

Quality Assurance in Bangladesh's Higher Education: The Role of BAC in Bridging Equity Gaps, Skill Mismatches, and Socioeconomic Outcomes

1.Md Asif Hossain; 2.Md. Hasibul Haque; 3.Md. Shipon
1.Department of Japanese Studies, University of Dhaka
2.Department of English Jahangirnagar University
3.Department of Electronics and Electrical Engineering,
Daffodil International University

Abstract

The rapid expansion of Bangladesh's higher education sector presents a dual challenge: ensuring institutional quality while aligning graduate outcomes with the nation's ambitious "Vision 2041" development goals. This contemporary review critically examines the role of the Bangladesh Accreditation Council (BAC), established in 2017, as the central mechanism for quality assurance (QA). Synthesizing scholarly literature and policy documents, this article analyzes BAC's impact on three interconnected national priorities: mitigating educational equity gaps, resolving chronic graduate skill mismatches, and enhancing socioeconomic outcomes. The review establishes that the BAC framework, by promoting Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and institutional self-assessment, has provided a necessary pathway for systemic reform [1]. However, its effectiveness is significantly constrained by macro-level factors, including persistent gender disparity in STEM fields [2], high graduate unemployment [3], and the uneven capacity of institutions to meet accreditation standards [4]. The conclusion proposes that for BAC to realize its transformative potential, its mandate must be broadened beyond institutional compliance to include explicit policy integration with national economic planning and targeted interventions to address structural inequities.

Keywords: Bangladesh Accreditation Council, higher education, quality assurance, educational equity, skill mismatch, employability, socioeconomic development.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh's journey toward becoming a developed nation by 2041 is inextricably linked to the quality and relevance of its higher education system. The sector has witnessed exponential growth in student enrollment, leading to a complex landscape characterized by a diversity of public and private institutions [1]. This quantitative expansion, however, has often outpaced the development of robust quality control mechanisms, resulting in concerns over academic standards, graduate competencies, and institutional accountability [5]. As [6] noted even before the BAC's formation, a theoretical framework for quality was urgently needed to address systemic issues.

The establishment of the Bangladesh Accreditation Council (BAC) under the Accreditation Act of 2017 marked a pivotal shift toward institutionalizing a formal, external quality assurance (QA) framework. BAC is tasked with setting international-standard criteria, promoting Outcome-Based Education (OBE), and aligning the higher education system with the Bangladesh National Qualifications Framework (BNQF) [7]. The core philosophical underpinning of BAC's mandate is the belief that systemic quality

improvement will naturally translate into positive national development outcomes, a principle supported by global QA literature [8].

This review seeks to provide a comprehensive, contemporary analysis of this critical linkage by focusing on three areas where the impact of QA is most acutely felt: educational equity, the skill mismatch between the labor market and graduates [9], and the resulting socioeconomic outcomes. By synthesizing peer-reviewed research, this article aims to: (1) detail the structure and function of the BAC framework; (2) critically evaluate its effectiveness in addressing structural inequities and skills gaps; and (3) propose future directions for policy and research to maximize BAC's contribution to national development.

2. Thematic Review: Quality Assurance and National Challenges

The literature identifies accreditation as a key driver for institutional self-improvement and public trust, particularly in rapidly expanding higher education systems [1]. BAC's standards, which cover areas from governance and curriculum design to research and student support, are intended to be a holistic mechanism for quality enhancement [10].

2.1. Educational Equity and Access

Despite significant progress in primary and secondary education, educational equity remains a persistent challenge at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. Scholarly work highlights that access to quality higher education is highly stratified by gender, socioeconomic status, and geographical location [2], [11].

Gender Disparity in STEM: While overall female enrollment has increased, a stark gender gap persists in high-value, high-demand fields such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Research indicates that deeply ingrained societal norms, lack

of female role models, and inadequate institutional support contribute to a "leaky pipeline," where women are significantly underrepresented in STEM tertiary education and subsequent careers [2], [12]. BAC's QA criteria, while promoting non-discriminatory admissions, have yet to demonstrate a measurable impact on actively closing this disciplinary gender gap.

Socioeconomic and Geographic Gaps: Studies focusing on educational inequality point to the disproportionate concentration of high-quality, well-resourced institutions in urban centers, leaving rural and marginalized students with fewer options [13]. The cost of higher education and the digital divide, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, further limit equitable access, suggesting that institutional-level QA alone cannot overcome these structural barriers [14], [15].

2.2. Graduate Skill Mismatch and Employability

The issue of graduate skill mismatch is one of the most pressing concerns for Bangladesh's economy, contributing to a high rate of graduate unemployment [3]. This challenge is not new, with studies consistently highlighting the gap between employer expectations and graduate competencies [16].

- **The Nature of the Mismatch:** Research consistently shows that employers prioritize "soft skills" such as critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving which graduates often lack [17], [18]. The traditional, input-focused pedagogical approach prevalent in many HEIs fails to cultivate these essential competencies [19].
- **BAC and Outcome-Based Education (OBE):** The BAC framework strongly advocates for the adoption of OBE, which mandates that curricula be designed around defined learning outcomes relevant to industry needs. This shift is seen as a necessary condition for

improving employability [20]. However, the successful implementation of OBE requires substantial investment in faculty training, curriculum redesign, and continuous industry engagement, which many institutions, particularly those with low capacity, struggle to provide [21], [4].

- **Limited Integration with TVET:** A critical structural flaw is the limited formal linkage between the BAC's QA framework for higher education and the quality assurance of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). This separation prevents the creation of a seamless, market-responsive national qualifications system that could effectively address the diverse needs of the labor market [20], [22].

2.3. Socioeconomic Outcomes and National Development

The ultimate justification for establishing a national QA body is its expected contribution to broader socioeconomic outcomes, including economic growth, innovation, and global competitiveness [23].

- **Institutional Reputation and Global Mobility:** Accreditation by BAC is intended to enhance the international

recognition of Bangladeshi degrees, facilitating student and faculty mobility and promoting transnational education partnerships [1]. This improved reputation is crucial for attracting foreign investment and integrating the national HE sector into the global academic community [24].

- **Economic Impact and Innovation:** While direct longitudinal studies linking BAC accreditation to national economic indicators are still emerging, the literature suggests that accredited institutions are better positioned to foster a culture of research and entrepreneurship [17]. Conversely, the persistent reliance on imported skilled labor is a direct consequence of the domestic HE sector's failure to produce high-quality, relevant graduates a failure the BAC is tasked with reversing [25]. The limited institutional readiness for accreditation [26] and the slow pace of reform suggest that the full economic benefits of QA are yet to be realized [27].

3. Critical Analysis and Future Directions

3.1. Strengths, Limitations, and Controversies

Aspect	Strength	Limitation/Controversy
Institutional Impact	Catalyzed internal governance reform and established a culture of self-assessment [21].	Risk of a two-tiered system where only well-resourced, urban HEIs achieve accreditation, widening the equity gap [13].
Curriculum Relevance	Mandates the shift to Outcome-Based Education (OBE) to align training with industry needs [20].	Implementation challenges due to inadequate faculty capacity, lack of sustained industry engagement, and poor integration with TVET [4].
National Alignment	Aligns HE with the BNQF and promotes international recognition of qualifications [1].	BAC's institutional focus is insufficient to address macro-level structural issues like the digital divide and inadequate public funding [14].

The central controversy revolves around the scope of the BAC's influence. Can a quality assurance body, operating primarily at the institutional level, effectively address national-level socioeconomic and structural inequities? The evidence suggests that while BAC is a necessary condition for quality improvement, it is not a sufficient condition for equitable national development [28].

3.2. Future Directions and Research Agenda

To maximize BAC's impact, future efforts must focus on policy integration and targeted equity interventions:

1 Policy Integration and Funding: There is an urgent need for the government to substantially increase public funding for higher education, specifically targeting capacity building in rural and marginalized institutions to enable them to meet BAC standards [5]. Furthermore, BAC's mandate should be formally integrated with the national economic planning commission to ensure dynamic alignment with labor market demands.

2 Targeted Equity QA Metrics: Future iterations of the BAC framework should include explicit, measurable QA metrics for equity, such as mandatory targets for female representation in STEM programs and dedicated resources for students from low-income or rural backgrounds. This moves QA from passive compliance to active social engineering [2], [29].

3 Longitudinal Impact Studies: Future research must move beyond descriptive analysis of QA implementation to perform longitudinal studies that track the career trajectories, earnings, and entrepreneurial success of graduates from accredited versus non-accredited programs over a 5–10 year period, disaggregated by gender and region. Such data is essential

for validating the socioeconomic return on investment in the BAC framework [30].4

4. Conclusion

The Bangladesh Accreditation Council is a critical, modernizing force in the nation's higher education sector. It has successfully introduced a culture of quality, accountability, and outcome-orientation, which is foundational to achieving the goals of "Vision 2041." However, the review concludes that BAC's potential to effectively bridge the nation's equity gaps and skill mismatches is currently hampered by the structural disconnect between institutional QA and broader national policy. For BAC to evolve from a quality regulator to a true catalyst for equitable socioeconomic development, its efforts must be reinforced by substantial public investment, a unified national qualifications framework that integrates TVET, and a renewed commitment from policymakers to address the deep-seated structural inequities that lie outside the HEI's immediate control. Only through this concerted national effort can the quality assurance mechanism ensure that the benefits of a modern higher education system are realized by all segments of Bangladeshi society.

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