

Higher Education Policy in Bangladesh: A Philosophical and Practitioner's Perspective on Initiation, Formulation, and Implementation

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ABSTRACT : This paper examines how higher education policy in Bangladesh is initiated, formulated, and implemented, with particular attention to the contested narratives of "quality." Drawing on policy studies and the sociology of education, it highlights the political, socio-economic, and ideological forces that shape policy agendas and create persistent gaps. The analysis situates Bangladesh's policy processes within both global and domestic contexts, showing how international donor influence, market-oriented reforms, and global knowledge economy discourses intersect with local political ideologies and bureaucratic structures. While policy texts gesture toward decentralization, democracy, and modernization, their implementation exposes contradictions, exclusions, and limited reflexivity. The study argues that "quality" is treated as a constructed and politically mediated term, lacking clear operational frameworks for reform. By revealing how political interests, economic pressures, and institutional stagnation undermine sustainable change, the paper contributes to scholarship on higher education policy in Bangladesh by clarifying why reforms remain uneven and inequitable, and by pointing to the need for a more context-sensitive and inclusive approach to policy design.

Key words: Higher Education, Policy framework, Quality, Policy gap

INTRODUCTION

Education policy is never a neutral exercise; it is embedded in political and socio-economic struggles that reflect conflicting visions of nation building, development, and globalization. The higher education subsector is particularly steeped in ideological conflict while also serving as a conduit for economic development, rendering its policy processes multifaceted. In the case of Bangladesh, the discourse of "quality" in higher education, in the context of the massification of education, global knowledge economy, and domestic political shifts, has emerged as a defining issue of concern in the last two decades.

The initiation and formulation of policy, particularly in the education sector, has been framed as a product of vested interests, power struggles, and socio-economic ideologies (Parsons, 1995; Ball, 2008). In the case of Bangladesh, the move away from the centralized approach rooted in a colonial legacy toward more market-oriented and

decentralized policy structures reveals both domestic political reconfigurations as well as external influences from global economic needs, international donors, and global market demands. The government's National Education Policy of 2010 is often considered a watershed moment in the country's policy—and it is telling that the document situates "quality" in the context of technological development, knowledge economy, and global competitiveness (MoE, 2010; UNESCO, 2011).

Nonetheless, the processes of policy initiation, formulation, and the implementation still contain contradictions. While the discourse is conducted and controlled by intellectuals, bureaucrats, and political and social elites, there is minimal involvement from the wider stakeholders such as teachers, students, and civil society actors (Khatun et al., 2013). It also raises the most urgent questions of interest, whose interest is truly served by policy and does the rhetoric of "quality" truly internalized the system and structural change? In addition, the implementation challenges—characterized by fragmentation, weak institutional capacity, and political strife—add to the complexity of achieving the stated objectives.

As an educator in a university in Bangladesh, I have witnessed some of the policy contradictions in the class and institutional settings. There is, for example, a growing demand for teaching and curricula geared toward a global market and emphasizing employment, technology, and quantifiable results. Faculty and students, for their part, often grapple with a shortage of resources, little institutional freedom, and divergent views on the meaning of "quality education". These realities enrich the theoretical debates with lived experience, and demonstrate the distance that separates policy rhetoric and reality in higher education.

Against this context, this paper seeks to evaluate critically the higher education policy in Bangladesh concerning three interrelated phases: initiation, formulation, and implementation. The policy analytic framework is located within the Bangladesh socio-political context and the actual experiences of the educators, but the policy processes are placed within wider state power, discourse, and globalization, and their intersecting theoretical levels.

More specifically, the paper seeks to answer the following guiding questions:

Policy Initiation – What forces shaped policy initiation in Bangladesh?

Policy Formulation – How was "quality" framed in policy formulation?

Policy Implementation – What challenges emerged in implementation?

Answering these questions, the paper argues that the “quality” pursuit of higher education in Bangladesh is influenced predominantly by political symbolism, market-based donor-driven policy, and market-rational reforms rather than thoughtful design and genuine collaboration.

METHOD

The current study uses qualitative interpretive policy analysis with autoethnographic elements. It integrates policy discourse analysis alongside autoethnographic reflection. It reviews national policy documents such as the National Education Policy 2010 (MoE, 2010) and ministerial statements, donor reports, and even parliamentary records as political artifacts which contain competing interests and ideologies. The analysis draws upon key theoretical policy frameworks from policy studies and the sociology of education (Ball, 2008; Apple, 1982, 1989; Parsons, 1995) which place Bangladesh’s policy history within global and historical frameworks. In addition to the textual analysis, the paper draws on my professional experience as a university educator in Bangladesh to show how the “quality” of education discourse shapes and intertwines with institutional norms and the day-to-day teaching practices. Rather than serving as a substitute for empirical triangulation, this positionality functions as a lens that enriches the analysis by revealing the lived consequences of abstract policy agendas. While the study does not generalize beyond this interpretive scope, it contributes an insider perspective that illuminates the tensions between policy intentions and institutional practices—an angle often underrepresented in the literature. Such reflection alongside secondary data becomes a limitation since it relies on personal data lacking interviews or quantitative data. Here lies the limitation of generalization; in this case, the value comes from providing a critical, interpretive, and insider view on the processes of higher education policy in Bangladesh.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopts a critical–philosophical framework integrating Ball’s policy cycle theory (1994, 2008), Apple’s critical sociology of education (1982, 1986, 1989), and Parsons’ political systems theory (1995) Framework. Together, these perspectives provide complementary lenses for analyzing higher education policy in Bangladesh.

Ball’s policy cycle of initiation, formulation, and implementation provides a sequential structure for analysis on the policy of higher education in Bangladesh, how it is crafted, and how it is executed. Apple’s critical sociology exposes the ideological undercurrents of policy discourse, especially how “quality” is used based on global neoliberal class agendas instead of local educational needs. Parsons’ systems theory

situates these tensions in higher education within larger political and institutional contexts of competing state, donor, and institutional interests in policy formulation.

The integration of these theories is not empirical but philosophical in nature as it engages with policy assumptions to interrogate and reflect on the gap between “quality” education as a one-size-fits-all in the discourse and the actually experienced education in Bangladesh. Framed within these critical perspectives, the study argues for the need to understand policy not just as an instrument of governance, but as a form of political contestation and power with conflict and layered meanings.

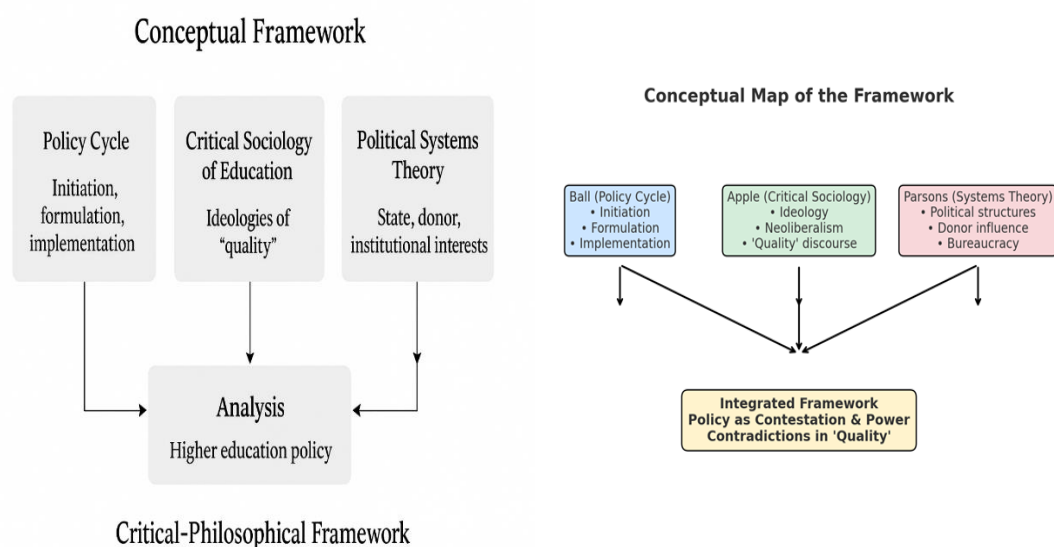


Figure 1 : Conceptual Framework

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Policy Process in Higher Education in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the higher education policy process results from the integration of politics, socio-economics, and institutional influence. Global considerations as well as local demands for quality education impact the ideas and interests of the ruling elites, bureaucrats, and intellectual actors. In this part, we discuss the history of Bangladesh’s higher education policies development, focusing on the issues of coordination and engagement, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and the implementation work within the ever-changing socio-political and economic landscape.

Policy Initiation

The vested interest interplay at initiation process arises out practitioners' political, religious and socioeconomic beliefs. Policy analysis requires an understanding of the

complexity of different forces of society by constructing maps and inter-connected links to develop our ideas (Parsons, 1995). Policy can be initiated from anywhere and may not be explicit until at the implement process (Hill, 2012). The quality in higher education policy in Bangladesh was initiated mainly when 'academicians, education thinkers, education researchers, were in consensus that the quality of higher education was in decline over the last two decades' (Aminuzzaman, 2011).

Since 1980s, a new political ideology, driven by Right and Left, aspires 'education must serve the economy' to raise standards and opportunities (Ball, 2008). Apple (1982) argues that conflict between property rights and person rights shape educational policies, which idealizes 'free market economy' by standardizing 'the needs of business' into 'the goals of the education system' (Apple, 1989:5). The current Government Awami league ruling party (Since 2009), which is idealized historically by leftist progressive forces but now it is becoming left right wing, and which is driven by socio-economic contexts, has initiated this policy (Jong, 2018) by shifting from colonial perspectives [centralization] to de-colonial ideologies [decentralization]. For example, as previous higher education policy which was formed in 1974 did not see the light of implementation, the government of Bangladesh (GoB) formulated a modern national education policy (Billah, 2009,2012) following the shifting process to ensure the quality education with respect to changing world (Saha and Biswas,2015). 'The Vision 2021' of GoB was inspired by the 'idealized free market economy' to establish 'an informed, knowledge based, technology oriented learning system' (UNESCO, 2011:2) 'to innovate new areas of knowledge through cultivation, research and creativity' for Bangladesh (MoE, 2010:23).

Archer (1979:1-3) argues that generally education is all 'about what people have wanted of it and have been able to do it'. Seemingly, it was the ruling Awami League's intellectual actors who were the decision makers in initiation and formulation stages of policy making process, complying with increased demand of international donors at implementation (Podder, 2015). Thus, national 'policy entrepreneurs' (Levin, 1998) want to be seen 'in control', or at least doing something such as managing the economy, solving international conflicts as they would claim (Hill, 2012).

National governments see education as a vehicle of national development even if they are unattainable (Denham, 1996:9). Since higher education has shifted from elite to mass (Green, 1997), enhancing quality has become a must. Competitiveness has become a middle class educational goal and is rather an 'economic commodity' 'from being a public good' (Ball, 2008:126), which turns into a national educational drive (Taylor et al., 1997:77). Therefore, policy initiators proposed investment into a range of

educational programs to support quality higher education in the policy document (MoE, 2010).

Though globalization demands 'technological developments and knowledge production to national economies in order to be competitive' (Olssen et al., 2004:10), the negative impact of it in higher education witnesses expansion of unplanned education institutions that lacking in quality but relying on students based income, and focusing on easily marketable courses of compromised standard (Olssen et al., 2004). The higher education policy presents areas of criticism of the validity and applicability of quality tertiary institutions in Bangladesh (Choudhury, 2015). Marginson and Considine (2000) point that privatisation of higher education could lead to performance and accountability assessments and making only positive statements (Olssen et al., 2004; Olssen & Peters, 2005). This 'quality' may be dumped only in the initiation process as the policy document synthesizes that a [government monitoring] system should essentially monitor the higher academic institutions to ensure the standard of education (MoE, 2010:24).

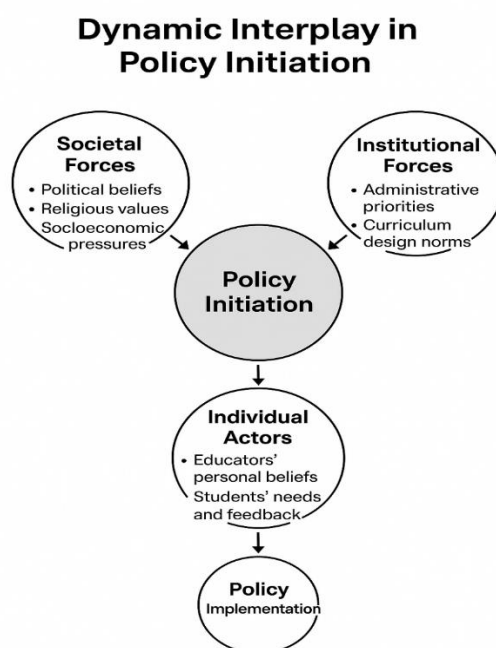


Figure 2 : Dynamic Interplay in Policy Initiation

Policy formulation

In policy making process 'guiding principles are formulated' with its aims while dominant language used in discourses is examined to legitimate the policy (Ball and Stevenson, 2006:13-14). Hence, Torres (1989:83) suggests theory of power should be integrated with a theory of the state to investigate the role of bureaucrats to situate the policy making context. The higher education policy planners in Bangladesh are national intellectuals, local political actors and bureaucrats (MoE, 2010) whom Hughes & Tight (1995) referred to as 'stakeholders', represent powerful myths for projecting futuristic visions which determine the education policy and practice principles. To improve the quality, the formulation stage of the policy addresses the policy objectives (MoE, 2010) which Knoepfel et al. (2007) refers to a series of complex policy layers.

At the formulation phase, policies are mostly generalised text and all possible outcomes are not covered. There will be 'contradictory' and 'problematic' visions with a tendency to struggle and compromise (Bowe et al., 1992: 21.) This layered complexity, like many areas of state activity, has become the dominant dynamic in education (Ball, 2008). The complexity is perceived as the policy was endorsed in the parliament without 'any discussion in the relevant Parliamentary Committees' (Ahmed, 2013). This led the clashes between country's secular cultural heritages with the Islamic values upheld by its majority Muslim population, as its cognitive domain has been touched by the rise of conservative nationalistic feelings of the Islamic world. Thus, Ball and Stevenson (2006) state by crystallizing the opinions, leaders emerged as 'an autonomous statutory and permanent National Education Commission' to prepare recommendations for revision and amendments in the Higher Education Policy as and when necessary (MoE, 2010:64).

As policies are 'modes for the expression of human meaning' (Yanow, 2003:229), discourse analysis of policy content suggest to dig the code out the conditions the policy is in (Dryzek, 2008:5). This condition is mainly dependent on 'educational administration' and 'its management' to ensure quality education which the policy content recommends for 'successful implementation of the policy and qualitative excellence of the education system' (MoE, 2010: 64).

Our policy is altered, revised several times as it 'engages a problem which tries out in its altered form for many times' (Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963:73) by 'taking into account all laws, regulations and policies' to 'formulate a newly coordinated Education law and to ensure its proper implementation' (MoE, 2010:64). Capital mobility and deregulated global market society can also affect the policy which can be

a concern of state's economic strategy (Watson, 2004). This pressure is felt when expansion of corporate business is giving great impetus in the business management education, both nationally and internationally because Bangladesh is going through a booming economic development phase having one of the highest GDP growth rates in the world. All these matters have immediately impacted the policy formulation as the policy aspires effectively to 'introduce students to the knowledge of the modern and fast advancing world' to build up progressive citizens (MoE, 2010:3).

Moreover, the education system is currently undergoing reforms in order to meet the current and future needs and challenges of the socio-economic development of the country as well as the imperatives of the global knowledge economy (MoE, 2010). Every year need for new discipline of studies are being felt which also prompts the policy formulation.

Policy making includes 'policy systems' comprised of 'Policy institutions, Political economy, Policy culture and Policy actors' Considine's (1994), which are employed in our policy formulation stage when local policy actors ask for accreditation of our universities [policy institutions] which will be certified by relevant local and international boards to examine the capacity to deliver quality education to improve our economy (MoE, 2010). Dale (1989, 1999, 2005) posits that the state is responsible to address the problems that derived from its connection to capitalism, and this layered complexity is found in many areas of state action which is dominant in education policy (Ball, 1994). The complexity is seen in our policy document when it doubts the role of educational administration with 'the realization of transparency, accountability and dynamism in the educational institutions' to improve quality education (MoE, 2010:64). Thus, the political economy of accessing global job markets and corporate culture have affected the recent education policy formulation. On the other hand the characteristic indecisiveness of the policy actors creates a tiringly procrastination in the implementation phase.

To maintain quality, 'policy formation and operational activities must be clearly separated' because, 'while neoliberalism values efficiency, effectiveness and control, it devalues interpersonal trust' so institutions must involve in 'objective setting', 'planning', 'reviewing', 'internal monitoring' and 'external reporting' (Olssen et al., 2004:191-192). Thus, the national policy document envisions that an independent powerful National Education Commission will be formed for reporting and monitoring steps (MoE, 2010), which shows that the state is in power in formulation process.

Bowe et al. (1992:15) states that 'policy concepts' are driven by the discourses and claims 'through the mass media' either they support or challenge to influence the nation. For example, in Bangladesh the policy documents were not scrutinized in the

parliament by the opposition despite the government intention because of the absence of opposition in parliament; instead it was put on the website for the examination of 'educationists, guardians, students and all stakeholders of education' and their opinions (Billah, 2009).

When policy makers say improving quality, they do not define what they mean by quality and how they will be measuring. In Bangladesh, a policy guideline is yet to be formulated to evaluate and assess the quality (MoE, 2010) which can be the situations what Brenner and Theodore (2002: 362-363) proffer as an analysis of 'highly contradictory trajectories' on 'the (partial) destruction of extant institutional arrangements and the creation of a new infrastructure for market-oriented economic growth, commodification and the rule of capital'. This policy situation might be shaped by the policy elites and state officials in progressive countries with vision of free market in world trade as Hirst (2000:179) argues, 'what is supposed to be an inevitable market-driven global process is actually substantially a product of public policy'.

While making the policy of quality in higher education, policy actors were driven by 'periodisation' which is a new directive – [a phase of deregulation and marketization] resulting from international markets (Craig and Cotterell, 2007: 504-509). This made them to wish that the learners will be intellectually competent to meet the international demands (MoE, 2010).

Policy statement may not always transfer social equalities (Hill: 2012) and the failure can be smoked screened as 'political success' because governments only do (do not) what they process to do (McConnell, 2000:25). This 'politics' in political success is implied when the policy proposes that only UGC will be 'monitoring the activities of all universities' specifically matters related to quality of education because they will be [crystal clear] as they are [Government funded] (MoE, 2010: 69).

However, a larger section of stakeholders in the society were not involved into 'constructive discussions and debates on the priorities and strategies presented' while formulating the 'quality' in higher education policy document (Khatun et al., 2013:2). The role of local policy actors remained limited in the process of process of initiation, formulation and implementation because of lack of entry points and space. Even if there is a concern of promoting public agenda which develops from non-state actors, they are ignored by political elites, from both governments in power and opposition parties (Khatun et al., 2013). The role of state policy actors and their activities are perceived in [power] in the discourse of 'quality' in higher education policy formulation.

Policy implementation

Due to complexities in education governance, implementation requires multiple layers of implementing cells and channels, which could give rise to ‘crowded policy space’ out of fatigue and confusion among the implementers (Honig, 2006), more challenging than in a more hierarchical organisations (Van Der Voet, Kuipers and Groeneveld, 2015). Like any change, the issues of organizing capitals and volumes of sources could bring the disagreement between the policy operators and the goals they target (Weaver, 2010). The effect of timing on implementation thus depends on the degree of acceptability of the policy, and on the system’s capacity to implement (Haddad and Demsky, 1995) which are clearly observable when Former Education minister Nahid endorsed the education act by terming quality implementation in higher education as a continuous process (Ahmed, 2018). ‘The lack of coordination’ is reflected when the decisions of the government are treated as isolated actions as they are not connected in the education sector (Ahmed, 2015). The ‘vast distance between policy and practice’ (Hess, 2013) becomes apparent when Podder (2015) calls for the Government and stakeholders in Bangladesh to organize discussions to clear the policy guidelines and expectations from the implementers seems to be an understanding gap among the implementers. Reza (2017a) asked for hiring experts to execute the policy, which creates dismay in the minds of both implementers and stakeholders.

Inconsistency in the implementation has less to do with Honig’s ‘crowded policy space’ suggestion than the ruling party’s stress on quality in higher education at the time when its key ally Ershad, opposes this policy saying that it would create discontent among teachers, students and people and is not realistic to be implemented (Ershad opposes, 2009). This highlight needs to have concerted motivations but also coordinated efforts of all actors and that implementation is a complex process.

It is evident that the implementation stage in the policy is one of the pressing problems for Bangladesh which indicates the slow pace of implementation of the policy. Maintaining significant coordination and revised policy strategies are vital in the process. Quality educational reform in Bangladesh, is hampered by a lack of epistemological reflexivity, that is, awareness of the circular relationships between causes and effects (Archer, 2007), because rushing to the goal (policy catch-up) is all-important.

The phased discussion on policy noted some conflicting opinions around various aspects of implementation. However, the policy does not address the lack of capacity and the lack of an integrated IT infrastructure for universities to effectively share data (Reza, 2017b). The consultation process fall short of being transparent and robust. This compromise led lately at the implementation stage to the impact of the policy being of

stunted diminutive. This is not surprising, given the observation that nation-states develop their identities in relation to others (Verger and Novelli, 2012; Verger et al., 2012).

The sharp contrast between the formulating and the initiating stages of the policy necessitates an evaluation of the implementation real phenomena. In the case of Bangladesh, I observed almost all higher education policies lack sustained and effective implementation, which presents issues of coordination as well as stakeholder engagement representative of along with practical support structures to address the challenges, policy frameworks need to be contextually relevant and more inclusive.

CONCLUSION

This paper has traced the history of higher education policy development and implementation in Bangladesh in relation to the political, socio-economic, and ideological context. As a practitioner academic, I have come to understand that policy initiation is always a product of the ruling elite, technocrats, and intellectuals, influenced by local realities and international contexts. Aspirational policies, aimed at improving institutional quality and competitiveness, are always rooted in historical constructs and ideological frameworks which determine who has the power to define “quality”, and whose interests are served.

Policies are formulated within the context of ambitious strategic objectives, but the absence of collaboration on the strategy leads to a lack of input from teachers, students, and civil society. My experience in university classrooms and governance shows the strong tendency within education systems to render policy aspirations irrelevant to practice. Policy documents, in the intention of being helpful, greatly overestimate the degree of flexibility that needs to be applied to institutional frameworks, resource limitations, and social obligations.

As this study shows, gaps between aspiration and reality stand out most at the stage of implementation. The gaps in coordination, infrastructure, monitoring, and capacity along with several other gaps, slow down the progress and this causes frustration to the implementers and the beneficiaries. With my background as an educator, I have seen how gaps shape the reality of classrooms, research initiatives, and institutional practices and I have come to understand how limited policy frameworks, in the absence of comprehensive dialogue, earnest backing, and thoughtful design, have to offer.

The higher education policy in Bangladesh remains one of the unfinished, and continuously worked on, puzzles attempting to balance ambition and global

competitiveness along with the national development goals. Transformational changes, however, demand more than crafting policies on paper; it requires inclusivity in policymaking, responsive frameworks, and an unremitting relationship with the teaching and learning processes. I have observed in my own practice, the reality of educational quality stems from the relationship between policies and the lived experiences of educators, students, and institutions, rather than emanating from edicts or laws. If Bangladesh wants to achieve its aspirations, policies need to adopt this context-sensitive, relational framework to ensure reforms serve the intended audience and result in real advancements of knowledge, practice, and development. Moreover, to make reforms more effective, policymakers could introduce mechanisms for broader stakeholder participation, establish safeguards to reduce political capture, and implement systematic monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track progress and provide feedback. By adopting this context-sensitive, relational approach, policies are more likely to serve their intended audience and result in real advancements in knowledge, practice, and development.

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