulties adjusting to the transition from two-year bachelor's degrees to four-year programs mandated by the NQF.

- k) **Institutional Adaptation:** Educational institutions encountered challenges in adapting their curricula, infrastructure, and administrative processes to comply with the NQF's requirements. This includes redesigning course structures, revising academic calendars, and ensuring faculty preparedness for the extended duration of bachelor's programs
- l) **Equivalency and Recognition:** Despite the NQF's intent to align Pakistani qualifications with international standards, challenges persist in achieving full equivalency and recognition abroad. Stakeholders' express concerns about the credibility and acceptance of Pakistani degrees in foreign educational institutions and job markets, particularly in countries where the NQF is not widely understood or recognized.
- m) **Awareness and Communication:** Stakeholders highlight the importance of raising awareness and improving communication about the NQF's objectives, implications, and benefits. Lack of clarity and understanding among students, parents, and employers regarding the NQF's significance and implications contribute to implementation challenges, including misconceptions and resistance.
- n) **Resource Constraints:** Limited resources, both financial and infrastructural, pose significant barriers to the effective implementation of the NQF. Educational institutions face challenges in mobilizing resources to support the transition to four-year programs, including funding for faculty development, infrastructure upgrades, and curriculum development
- o) **Policy Alignment and Coordination:** Ensuring alignment between NQF policies and existing educational policies and practices remains a challenge. Stakeholders emphasize the importance of coordinated efforts among government agencies, educational institutions, and industry stakeholders to address policy inconsistencies and streamline implementation processes.

Discussion

The discussion section delves deeper into the findings presented in the previous chapter, providing a nuanced analysis and interpretation of the results. It offers insights into the implications of the findings, explores potential explanations for observed patterns, and considers the broader significance of the study within the context of educational policy and practice.

"There is one gap in this NQF. We also have diplomas... Those diplomas should also be made equivalent to some associate degree or two years bachelor's program so that those students can also be eligible to get the admission." Participant 1

Key themes and patterns emerging from the findings are critically examined, with particular attention to the interplay between stakeholder perceptions, implementation challenges, and the overarching goals of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The discussion also considers how contextual factors such as socio-economic dynamics, political environments, and cultural norms influence stakeholder attitudes and behaviors towards the NQF.

Moreover, the discussion section fosters dialogue around areas of contention and ambiguity, encouraging readers to critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of the study's methodology, data analysis techniques, and theoretical frameworks. By engaging in a reflective and constructive dialogue, the discussion section contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding the NQF and informs future research and policy initiatives in the field of education.

Recognition of Diplomas and Vocational Training

Participant 1 *highlights the gap in the NQF regarding the recognition of diplomas offered by vocational training centers. They advocate for making these diplomas equivalent to associate degrees or two-year bachelor's programs to ensure students are eligible for further education.*

Inclusion of Professional Certifications

The conversation also touches upon the importance of including professional certifications like ACCA, CEA, and CEMA in the NQF. Participant 2 *emphasizes that these certifications hold value in the job market and should be equated to degrees to facilitate students' pursuit of higher education.*

Equivalency and Exemptions:

There is a discussion about the concept of equivalency and exemptions in degree programs for individuals who have completed professional certifications like ACCA and CEMA. While exemptions are provided in some institutions, Participant 3:

“suggests establishing clear equivalencies to ensure these individuals receive appropriate recognition for their educational achievements.”

Opportunities for Further Education:

All participants highlighted that, the implementation of equivalencies is seen as a means to provide opportunities for students to pursue higher education, including master's and PhD programs. participant 4

“emphasizes that setting clear equivalencies would enable students to continue their education seamlessly, despite any previous challenges in completing certain papers or examinations.”

Impact on Career Advancement:

Participants imply that the inclusion of diplomas and professional certifications in the NQF would have a positive impact on students' career advancement prospects. Recognition of these qualifications at the educational level would open doors for individuals to access better job opportunities and salary packages.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in Pakistan is perceived as a crucial step towards aligning the country's education system with international standards and improving its quality. While stakeholders recognize the potential benefits of the NQF in enhancing educational mobility and recognition, they also acknowledge various challenges. These challenges include resistance to change, institutional adaptation, equivalency and recognition issues, awareness and communication gaps, resource constraints, and policy alignment. To overcome these challenges and ensure the successful implementation of the NQF, stakeholders emphasize the need for coordinated efforts, capacity-building initiatives, improved communication, and policy alignment. Despite the hurdles, the NQF represents a significant reform initiative with the potential to enhance the quality and competitiveness of Pakistan's education system on a global scale.

Recommendations for Future Research

Investigating Diploma Equivalencies and Recognition: More study should be done on how the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) recognizes diplomas provided by technical training facilities. In order to expedite students' eligibility for postsecondary education, this includes examining the viability and consequences of equating these diplomas to associate degrees or two-year bachelor's programs.

Professional Certifications: Including certifications like ACCA, CEA, and CEMA in the NQF

is something that further research projects should look into. To encourage students to pursue higher education, this entails evaluating the worth of these certifications in the labor market and investigating ways to convert them into degrees. Exemption and equivalence Policy Clarification: Professional certification holders such as ACCAs and CEMAs require clarification on the policies of exemption and equivalence.

Implications

To summarise, the research delves into multiple viewpoints about Pakistan's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) from a wide array of stakeholders, such as government officials, educators, industry representatives, and students. Stakeholders acknowledge that the NQF has the potential to improve mobility and drive educational reform, but they are also concerned about obstacles like institutional adaptation, change resistance, and problems with acceptance outside. The report makes several important recommendations, one of which is to equalize diplomas from vocational training centers to associate degrees or two-year bachelor's programs in order to close the recognition gap within the NQF. To support students' pursuit of further education, professional certificates such as ACCA, CEA, and CEMA must also be incorporated into the NQF.

Future Research Area

For the purpose of addressing the unique requirements and difficulties faced by Pakistan, a number of prospective future study topics pertaining to educational policy and certification frameworks should be investigated. Among these regions are a few of these:

Qualifications Framework Alignment with Industry Needs: Examining the degree to which Pakistan's frameworks for qualifications meet the changing demands of various industries and employment markets. In addition to identifying any gaps that require filling, this study may evaluate how well the skills and competences prioritized in educational programs match the needs of employers.

Efficiency of Quality Assurance Mechanisms: Analysing how well monitoring and accrediting programs, among other mechanisms, work to ensure that educational programs are relevant and of high quality in Pakistan's various institutions and locations.

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