

# Quality Enhancement in Higher Education of Bangladesh: The Role of Academic Leadership

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**Abstract:** The rapid expansion of higher education in Bangladesh has brought both opportunities and challenges, particularly regarding the maintenance and enhancement of academic quality. Amidst growing concerns about teaching standards, research output, and institutional effectiveness, academic leadership has emerged as a key driver of quality enhancement. This study aims to examine the role of academic leadership in fostering quality assurance and institutional excellence in Bangladeshi higher education. Using a secondary data-based content analysis approach, relevant literature, policy documents, and institutional reports were systematically reviewed to identify core themes. The analysis highlights the critical influence of governance structures, leadership practices, policy alignment, and institutional culture in shaping academic quality outcomes. Effective academic leadership not only steers strategic decision-making but also cultivates an environment that encourages innovation, accountability, and continuous improvement. The findings underscore the necessity of strengthening leadership capacity, aligning institutional policies with national quality frameworks, and fostering participatory and transparent governance. The study concludes with implications for policy and practice, emphasizing that sustainable quality enhancement in higher education is contingent upon proactive, visionary, and context-sensitive academic leadership.

## **Introduction**

Higher education in Bangladesh has witnessed a very significant and massive growth over the past decades, with both public and private universities widening access for an expanding student population (New Age, 2022). This expansion reflects the increasing societal demand for tertiary and the need for a skilled workforce essential for national socio-economic development. However, this rapid increase in institutional numbers has raised concern about quality, accountability, and global competitiveness of higher education in the country ((The Financial Express, 2024). Despite greatest access to university education, gaps remain in teaching learning practices, research output, governance structure, and student outcomes, prompting stakeholders to call for more robust mechanism to ensure academic excellence and relevance (Bangladesh Accreditation Council, nod)

Quality enhancement in higher education extends beyond formal accreditation to continuous improvement in teaching -learning process, research productivity, institutional governance and graduate competencies (Bangladesh Accreditation Council, n.d.; Zheng & Hu, 2019). Accreditation bodies such as the Bangladesh Accreditation are part of this landscape, but ensuring quality requires holistic institutional change and a culture of continuous improvement (Bangladesh Accreditation Council, n.d.)

At the heart of this transformational agenda is academic leadership. Leaders such as vice chancellors, deans, department heads, and academic managers play a crucial role in shaping institutional visions, fostering a culture of quality, and aligning internal practices with national and global expectations (Zheng & Hu, 2019). Their strategic decision-making, governance practices, and capacity to cultivate a quality-focused organizational environment influence how universities respond to challenge and secure sustainable improvement.

The objective of this study is to examine how academic leadership contributes to quality enhancement in higher education institutions leadership, with particular emphasis on leadership roles, institutional practices, and alignment with overarching policy frameworks. This investigation seeks to highlight the strategic contributions of academic leaders toward strengthening quality assurance, governance, and institutional performance in the context of rapidly evolving higher education ecosystem.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the role of academic leadership in quality enhancement within higher education institutions in Bangladesh. Qualitative research particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomenon, such as leadership practices, institutional culture, and governance mechanisms, where in-depth understanding and contextual insights are required (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

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involved systematically identifying, coding, and categorizing themes related to governance, leadership roles, institutional practices, policy alignment, and culture. This approach enabled the identification of patterns and insights regarding how academic leadership contributes to the enhancement of teaching, learning, research, and overall institutional quality.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The study employed qualitative content analysis as the primary data analysis technique to systematically examine secondary data related to academic leadership and quality enhancement in higher education. Content analysis was used to identify, interpret, and organize recurring patterns and themes emerging from policy documents, institutional guidelines, scholarly literature, and reports published by national and international organizations.

The analysis followed a structured and iterative process. First, relevant documents were carefully reviewed to gain familiarity with their content. Second, meaningful units of text related to academic leadership, governance, quality assurance mechanisms, teaching–learning practices, research management, and institutional culture were identified and coded. Third, these codes were grouped into broader thematic categories to capture recurring and dominant themes reflecting the contribution of academic leadership to quality enhancement.

This thematic categorization enabled the synthesis of diverse perspectives and facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how leadership roles, institutional practices, and policy frameworks interact to influence quality outcomes in higher education institutions in Bangladesh. Content analysis thus provided a rigorous and systematic approach for generating insights grounded in existing evidence, ensuring analytical depth and coherence in addressing the study objectives.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite providing valuable insights, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research relies exclusively on secondary data sources, including policy documents, institutional guidelines, scholarly literature, and reports from national and international organizations. While secondary data enable broad analysis and contextual understanding, they may not fully capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual nuances of academic leaders and stakeholders within higher education institutions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Second, the absence of primary data means that the perspectives of key stakeholders such as vice chancellors, deans, department heads, faculty members, and students are not directly represented. As a result, the study may overlook institution-specific practices, informal leadership dynamics, and operational challenges that influence quality enhancement at the ground level (Bowen, 2009).

Additionally, content analysis of secondary sources is dependent on the availability, scope, and quality of existing documents, which may reflect institutional or policy-level priorities rather than critical or divergent viewpoints (Krippner, 2019). Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution and viewed as indicative rather than exhaustive. Future research incorporating primary data through interviews, surveys, or case studies could provide deeper and more nuanced insights into the role of academic leadership in quality enhancement within Bangladeshi higher education institutions.

### **Academic Leadership and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education**

Academic leadership plays a central role in shaping the quality and effectiveness of higher education institutions. In the context of universities, leadership extends beyond administrative control to include strategic vision, academic governance, and the cultivation of a quality-driven institutional culture. Two dominant leadership approaches discussed in higher education literature are managerial leadership and transformational leadership, each with distinct implications for quality enhancement.

Managerial leadership in higher education emphasizes efficiency, compliance, planning, and control, often focusing on administrative process, regulatory adherence, and performance monitoring (Bolden et al., 2012). This approach is particularly relevant in systems experiencing rapid expansion, such as Bangladesh, where ensuring accountability, standardization, and compliance with national quality assurance frameworks is critical. Managerial leadership supports quality enhancement by strengthening internal systems, implementing quality assurance mechanism, and aligning institutional operation with policy requirement (Middlehurst, 2013). However, an overemphasis on managerialism may limit academic autonomy and innovation if not balanced with participatory leadership practices.

In contrast, transformational leadership emphasizes vision, inspiration, collaboration, and cultural change. Transformational academic leaders motivate faculty and staff to transcend routine compliance and actively engage in improving

teaching, learning, and research practices (Bass & Riggio, 2026). In higher education, transformational leadership is closely associated with fostering a quality culture, encouraging reflective practice, and promoting continuous improvement rather than episodic evaluation (Zheng & Hu, 2019). Such leadership is particularly effective in aligning institutional mission with long-term quality goals and responding to global competitiveness challenges.

Academic leadership contributes to quality enhancement through several interrelated roles. In strategic planning, leaders articulate institutional vision, set quality-oriented goals, and allocate resources to support academic excellence. In academic governance, vice chancellors, deans, and department heads ensure transparent decision-making, faculty engagement, and accountability mechanisms that uphold academic standards. Furthermore, leadership is institutional in nurturing a quality culture, where quality assurance is viewed not merely as compliance but as a shared institutional responsibility embedded in everyday academic practices (European University Association, 2018)

Overall, effective quality enhancement in higher education requires a balanced integration of managerial and transformational leadership. While managerial leadership ensures structural stability and policy alignment, transformational leadership drives innovation, engagement, and sustainable improvement. In the Bangladeshi higher education context, strengthening academic leadership capacity across institutional levels is therefore essential for achieving meaningful and enduring quality enhancement.

### **National Quality Assurance Framework in Higher Education**

The National Quality Assurance Framework (NQAF) of Bangladesh provides structural and policy foundation for ensuring and enhancing quality in higher education institutions. Central to this framework is the role of the University Grants Commission (UGC), which acts as the apex regulatory body responsible for formulating policies, issuing guidelines, and overseeing quality assurance initiatives across public and private universities. Through its quality assurance initiatives, particularly under Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP), the UGC has promoted institutional accountability, standardization, and continuous improvement in academic practices (University Grants Commission, 2021; World Bank 2021).

At the institutional level, the establishment of Institutional Quality Assurance Cell (IQACs) has been a key mechanism for operationalizing quality assurance and enhancement practices. IQACs are responsible for implementing internal quality assurance processes, conducting self-assessment, facilitating external peer review, and promoting a culture of continuous quality improvement within universities (Bangladesh Accreditation Council, nod ). These cells serve as a bridge between national policy expectations and institutional practices, ensuring that quality assurance is embedded in routine academic and administrative activities rather than treated as a one-time compliance exercise.

Institutional -level quality enhancement practices under the NQAF focus strongly on curriculum development, teaching-learning process, assessment methods, and research engagement. Curriculum feedback, and alignment with national qualifications frameworks to ensure relevance, coherence, and employability of graduates (UGC, 2021) Regular curriculum review processes encourage academic departments to update course content in line with disciplinary advance and labor market demands.

Another critical component of the national quality assurance framework is faculty development. Universities are encouraging to implement structured faculty development programs, including pedagogical training, research capacity building, effectiveness, promotes innovative institutional practices, and strengthen research productivity, thereby directly contributing to quality enhancement (UNESCO, 2022). Academic leadership plays a crucial role in prioritizing faculty development, allocating resources, and fostering an institutional environment that values professional growth and reflective practices.

Overall, the national quality assurance frameworks in Bangladesh emphasizes a shift from external control to internal responsibility, where institutions, guided by academic leadership, actively engaged in sustaining and enhancing quality. The effectiveness of this framework depends not only on regulatory structures but also on leadership commitment, institutional ownership, and the integration of quality enhancement into everyday academic life.

### **Role of Academic Leadership in Quality Enhancement**

Academic leadership is a decisive factor in advancing quality enhancement in higher education institutions, particularly within system understanding rapid expansion and reform such as Bangladesh. Academic leaders including vice

chancellors, deans, department heads, and academic managers play a central role in translating national quality assurance policy into meaningful institutional strategies, strengthening teaching and learning practices, fostering research culture, and ensuring transparent and accountable governance.

### **Strategic Vision and Policy Implementation**

One of the primary responsibilities of academic leadership is to articulate a clear strategies vision that aligns institutional goals with national higher education policies and quality assurance frameworks. Academic leader acts as policy translators, adapting national directives issued bodies such as the UGC and Bangladesh Accreditation council into context-sensitive institutional strategies, action plans, and performance benchmarks (UGC, 2021; Middlehurst, 2013). Effective leadership ensures that quality enhancement is embedded in institutional planning, resource allocation, and monitoring system rather than treated as a compliance -driven activity.

### **Leadership in Teaching and Learning Quality**

Academic leaders play crucial role in promoting high-quality teaching and learning by encouraging learner-centered pedagogical approaches, outcome-based education, and continuous curriculum review. By setting academic standards, overseeing assessment systems, and ensuring integrity in examination and evaluation process, leaders safeguard academic credibility and student learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2011) Leader's commitment is also essential in supporting the adoption of innovative teaching methods, digital learning tools, and inclusive instructional practices that respond to diverse learner needs

### **Faculty Development and Research Culture**

Quality enhancement in higher education is closely linked to faculty competence and research productivity. Academic leadership contributes to this domain by establishing structured faculty development programs, mentoring early-career academics and implementing transparent performance, evaluation systems (UNESCO, 2022) Leaders also shape research culture by facilitating access to research funding recognizing scholarly outputs, and creating incentives for interdisciplinary and policy-relevant research. Such practices not only improve institutional capacity but also enhance academic motivation and professional growth (Bolden et al., 2012)

## **Governance, Transparency, and Accountability**

Effective academic leadership strengthens governance through transparent decision-making, accountability mechanisms, and participatory management structures. Ethical leadership promotes trust, fairness, and inclusiveness by engaging faculty, staff, and students in institutional decision-making processes (European University Association, 2018). Participatory governance enhances ownership of quality initiatives and fosters a shared responsibility for institutional performance and integrity.

## **Challenges Faced by Academic Leaders**

Despite their critical role, academic leaders in Bangladesh face several challenges in advancing quality enhancement. Political influence in university governance can undermine institutional autonomy and merit-based decision-making. Resources constraints, including limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and high student-teacher ratios, restrict the effective implementation of quality initiatives (World Bank, 2021). Additionally, resistance to change among faculty and staff may hinder the adoption of new pedagogical approaches, quality assurance practices, and performance -based evaluation systems. Addressing these challenges requires leadership capacity building, supportive policy environments, and sustained institutional commitment to quality-driven transformation.

## **Findings**

The study examined the role of academic leadership in quality enhancement in higher education institutions in Bangladesh through a qualitative content analysis of policy documents, institutional guidelines and scholarly literature. The findings reveal that academic leadership functions as a central connecting mechanism between national quality assurance frameworks, institutional practices and quality outcome in teaching, learning, research and governance.

The analysis indicates strong alignment between national and quality assurance initiatives and institutional expectations, particularly through the roles of the University Grants Commission (UGC), Bangladesh Accreditation Council, and Institutional Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs). Consistent with existing literature, effective academic leadership was found to be critical in translating policy mandates into institutional strategies and operational practices (Middlehurst, 2013; UGC, 2021). This supports earlier studies suggesting that leadership capacity determines whether quality assurance frameworks function as tools for genuine improvement or remain compliance-oriented exercises (Bolden et al., 2012)

The findings also corroborate prior research emphasizing the importance of leadership in fostering a quality culture rather than focusing solely on accreditation outcomes (European University Association, 2018; Zheng & Hu, 2019). Academic leaders who promote participatory governance, learner-centered pedagogy, and faculty development contribute more effectively to sustainable quality enhancement. This aligns with transformational leadership theories that stress vision-building, motivation, and institutional learning as drivers of quality improvement (Boss & Riggio, 2006)

However, this discussion also highlights contextual challenges unique to Bangladeshi higher education. Political influence in university governance, resource constraints, high student enrollment, and resistance to change complicate leadership effectiveness and limit the full realization of quality assurance objectives (World Bank, 2021). These challenges echo findings from prior studies that caution against transplanting global quality modes without adequate consideration of local institutional capacity and socio-political realities (UNESCO, 2022).

Overall, the synthesis of findings suggests that while policy frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms in Bangladesh are largely aligned with international standards, their effectiveness depends significantly on the agency, competence, and ethical commitment of academic leaders. Strengthening leadership development, ensuring institutional autonomy, and fostering inclusive governance structures are therefore essential for advancing quality enhancement in the Bangladeshi higher education context.

## **Conclusion**

This study underscores the pivotal role of academic leadership in enhancing the quality of higher education in Bangladesh. The findings demonstrate that academic leaders serve as key agents in translating national quality assurance policies into effective institutional practices, shaping strategic vision, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Through leadership in academic governance, teaching learning processes, faculty development, and research management, academic leaders significantly influence institutional performance and student outcomes. The study further highlights that quality enhancement extends beyond accreditation to encompass learner-centered pedagogy, ethical governance, research culture, and accountability mechanisms. However, the effectiveness of academic leadership is often constrained by contextual challenges such as political influence, resource limitations, and resistance to change. Strengthening leadership capacity, autonomy,

and ethical commitment is therefore essential for achieving sustainable quality improvement in Bangladeshi higher education institutions.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, systematic leadership development and capacity -building programs should be institutionalized to equip academic leaders with strategic, pedagogical, and governance competencies. Second, universities should promote participatory and transparent governance structure to enhance accountability, trust, and shared ownership of quality initiatives. Third, stronger alignment between national quality assurance frameworks and institutional practices is needed to ensure that quality enhancement is integrated into strategic planning and daily academic operations. Finally, policymakers should ensure adequate resource allocation and protect institutional autonomy to enable academic leaders to effectively implement quality -driven reforms. This measure will support sustainable quality enhancement and strengthen the global competitiveness of higher education in Bangladesh.

### **Future Research Directions**

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of academic leadership in quality enhancement in Bangladeshi higher education, it also opens several avenues for future research. First, empirical studies based on primary data are needed to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and practices of key stakeholders, including Vice chancellor, deans, department heads, faculty members, and students. Qualitative approach such as interviews, focus group discussion, and institutional case studies, as well as quantitative surveys, would offer deeper and more nuanced understanding of how leadership practices quality outcomes at the institutional and departmental levels.

Second, future research may adopt comparative approaches to examine academic leadership and quality enhancement across South-Asian higher education systems, such as those of India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan. Comparative studies would help identify common challenges, contextual differences, and institutional best practices, thereby enriching regional policy discourse and institutional reform strategies. Such cross-country analyses could contribute to developing context-sensitive leadership models that address both global quality standards and regional realities .Overall, future research grounded in empirical evidence and comparative perspectives will strengthen the understanding of academic leadership as a driver of sustainable quality enhancement in higher education

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