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"Beyond Survival: Evolving Leaders and Quality Assurance Managers' Roles in the Post-Pandemic Higher Education Landscape"

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a major shift in higher education, prompting quick changes in quality assurance (QA) practices. This study examines how Pakistani higher education institutions responded to these issues by exploring the roles of academic leaders and quality managers. Using a qualitative case study method, our results show that leaders find it difficult to shift from crisis management to a more strategic focus on quality improvement. However, updates to quality assurance for teaching and learning are slow but necessary. The pandemic has provided an opportunity to begin redefining the roles of quality managers and academic leaders to meet future demands. Now, greater collaboration and compliance are needed to support evolving teaching and learning practices. This research offers insights into QA challenges and opportunities in higher education, informing policy development and implementation.

Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education transcended geographical boundaries, leaving an enduring imprint on institutions worldwide. By 2023, the exponential spread of the virus had led to over 757 million reported cases and 6.85 million fatalities globally (Coronavirus Dashboard, 2023). Within a few months, higher education institutions (HEIs) across 188 countries, including the Wuhan region, were profoundly affected (Toquero, 2020).

The effects of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were extensive, encompassing restrictions on teachers and students to their homes, reductions in government funding, delays in entrance examinations, and interruptions to international travel (Hou et al., 2022). For numerous institutions, the transition to emergency remote learning (Hodges et al., 2020) proved to be a formidable challenge, further exacerbated by the absence of pre-existing contingency plans (IESALC, 2020). Brown and Salmi (2020) emphasize the pressure exerted on HEIs during this period, which necessitated critical decisions concerning entrance examinations and student recruitment, both domestically and internationally. The swift adaptation to new pedagogical methods and learning formats displayed varied degrees of effectiveness across institutions, with student assessments often being postponed.

The pandemic's threats also significantly impacted Asian higher education (HE) and quality assurance practices (Hou et al., 2022). The abrupt switch from on-campus to online learning led to deviations from established standards and quality practices within HEIs (Tanis, 2020). The year 2020 presented formidable challenges to higher education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. China, the first nation to shutter its institutions and transition to online learning, faced considerable scepticism regarding the quality of internet-based education, particularly in Asia (with exceptions like Japan and Singapore) (Ramirez, 2020). However, the pandemic left China, and indeed all other countries, with little choice but to rapidly embrace technology-based higher education institutions (HEIs) (Ramirez, 2020).

Research examining the impact of COVID-19 on the higher education sector has illuminated several challenges associated with the rapid transition to online and blended learning modalities (Simamora et al., 2020; Agormedah et al., 2020). These challenges encompass concerns related to student health (Tria, 2020), deficiencies in training and technological skills (Abdullah, Husin, & Haider, 2020; Oducado, 2020), and technological barriers. Furthermore, these studies have investigated the potential of future blended learning frameworks (Lukarov & Schroeder, 2020). Nonetheless, the role of university leadership and management was crucial for the sustenance of academic activities within higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Kruse et al., 2020).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) issued quality assurance guidelines on March 13, 2020, subsequent to the government's directive to close Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) nationwide until April 5, 2020. Many public institutions lacked the requisite learning management systems and technological infrastructure to effectively implement a high-quality online learning environment. Consequently, all HEIs were mandated to prepare for online teaching and learning as an alternative to on-campus instruction, with the dual objectives of ensuring accessibility from any location and maintaining the quality of education. This necessitated extensive collaboration among senior management, administrative staff, and

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faculty members to ensure the comprehensive and timely delivery of education through digital and electronic platforms. The policies were published on the HEC website (HEC COVID-19 Guidelines, 2020). Throughout the pandemic period, HEC released approximately 8 to 10 guidelines aimed at providing detailed procedures and protocols for HEIs across Pakistan. Given that higher education institutions were relatively new to remote learning, a fundamental roadmap was essential to facilitate online education. A brief overview of the guidelines is provided in the appendix.

Quality education is described as a transformative process for students and society, involving the design, delivery, and content of educational programs. The role of academic leaders in decision-making is emphasized, with universities being seen as the academic faces that must play a key role in maintaining quality. The quality of teaching and learning depends on a multi-dimensional model that includes proficient teachers, skilled students, and market-oriented programs, highlighting the collaborative effort needed to achieve and sustain quality education in HEIs. leaders and managers have a pivotal role in ensuring the effective delivery of learning activities in higher education, especially during unforeseen events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the education landscape in 2020, leading to the integration of concepts like social distancing and remote learning into academic discussions. The shift to online learning opened opportunities for advancements in blended and hybrid education models. This created challenges for leaders and managers to incorporate hybrid learning in the post-pandemic phase. What are the future challenges? The paper presents a comparative analysis of two higher education institutions in Pakistan—one private and one public—highlighting changes in quality assurance practices during the COVID-19 pandemic as experienced by their leaders and managers. The study aims to address the following specific questions.

1. How have the roles of top management (Vice-Chancellor (VC), deans, and registrar), Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC), and Heads of Departments (HODs) evolved in response to the implementation of remote learning and other guidelines issued by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) during the pandemic?
2. What is the potential trajectory of remote/blended learning in shaping the development of a hybrid institution in the future?

The article commences with an introduction; the second section comprises a literature review and theoretical frameworks; the third section delineates the methods employed; the fourth section elaborates on the findings; the fifth section discusses the implications of these findings; and the final section provides the conclusion and recommendations.

Literature Review

Defining quality in an online learning environment remains a complex task (Esfijani, 2018). Various frameworks exist, including individual models, national standards, and commercial tools, to evaluate quality at different levels: macro (institutional), meso (course/program), and micro (student) (Shraim, 2020). Studies on the impact of COVID-19 on the higher education sector highlight several challenges linked to the rapid transition to online and blended learning. These include concerns about student health (Tria, 2020), insufficient training, skill gaps, and technological obstacles (Abdullah, Husin, & Haider, 2020; Oducado, 2020). Additionally,

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these studies have examined the potential of future blended learning models ((Lukarov & Schroeder, 2020)

Quality assurance (QA) mechanisms serve a vital function in enhancing the quality of processes and workflows within educational institutions. Academic staff, university leaders, and managers are expected to document and validate their innovative pedagogical approaches to align with the changing needs of target audiences and environments. Nonetheless, the rapid pace of change and the requirement for ongoing evidence generation are frequently perceived as challenges rather than opportunities by academics. Moreover, academics are aware of the implicit power dynamics and surveillance associated with audits, evaluations, and performance appraisals, which may lead them to perceive these assessments as counterproductive. Despite being a regular and influential component of the quality assurance process aimed at continuous improvement, academic assessments are often met with resistance (Anderson, 2006, 2008).

Anderson (2006) elucidated some unfavorable perspectives that academics maintain concerning student evaluations in quality assurance processes. For example, academics have expressed concerns that students may misuse their voice to unjustly criticize them, and that feedback from first-year students may not consistently be mature or constructive. Furthermore, academics might exhibit bias owing to prior negative feedback, as they endeavor to secure favorable student evaluations and uphold their reputation. As a result, opinions among academics regarding the implementation of student evaluations within quality assurance procedures vary. (Newton, 2000, 2002)

The notion of quality is central to scholarly endeavors and constitutes the foundational element of the quality assurance framework. Nonetheless, academic personnel frequently regard the quality assurance process as inconsequential and demonstrate reduced engagement, often perceiving it as an unwarranted obligation that may fail to produce the anticipated results (Watty, 2006). This aversion contributes to increased complexity within the university's management culture, occasionally leading to the perception of quality assurance as merely a superficial display or an artificial procedure (Anderson, 2006; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Newton, 2000).

Academics play a significant role as they are directly impacted by the rules and regulations changes aimed at maintaining the quality and delivery of services by the institution. While teaching staff are pivotal in introducing and implementing quality assurance strategies, non-teaching staff also have a crucial role in managing day-to-day administration activities to achieve the institution's goals (Cardoso et al., 2019). Hence, recognizing the importance of both groups in the quality assurance system is essential for the overall success of an institution

The role of quality managers in fostering a culture of quality assurance within universities is essential but often challenging. They are responsible for continuously developing and refining procedures, audits, and evaluations to ensure effective quality assurance systems. Quality managers work at the intersection of the university and regulatory agencies, and their self-view influences how they see the effectiveness of their audits and processes. The control over quality managers is considered external, as their decisions regarding quality assurance policies and procedures are shaped by the university's size, culture, and type, rather than their personal traits or skills. The ongoing nature of quality assurance processes means that when evaluations are part of the

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improvement process, it can affect academics' perceptions negatively, while simultaneously enhancing the actual implementation of quality assurance.

In this context, quality managers often transition into consultants rather than bureaucratic leaders. There is a growing emphasis on universities functioning as corporate entities, managed administratively, and serving as self-regulatory bodies. The perception of quality assurance by quality managers is influenced by internal factors such as the support of university management, external factors like the Bologna Process or international changes in quality assurance initiatives, and the effectiveness of quality assurance processes is seen to increase when linked with other higher education institutions. From the perspective of quality managers, quality assurance procedures are most effective when strategically supported by top-level management and when quality assurance departments of different higher education institutions are closely linked, becoming valuable parts of their respective institutes (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has instigated a significant transformation in teaching and learning modalities, thereby precipitating a crisis management scenario for higher education institutions (HEIs). This development has posed a substantial challenge for the leadership and management of HEIs to uphold social distancing protocols on campus and to establish mechanisms facilitating remote learning. Such changes directly influence internal quality assurance practices (IQA). Moreover, IQA is intrinsically aligned with the institution's teaching and learning environment, resources, and outcomes—facets that are equally impacted by social distancing and remote learning arrangements. The interaction between remote learning and social distancing has the potential to induce alterations in IQA procedures and activities related to accountability, continuous improvement, and enhancement. Consequently, this impact directly affects the roles of HEI leaders and managers, as their emerging responsibilities are closely associated with blended or hybrid learning models. Key variables are elucidated for the purpose of clarity.

- ◦ Remote Learning: Utilization of technology and the internet for distant education, frequently adopted during the pandemic (your definition).
- ◦ Social Distancing: Preservation of physical distance to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2020).
- ◦ Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) Practices: Institutional procedures for monitoring, reflecting on, and enhancing educational quality (Harvey & Green, 1993; Mishra, 2007; Westerheijden et al., 2007). These include:
- ◦ Quality of Teaching & Learning: The effectiveness in delivering knowledge and engaging students (including teacher proficiency, curriculum, assessments, etc.).
- ◦ Quality of Inputs: Essential prerequisites such as facilities, infrastructure, budget, and human resources.
- ◦ Quality of Outputs: Student knowledge, professional expertise, and performance metrics (including grades and dropout rates).
- ◦ Changes in IQA Practices: Variations in monitoring, reporting, and quality improvement processes due to

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remote or blended learning modalities.

- ◦ Blended Learning: An instructional approach combining on-campus and online education, delivered synchronously and asynchronously (News, 2020).
- ◦ Hybrid Learning: The utilization of diverse technologies and tools for knowledge transfer, including collaborations, flipped classrooms, and resource sharing.

Methods

The study is qualitative and follows a comparative case study design. The phenomenon is recent, and similar studies have not been conducted in higher education institutions in Pakistan. The research questions were predefined; however, they were refined after a few initial interviews. The study focuses on the experiences of leaders, managers, and HODs regarding the quality of learning and teaching during the pandemic. Since the study aims to understand these experiences, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate. This multiple case study compares public and private higher education institutions. The qualitative exploratory design was selected to gain in-depth insights from leaders, managers, quality assurance staff, and Heads of Departments in higher education institutions (HEIs). The research involved key stakeholders responsible for developing and implementing quality assurance practices within two HEIs in Lahore, Pakistan. These participants included:

- Top Management: Vice Chancellors, Deans, Registrars
- Quality Assurance Personnel: QEC Directors, Staff Members
- Academic Leaders: Heads of Departments (HODs)

Within the HOD category, purposive sampling further narrowed the selection based on academic disciplines:

- Business, Administration, and Management
- Applied Sciences
- Arts, Humanities, and Other Social Sciences

While prioritizing academic positions, the researcher ensured a balanced representation of female participants throughout the sample. The study took place within the campus offices and Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) of the two selected HEIs. These environments, both directly and indirectly, influence quality assurance policies and procedures because of their involvement in daily institutional operations and initiatives.

To gather views from both public and private sectors, two universities were selected.

- Case Study 1: UEP: A public university established in 2002, currently ranked internationally between 1201-1500. It participates in quality networks like APQN and PNQAHE. Its QEC, established in 2005 and categorized as III by HEC, manages various quality assurance functions.
- Case Study 2: UMTP: A private university founded in 2004, ranked 527th globally and 20th in Globethics.net ranking. It boasts 19 schools and institutes, offering over 150 programs and holding nine accreditations. Its AAQIC, established in category VI by HEC, oversees institutional quality and implements innovative initiatives like online class observation for blended learning assurance. Notably, UMTP ranks as the #1 private university by HEC in 2023 and maintains an impressive annual HEC-QAA performance score.

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Data Collection and Analysis:

This study employed semi-structured interviews featuring open-ended questions and prompts to collect data from principal stakeholders. Furthermore, a content analysis of pertinent HEC COVID-19 policy documents was undertaken. The interview protocol, aligned with research objectives and HEC policies, comprised 11 core questions customized to participant categories. Prompts were utilized judiciously and documented accordingly. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim into Word documents, serving as the primary data source. A qualitative content analysis methodology was adopted to derive insights. This approach involves a meticulous, word-by-word interpretation, accommodating diverse perspectives and contrasting findings. Throughout the process, participant privacy and anonymity were rigorously safeguarded. Transcriptions were reviewed multiple times to identify relevant statements. Data was organized in Word and Excel using four distinct columns: data points, codes, categories, and themes. Pseudonyms were employed to ensure participant anonymity in quotations. Additionally, relevant HEC documents from 2020 were analyzed and compared with the transcripts and emerging themes.

Validity Strategies:

Internal Validity: Triangulation of Participants: Data from diverse participants across leadership, departments, and disciplines (including all three departmental categories) with balanced gender representation.

Methodological Triangulation: Combined qualitative interview data with document analysis for richer interpretation.

External Validity: Transferability- explores the impact of COVID-19 policies across disciplines, allowing potential application to similar contexts.

Theoretical Coherence: Comparisons between case studies and existing literature contribute to external validity.

Ethical Considerations:

- Follows ethical principles (ownership, authenticity, credibility) outlined by Israel & Hay (2007).
- Recognized the sensitivity of collecting personal data (Punch, 2013) and prioritized ethical conduct throughout (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).
- Secured institutional and supervisory approval.
- Both universities operate under HEC standards.
- Obtained informed consent through respectful invitations via email, phone, and in-person meetings.
- Provided confidentiality assurances and anonymized participant data.
- Briefed institutional leaders and QEC managers on research goals and procedures before each interview.

Findings

Case Study 1: University of Education, Lahore

There is a major theme of performance of management related to question 1.

Performance of management

The Vice-Chancellor immediately decided to move operations online, effectively saving the academic calendar and serving as the main driving force behind the transition. He also dedicated eight hours to teacher training sessions. In conclusion, the Vice-Chancellor and deans played a prominent role in ensuring the management of quality activities by the COVID-19 guidelines for quality assurance. The registrar's office, on the other hand, was responsible for managing and ensuring compliance with academic and support activities, working online throughout the pandemic via Zoom and Google Meet. All syndicate, statutory, and selection board meetings were conducted online.

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The Higher Education Commission (HEC) functioned as a regulatory authority, formulating policies and guidelines, and requiring ongoing feedback. The Vice-Chancellor was deeply engaged in decision-making processes at the HEC level. Furthermore, the Vice-Chancellor's office and the registrar's office exercised autonomous decision-making during this period, with their responsibilities remaining largely consistent with pre-COVID-19 operations, save for their physical absence and the shift to remote work, which necessitated prompt responses amidst the challenging circumstances.

The Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) functions as a supporting department tasked with overseeing quality-related practices in accordance with established standards. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the routine operations of the QEC, necessitating a transition to digital communication methods such as emails, Zoom, and Google Meet. The department provided guidance to management staff and faculty in establishing a secure and blended learning environment, coordinated seminars, and actively engaged in academic committee meetings to guarantee the quality of education amid the pandemic. Furthermore, the QEC supervised online classes and conducted weekly evaluations to maintain teaching standards. A participant remarked, "They took our Google Classroom IDs and double checked the delivered lectures." (UE/D/Edu03)

They also suggested loans for faculty to purchase gadgets for online classes. Despite efforts to minimize the negative impact of remote learning, the vice chancellor acknowledged the compromise in the quality of online teaching. The vice chancellor's view was, *"There is a compromise for online teaching. You cannot expect that quality and that interactive teaching as you have in the face-to-face environment."* (UE/D/QEC01)

Overall, the QEC's role evolved to include monitoring the online landscape and making quick decisions to maintain the quality of education during the pandemic. The department head is responsible for overseeing the teaching faculty in their department. During the COVID-19 pandemic, department and faculty heads participated in academic committees and worked both from home and the office as needed. The dean of the education division highlighted the advanced role of their department, particularly in terms of familiarity with digital tools and technologies, which resulted in fewer complaints compared to other departments during the transition to remote learning. Each department was responsible for ensuring that faculty members received training for online instruction and that students had the necessary support and resources for online learning. Department heads also closely tracked student engagement and performance, offering additional support to those facing challenges during this period. Their role was crucial because they were the primary implementers, addressing both teacher and student concerns while serving as a liaison between faculty and management. Effectively gathering and representing feedback from both sides was a key responsibility for the department heads.

There are two main themes related to question 2: 1) Changes in teaching and learning with a future perspective; 2) Opportunities, threats, and the future of blended learning.

Teaching and learning changes with a future perspective

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes in teaching and learning practices, particularly due to the shift from on-campus education to online learning. This transition has had substantial effects on both teaching and learning. One notable

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change is the increased use of technology. Many teachers who previously used traditional teaching methods, such as whiteboards, have now transitioned to using PowerPoint presentations and other digital tools. The use of platforms like Zoom and Smart Classrooms has also become more common, allowing for remote connections between different campuses. While the pandemic may be over and on-campus education has resumed, some students in far-reaching areas continue to benefit from remote learning. This shift has led to the development of new lectures, with physical classes being held on campus and online classes being offered to students at distant campuses.

Furthermore, the availability of online resources, including e-libraries, video lectures on platforms such as YouTube, and learning management systems (LMS), has become more widespread. The pandemic has underscored the importance of these online tools and resources, resulting in increased attention from education stakeholders. The participant said, *"We are developing new lectures because here we will have physical classes, and the far campus will have an online class."* (UE/D/QEC01)

However, the transition to remote learning has presented several challenges, particularly in the field of applied sciences, where online laboratories and recorded lectures are insufficient substitutes for the practical experience gained through in-person laboratories. Consequently, there is a recognized need for supplementary laboratories and group sessions that adhere to social distancing protocols during campus reopenings.

The changes in the education system and quality practices have had both positive and negative impacts. While online learning has opened new avenues for academia, it has also led to concerns about students' dependency on technology and its potential impact on behaviors and relationships. Additionally, there is a conventional mindset among some teachers and students that does not fully align with online education. Registrar office shared, *"Online teaching is not the permanent solution. Students have become lethargic. Their library and writing habits are ruined because of their complete dependency on computers and other gadgets."* (UE/R/RO02) Another participant shared, *"Student-teacher relationship is damaged badly."* (UE/HOD/Maths04). The economics department chair said, *"The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of collaboration and coordination among different departments and stakeholders in responding to the crisis."* (UE/HOD/Eco08)

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted teaching and learning practices, increasing reliance on technology and online resources, and emphasizing the need for proactive measures to address the challenges and opportunities of this shift.

Opportunities, threats, and the future of blended learning

The transition to online platforms has created opportunities for international collaboration, as demonstrated by the participation of fifty speakers in a conference via Google Meet and Zoom. Nonetheless, it has also resulted in a shift in students' attitudes and has affected the teacher-student relationship. The economic downturn during the pandemic adversely impacted the psychological well-being of both teachers and students, leading to difficulties with isolation and the lack of in-person interaction within the online learning environment. Despite these obstacles, the adoption of new technologies and practices has served as a valuable learning experience for senior management and faculty members, who are increasingly integrating

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technological solutions and maintaining readiness for online instruction.

Looking ahead, the future of blended learning appears promising, provided that universities and concerned authorities address internet connectivity issues and work to develop a culture that supports online learning. Establishing a complete system based on standard operating procedures (SOPs) for remote and online teaching and learning is crucial. It's clear that online mode has become an integral part of teaching and learning, and the future is likely to involve blended learning, flipped learning, and hybrid institutions. Although blended learning has a bright future, we require a supporting scenario. The participant described:

> *We have designed 2-3 video conference rooms. We have made a complete audio-video mechanism. Teachers have started recording lectures for us. We have planned to go with the recorded lectures. And, in hot weather, not from today, but rather a year later, because we are doing this slowly. Classes will be online in hot weather.* (UE/D/Edu03)

Remote or blended learning is challenging to implement in degree programs. We might offer short online courses for our future team. Additionally, capable teachers can deliver online lectures to different remote campuses. Therefore, visiting faculty can serve as the online component of the teaching plan. A comprehensive picture of participants' responses can provide a clearer view of changes in quality assurance practices.

Case Study 2

Performance of top management

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the roles of top management (Vice-Chancellor (VC), deans, and registrar), the Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC), and the Chairperson of Department (COD). They played a crucial role and made efforts to maintain and monitor the quality of education during the shift to online learning. For example, QEC adapted by moving its operations online, using email, Zoom, and WhatsApp for official communication.

The registrar's office was responsible for managing and ensuring compliance with academic and support activities, working closely under the immediate supervision of the Vice-Chancellor's office. Despite being physically absent due to the pandemic, top management continued working remotely via Zoom meetings, with all statutory and selection board meetings held online. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan was described as a regulatory body that shared policies and guidelines, requiring ongoing feedback. Overall, the role of top management remained largely unchanged from before COVID-19, with the main difference being their physical absence, the shift to remote work, and their response to the pandemic's challenges.

The QEC department played a crucial role in guiding management staff and faculty through the implementation process of online education. The head of the department was actively involved in extensive discussions at top-level academic committee meetings, focusing on education and its quality during the pandemic. Surveys were conducted frequently to gauge the satisfaction levels of students, faculty, and staff regarding policies, the quality of education, COVID-19 preventive measures, and the conducive environment for teaching and learning on campus. The head of AAQIC participated in extensive discussions at top-level academic committee meetings regarding education and its quality during the COVID-19 pandemic. He shared, *"Surveys were conducted frequently to understand students' faculty's and staff's satisfaction level on the policies, quality of education, COVID preventive measures, and*

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environment conducive for teaching and learning at the campus." (UMT/D/AAQIC01)

The QEC also took on additional responsibilities, such as monitoring online classes and conducting weekly checks to ensure the quality of education. Despite the challenges, the QEC department made efforts to reduce the adverse effects of remote and online learning on teaching and learning quality. This required quick decisions and cooperation during that time. Overall, the role of the QEC department expanded to focus on overseeing the online learning environment and maintaining educational quality, showing adaptability and proactive steps to tackle the challenges of the pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of department and division heads, especially the chairpersons of departments (CODs), became vital in ensuring a smooth transition to remote learning. They were responsible for managing the teaching faculty and students within their departments. As members of academic committees, they worked from home and the office as needed, adapting to the situation. The IT department's familiarity with digital tools and technology helped them handle remote learning with fewer complaints compared to other departments. Each department was responsible for ensuring that faculty members received training to deliver online instruction, while also providing students with the necessary support and access to online resources for their learning activities.

CODs played a crucial role in monitoring students' engagement and performance, providing extra support to those who struggled during remote learning. They served as key facilitators, handling complaints and issues from both teachers and students, and acted as liaisons between the faculty and top management. Additionally, they were responsible for conveying feedback from both sides, ensuring that the concerns and perspectives of faculty and management were properly communicated and addressed.

Overall, the role of CODs was intensified during the pandemic, requiring them to be responsive, supportive, and effective communicators to ensure the success of remote learning and the well-being of both faculty and students. Finally, a participant said, "*Well, again faculty in general in private universities is open to new things. They have the mindset, they are receptive." (UMT/COD/Fin07)*

Teaching and learning changes with future perspective

There are positive effects and compromises in teaching and learning practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as its effects on the future of blended and hybrid learning. The opportunities and challenges, emerged during and after the pandemic, particularly about the attitudes of students, the impact on the teacher-student relationship, and the psychological effects on both teachers and students.

The shift to remote learning led to an increased reliance on technology, the relaxation of surveillance, and the exposure of potential problems with the online learning environment. Both faculty and students had to adapt to the new mode of education, and while there were initial challenges, they were addressed over time.

The utilization of online tools, technologies, and resources intensified during the pandemic, with particular emphasis on learning management systems, online lectures, and digital libraries. Academic personnel also acquired new pedagogical techniques to effectively manage students in both physical and virtual classrooms, thereby fostering a blended learning paradigm. Nonetheless, the transition to

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digital education introduced ethical considerations and posed challenges regarding student attitudes and engagement. The modifications in the educational framework and quality enhancement practices encompassed both advantageous and adverse facets; however, the prospect of integrated and hybrid learning models was deemed inevitable. As a consequence, the university initiated projects to develop future technologies that would facilitate this transition.

Opportunities, threats, and the future of blended learning

While a traditional mindset favored established teaching methods, higher education institutions recognized the need for standard operating procedures (SOPs) for remote and online learning. The theme highlights the importance of being proactive in adjusting to the gradual changes in the education system and acknowledges the benefits of blended and hybrid learning. After the pandemic, there are lasting changes in teaching and learning practices in higher education, emphasizing the need for ongoing adaptation and proactive measures to handle the evolving education landscape.

The introduction of new technologies and practices, as well as the adaptation of faculty and top management to these changes, are noted as positive developments. Many participants emphasized the importance of addressing internet issues and developing a supportive culture for blended learning, acknowledging that this process will take time. The integration of online modes into teaching and learning is seen as an essential part of the future, with a focus on blended learning, flipped learning, and hybrid institutions.

However, many participants recognize the challenges of implementing remote or blended learning in degree programs and the potential impact on online learning quality compared to traditional on-campus education. It highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of participant responses to better assess changes in quality assurance practices.

Discussion

HEC mandated quality maintenance in online lectures through Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) offices. Public universities implemented a system of weekly reports and random QEC visits. Private universities adopted a more comprehensive approach, with regular assessments by the Academic Affairs Quality Improvement Cell. Virtual classroom visits documented in weekly reports ensured strict quality control. Despite these efforts, the pandemic affected the overall quality of education. Vice Chancellors actively strategized at the HEC level, but decision-making processes lacked broader input. Public universities are focusing on preparing future educators for online and blended environments, emphasizing self-directed learning to adapt to this changing landscape. Private institutions, on the other hand, are integrating advanced technologies and adopting flipped learning techniques, demonstrating their commitment to innovative educational methods.

The public and private sectors differed in infrastructure, management culture, and economic class of students. Hence, they implemented COVID-19 higher education quality assurance policies in their way. The public sector university needed to be readier for online readiness after the lockdown. So, they took forty days to start with the online teaching and learning scenario formally. LMS (VULMS) with limited features was already there. On the other hand, the private university did this for a couple of days, and in a week, it was all online. LMS with full features was already there in the university.

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There were significant issues related to internet connectivity in public sector organizations, whereas the private sector addressed this scenario with paid packages and alternative solutions, resulting in no significant issues regarding internet connectivity in the private sector. Even then, poor internet connectivity needed appropriate management providing compensation for recordings of live lectures and downloadable learning material (Rehn et al., 2016).

Internet problems were the main focus of discussion worldwide in 2020 (Dill, et al. 2020; Marinoni & van't Land, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020). Free and paid technologies were used based on resources and needs. Online systems supported students, shared screens during remote sessions, and added content to live lectures (Han & Shin, 2016; Viberg & Grönlund, 2015).

Crisis management was the main focus during the first phase of the pandemic. Faster decision-making occurred without considering the evidence-based Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle, which is the foundation of IQA practices. Gradually, the focus shifted to quality management and improvement. Additionally, the fall of 2020 saw a return to checking and planning practices. The main catalyst for QA was the COVID-19 emergency. Therefore, the pandemic experiences helped in planning subsequent academic calendars (Cirlan & Loukkola, 2021).

Universities needed to be more autonomous as they followed the QAA COVID-19 guidelines in general, but tailored their approach precisely according to their specific needs and resource categories. More autonomy gives a sense of responsibility and aligns with the interests and skill sets of leaders and managers at every level in decision-making, resulting in better outcomes with a sense of belonging (Hagmaier & Abele, 2015). Along with autonomy, competitiveness, and relevance, the better delivery of education is also demanded in the changing scenario, as there is now a blend of online and physical modes (Flack, Walker, Bickerstaff, Earle, & Margetts, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020). Institutions have learned a great deal from the sudden pandemic situation and can perform even better in the future by being proactive rather than reactive (Dhawan, 2020).

It is evident from the discussion that a future of blended and hybrid learning is anticipated. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) also recognize the needs of the emerging, diversified student demographic, as well as evolving teaching methods and curricula (Bhagat & Kim, 2020). Both the public and private sectors are enhancing their infrastructure to address forthcoming challenges. like the pandemic. Therefore, institutions are investing in resources, online infrastructures, and facilitating conditions (Camilleri, 2021; Saeed, 2021)) Moreover, public and private collaborations are recommended to cope such situations effectively for the betterment of quality (Anichkin, 2018).

The importance of teachers and students as the main pillars in maintaining the quality of education is emphasized. Teachers are expected to have clarity in their content, extensive knowledge, and accurate information about their respective fields. At the same time, leaders and managers provide strict oversight and monitoring to ensure high standards. Similarly, students are expected to show a strong interest in the learning process, with the admission process viewed as a key factor in determining student engagement and success. Overall, there is a need for continuous readiness for unexpected situations and the integration of online methods into teaching and learning, while also being aware of the complexities

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and potential quality issues that come with this transition.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The shift to online teaching requires a complete mindset change, especially in regions like Asia, specifically Pakistan and Bangladesh, where there is no established culture of online education. In contrast, India had already been using distance-learning programs. The roles of leaders and managers changed to become more involved in discussions and finding solutions to handle the situation and manage remote or online learning. However, leaders and managers felt relaxed delivering lessons via the internet, from virtually anywhere on the planet. Managers and teachers focused on content delivery and examination procedures as much as possible and experienced the benefits and drawbacks of remote or blended learning. Bartkutė and Kraujutaitytė (2007) argued that quality education requires an integrated model that combines effective academic strategies, accountability, institutional autonomy, and efficiency. Leaders and managers can now make better decisions when reengineering processes for future crises.

Clear communication and understanding of the implementation hierarchy are vital for successfully applying quality policies in HEI. Involving all stakeholders, from HEC to VC, QEC, deans, chairpersons, and focal persons, ensures policies are effectively communicated and adhered to at every level. Monitoring quality through evaluations and reports is crucial for ongoing improvement and overall enhancement of the education offered.

Online and hybrid learning models have been more quickly adopted and integrated into the curricula of private universities. In contrast, public universities faced challenges in incorporating these models into their established teaching and learning practices. While the pandemic accelerated the development of innovative learning approaches, public institutions made slower progress compared to private institutions. Consequently, online and hybrid learning have not become the standard mode of instruction across all institutions. However, private universities have made significant progress in establishing these models as a new normal. The recommendations are as follows:

- Customized SOPs: Develop institution-specific standard operating procedures (SOPs) for blended or hybrid learning.
- Technology infrastructure: Invest in the latest technologies and software to create a quality-focused learning environment.
- Teacher training: Provide teachers with appropriate infrastructure and training in blended or hybrid teaching techniques.
- Leveraging pandemic experience: Offer short online degree programs to capitalize on the pandemic's impact on teaching and learning. This can serve as a stepping stone for institutions to strengthen their quality assurance systems for future educational scenarios gradually.

Limitations

This study recognizes several limitations that suggest the need for further investigation and improvement in future research on blended or hybrid learning scenarios.

- Geographical Scope: Expanding data collection beyond Lahore, Pakistan, to include various regional and national contexts would provide a broader perspective.
- Stakeholder Inclusion: Limiting the study to specific leadership roles excludes valuable insights from other stakeholders like teachers, staff, students, accreditation agencies, and regulatory bodies (e.g., HEC). Future research should consider including their perspectives for a more comprehensive understanding.

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Addressing these limitations would enrich both internal and external quality assurance literature, providing practical guidance for implementing blended/hybrid learning effectively.

Future Directions:

The following avenues present compelling opportunities for future research:

- Research Methods: Integrating quantitative and mixed-method approaches alongside qualitative methods could offer valuable quantification of challenges faced in blended/hybrid institutions.
- Quality Assurance Scope: Expanding the scope to encompass external quality assurance and the regulatory body (e.g., HEC) would provide a more holistic view.

By examining these limitations and future directions, researchers can make meaningful contributions to the progress of blended/hybrid learning research and practice.

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