Quality Assurance in Higher Education is one of the three pillars i.e. Access, Quality and Relevance upon which the whole structure of the Higher Education in Pakistan will be based. This fact has been highlighted in the Mid Term Development Framework document—the road map of the Higher Education Commission. Indeed, increasing access to Higher Education without enhancing its quality and relevance to the needs of the country cannot be expected to achieve the goal of a knowledge-based economy. The quality aspect has therefore, always dominated the decision making at the HEC and all of the major projects initiated by the HEC centre around this reality—may that be through faculty development, infrastructure development, curriculum development or may it be improvement of learning environment or governance issues in the institutions of Higher Learning.

The issue of quality in Higher Education is quite complex and needs clear comprehension for a proper understanding. Generally speaking, ‘Quality’ is a relative term which refers to the position of a particular outcome/output vis-a-vis predefined standards; in this case a set of prescribed standards in Higher Education. Although, to define standards in education is a difficult job because these are as much qualitative in nature as quantitative, but some working criteria could be prescribed that will ensure quality of graduates from our Institutions of Higher Learning.

The Quality Assurance program of the HEC essentially has three major components i.e. 1) development of criteria and standards for various quality parameters in Higher Education, 2) development of processes and capacity
building to ensure implementation of these criteria, and 3) develop a system for arrange regular internal and external monitoring of the Higher Education institutions in respect of the status of implementation of the quality criteria and quality control processes. The various steps taken by the HEC for the achievement of above objectives are as under. To oversee the Quality Assurance program of Higher Education in Pakistan, a Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) was constituted at the National level by HEC which comprises a number of eminent scholars, Vice Chancellors of public and private sector universities and policy makers.

The Committee is responsible for developing policy framework and various quality criteria for the Higher Education Sector. It acts as Advisory body to the Higher Education Commission for all aspects of quality in the higher education sector.

**Development of Quality Criteria**

The Quality Assurance Committee has already developed a set of Criteria for the award of M. Phil. & Ph.D. degrees, affiliation of Colleges / Institutes with the Universities, assessment (ranking) of universities / DAIs, and Guidelines for Self Assessment by the universities.

The criteria for the award of M.Phil/ Ph.D. have already been implemented in the Public Sector universities in the following manner.

1. For candidates who had submitted their Theses before 1st June, 2005, the old rules being practiced by the respective universities will be followed.
2. Theses submitted after 31st May, 2005 must be evaluated by two External Examiners from industrially advanced countries and the condition of publication of at least one research paper in the HEC recognized journals will be applicable.
3. For all new admissions into M.Phil and Ph.D. after 31st of May 2005, all the new rules for the award of M.Phil. /Ph.D. will be applicable.
The Commission has also approved new criteria of eligibility for the appointments of faculty members in universities, appointment of Meritorious Professors, and appointment of Professor Emeritus. A separate set of criteria has been approved for appointments of teachers in the disciplines of clinical and Medical Sciences, Engineering, Arts and Design (Studio practice), Law, and appointments under Tenure Track System.

Criteria have also been approved by the Commission for the approval of Journals of International Repute and the list of such journals is being enlarged steadily. According to these criteria, “a journal published regularly, having diverse editorial/advisory board, peer reviewed by at least two reviewers (including one international [i.e. from technologically advanced country]) and abstracted/indexed internationally” will have the approval of the HEC. A Committee and subcommittees have been constituted to develop criteria for approval of journals in disciplines of Social Sciences and, especially, the local languages.

A National Committee on Examinations System (NCES) was constituted to work out reforms in examinations systems being practiced in the Higher Education institutions and to improve the quality of the learning output. The Quality Assurance Committee has deliberated upon the recommendations of NCES which are now ready for presentation to the Commission for final approval. The QAC has also developed criteria for the assessment of relative standing of various universities/DAIs based upon the quality of faculty, availability of facilities, student intake and output, research output, and financial aspects of the universities. These criteria were approved by the Commission, and program-wise data collection for all the universities (private and public) is now in progress.

In future, the major emphasis will be on development of quality standards for various disciplines which will be carried out by the respective Accreditation Councils being constituted for the purpose as described later, while National Accreditation standards for an institutional accreditation will be developed by the
HEC.

HEC is moving forward on the roadmap of quality assurance by getting into network of quality in Higher Education across international boundaries. The Commission will become eligible to all kind of available facilitation and technical support under the umbrella of INQAAHE as a result of the membership which will make tremendous difference in developing and assuring the procedures and processes of quality assurance in higher education sector of the country in the global context. Moreover, the efforts of HEC made for quality assurance and enhancement in higher education will be recognized internationally through this quality network.

**Development of Processes and Capacity Building for Implementation of the Criteria:**

The approach taken by the HEC is that Quality Assurance is something which is primarily the responsibility of the respective institutions rather than to be imposed from outside. HEC’s role is to encourage and facilitate the process of Quality Assurance in universities for the implementation of various quality enhancement programs while the evaluation of implementation status for a particular degree program is to be undertaken by the respective Accreditation bodies. Nevertheless, the overall responsibility of ensuring quality of education in universities lies with the HEC. Quality Enhancement Strategy of the HEC and the guidelines for its implementation has been circulated for information sharing among all the public sector universities. The guidelines address the issues like Program mission, objectives and outcomes; Curriculum Design and Organization; Laboratories and Computing Facilities; Student Support and Advising; Process Control; Faculty; Institutional Facilities; and Institutional Support.

These quality assessments guidelines are to be implemented through the Departmental Committee, Faculty Committee and the Committee constituted for
the purpose at the University level. The result of the assessment is to be presented to the Vice-Chancellor and the Syndicate who may take appropriate actions for making improvements. These activities are to be coordinated by the Quality Enhancement Cell which will also liaison with the HEC for this purpose. The external Academic Audit is to be performed by the Accreditation Councils / other bodies through Peers who will be experts in the respective disciplines and will be trained to perform Academic Audit. The HEC is studying various systems being followed in different parts of the world for developing appropriate system of Academic Audits.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) set up under the umbrella of the HEC has already established Quality Enhancement Cells in ten major universities i.e. Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, National University of Science and Technology Rawalpindi, Agriculture University Faisalabad, University of Karachi, University of Engineering and Technology Lahore, Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences Jamshoro, University of Peshawar, University of Balouchistan, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Muzaffarabad, and University of the Punjab, in the first phase and is providing financial and technical assistance through regular training programs for the establishment of Quality Assurance processes in the universities. QECs will be established in twenty more universities in the next phase. Foreign training of QA staff in China and Australia was arranged for capacity building at HEC. For implementation of Quality Assurance at program level, some professional Councils such as PMDC, PEC, PVMC, Pharmacy Council, Architect and Town Planner Council, were already working in the country. Proper linkages with these Councils are being developed to have mutually agreed parameters for ensuring adherence to the approved standards. In areas where such Councils did not exist, new Accreditation Councils are being established under the umbrella of the HEC. National Computer Education Accreditation Council and National Agriculture
Education Accreditation Council have already been established while Councils for Business Management and Teacher's Education are at various stages of approval by the Commission. The other significant steps being taken for capacity building in this regard are as under:-

1. Draft guidelines for good practices in Accreditation Councils have been prepared and will be implemented after approval of the Commission in order to achieve the uniformity of standards and policies to be followed by all Accreditation Councils.

2. Self Assessment Manual has been published followed by training Workshops on the subject for introduction and implementation of self assessment system in the universities.

3. Development of a Toolkit for Quality Assurance in universities through QECs and National Standards for Institutional Accreditation is underway.

4. The webpage for Quality Assurance Division has been designed for updated information on the subject.

5. International linkages have been developed by qualifying for the membership of Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) and INQAAHE to get connected with international leaning resources on quality assurance.

**System of Internal and External Monitoring of Quality Assurance Programs:**

For ensuring high standards of education and their enhancement to make universities at par with a regular system of internal monitoring and evaluation of academic programs and institutions has been envisaged.
A set of guidelines "Self Assessment Manual" along with the requisite proforma for Faculty Course Review Report, Student Course Evaluation Questionnaire, Annual Programme. Monitoring Report, Student Programme Completion (Graduation) Survey/Questionnaire, Research Student Progress Review Form have been circulated among the Universities. The QEC through the University Learning & Teaching Committee will be responsible to collect, consolidate, analyze the relevant information and prepare reports for submission to the University authorities.

The Commission has also constituted special monitoring teams for specific purposes. For example, a Monitoring Team is monitoring the physical progress and utilization of funds by the Universities/DAIs for various projects awarded to universities by the HEC. Similarly, a Committee constituted by the HEC for the evaluation of M.Phil. / Ph.D. programs has already visited 25 universities and submitted its report to the Commission.

The above facts clearly indicate that a robust quality control program is being followed in the Public sector universities so that the public money being made available by the Government is spent with utmost care to achieve and maintain high standards of education in the Institutions of Higher Learning in Pakistan. The reforms will however, take some more time to show the true impact.

The private sector universities, while kept informed about the reforms in public sector Institutions, are expected to exercise their own quality control arrangements. However, the strict enforcement of minimum Cabinet Criteria for establishment of private institution of Higher Learning is being practiced by the HEC.