

Towards a Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Pakistani Model

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Abstract

Higher Education in Pakistan had a revolutionary change after the establishment of Higher Education Commission (HEC). With the passage of time, it was realized that maintaining quality in Higher Education must be on top priority basis in order to sustain the improvements made in higher education through HEC. Thus Quality Assurance Agency was established with a view to assure the provision of quality education. This agency gradually opened Quality Enhancement Cells (QEC) in state owned universities and assigned them the task of carrying out measures of quality as approved by the agency.

These Cells were headed by renowned educationist and they were provided training as well for effective evaluation. These cells were also invited quarterly to share the findings of implementing quality assurance measures. These quarterly meetings and support of various Cells for each other is gradually creating a quality culture in the universities and its network is getting stronger and deeper.

The success of this initiative of HEC penetrated in private sector universities and some of them have also established Quality Enhancement Cells in order to be a part of this network. The growing interest of the stakeholders shows that there would soon be a large local network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education with skilled evaluators striving not only to maintain quality but also enhance the same for the satisfaction of various stakeholders.

Keyword: Quality Assurance, Higher Education, Pakistan

Quality Assurance in Higher Education around the World:

The term Quality echoed in the institutions of higher education in the early 90s and gradually its need was realized and different departments, Cells and networks were established with multiple tools and techniques for quality assurance in higher education.

The term is not new. It has been defined variously by scholars and researchers such as Ball (1985), Birnbaum (1994), Lindsay (1992), van Vught and Westerheijden (1992). To put into a nutshell, as summed up by Professor Grant (1998), "Quality assurance refers to systematic management and assessment procedures adopted to ensure achievement of specified quality or improved quality, and to enable key stakeholders to have confidence in the management of quality and the outcomes achieved." Professor Harman (2000) also asserts that quality assurance, now, is no more merely an institutional or national concern but has become a global issue. The institutions offering higher education are investing their energies and expertise in devising new tools and mechanisms to ensure the provision of quality education in best possible means. Professor Thong Ngee Goh, Director, Office of Quality Management, National University of Singapore, Singapore, in his paper entitled, 'Mechanisms for Quality Assurance', also highlights the scope of quality assurance to have opened new insights and perspectives to meet global challenges in higher education institutions worldwide.

Similarly, Professor Di Yerbury AM, Board Member of the Council of Australia's University Presidents and Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, in his research paper entitled, "Credit Transfer and Mutual Recognition of Qualifications: Lessons Learned" , has clearly mentioned, " it is self-evident that unless universities adopt sound quality assurance processes

they cannot expect their courses and qualifications to be well regarded either nationally or internationally.” Looking around the globe, we find several QA networks functioning worldwide. The first example is the International Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAHE). As the name suggests, members of this network are different quality assurance agencies around the globe. The prime purpose of INQAHE is to gather and disseminate information on current theory and practice in assessment, improvement and maintenance of quality in higher education. This network has emerged as a very successful network for quality assurance internationally.

Taking inspiration from INQAHE, Arab network for Quality Assurance was established in June 2007 with an aim of collecting Arab Emirates to strengthen liaison between quality assurance bodies and disseminate good practices in QA. Similarly, there are various quality assurance networks working in United Kingdom (UK). The universities and colleges there, already have their own internal quality assurance procedures. However, Quality Assurance Agency, UK was established in 1997 with a mandate of external reviews and audit of universities and colleges.

Establishment of Quality Assurance Agency, Pakistan

Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan is the sole body for all the matters pertaining to higher education commission from the country. This Commission, realizing the need of Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutes formulated a committee of eminent educationists which recommended the establishment of an independent Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) at HEC and Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) under the umbrella of QAA. The following goals were set of QAA: (PC-1)

- “Policy making and developing practical guidelines of quality assurance in cross cutting areas of higher learning.
- Developing guidelines for establishing of Quality Enhancement Cells and Monitoring & Evaluation of these QEC’s.
- Capacity building to enhance the standards of quality assurance in higher education at national level”

This QA directly reports to the Chairman HEC while, QA Committee which recommended the establishment of QAA works as Advisory Body. The Quality Assurance Agency as per planning established Quality Enhancement Cells in Public Sector universities in different phases and facilitated in functioning and funding of these QECs. As far as the functions of QAA are concerned, QAA was responsible to establish QECs in all public and private sector universities in various phases to ensure the provision of quality education in higher education institutions. The performances of these QECs were monitored by QAA on regular basis. This monitoring was done mainly by calling meetings of all QECs and submitting progress reports on quarterly basis. This monitoring also includes the frequent

visits of the QAA officials to QECs to evaluate their performances as well as to bring uniformity in the implementation of QA practices in universities all over the country. Not only this, but QAA was also responsible to train QECs officials. For this selected QEC professionals were sent abroad to get training from international QA agencies. Later on, they replicated the same to train the QEC family.

As mentioned earlier that one of the functions of QAA is to establish QECs. These Cells were to be headed by a Professional who reports to the Vice Chancellor/ Rector of the respective university. He is also correspondent with the outer body and responsible for Internal Academic Audits.

The prime objective of QECs was to conduct Program Evaluation. This was done through Self Assessment approach. Following this approach, each institute was directed to prepare a Self Assessment Report after the completion of each academic year on the parameters prescribed by the QAA. (See, SAR Manual). For this QEC formulated a Program Team (PT). After receiving sufficient training and required material, the PT prepared the SAR and submitted it to the QEC who sent it for external audit. In the light of audit report, Implementation Plan was prepared and submitted along with the executive summary of the SAR, to higher officials of the university and that of QAA. Thus, the program evaluation was carried out in a proper set mechanism.

Growth of QECs:

In the first phase of the project, ten (10) QECs were established in 2006 in all four provinces of Pakistan. In the second phase, twenty (20) more public sector universities were selected for establishing QECs in 2007. In the third phase, fifteen (15) more public sector universities were chosen in 2009. These QECs met on quarterly basis since establishment and shared their progress with each other. Whereas, QAA was there as a Regulatory Body for performance review. Thus, a network gradually emerged under the umbrella of QAA which started with ten (10) members and has reached up to 45 State owned universities where these Cells are functioning and assuring the provision of quality education.

Progress Review of QECs:

The prime function of QECs was to conduct Program Evaluation through Self Assessment for which HEC used Self Assessment Manual prepared by Dr. Abdul Raof, a distinguished national professor and Chairman, Quality Assurance Committee, the Advisory Body for QAA. This manual contained eight criteria and several standards under each criteria. The QEC was supposed to provide this manual to different departments of their universities so that they may prepare a Self Assessment Report. However, this was initiated in a gradual manner that may be placed under the following heads:

1. Sensitization of QA Concept
2. Strengthening of Feedback Mechanism
3. Formal Program Evaluation

1. Sensitization of QA Concept:

In the beginning, the QECs were established. Several capacity building workshops were conducted to train the professionals who were working in these Cells. Some of them were sent abroad for attending workshops. QAA also arranged workshops for capacity building.

Since this was a new concept, QEC official arranged multiple awareness sessions for the faculty and administrative heads of their respective universities.

2. Strengthening of Feedback Mechanism:

QAA developed a reporting system and these QECs were required to submit a quarterly progress report for performance review. Not only this, but they were also invited in quarterly meetings to present the progress of QEC at their own institutions. They also shared their concerns regarding the implementation of QA measures in their context. This exercise proved to be an effective tool and this QEC family gradually developed links with one another under the umbrella of QAA.

3. Formal Program Evaluation:

These Quality Enhancement Cells formally initiated programme evaluation through Self Assessment initially in one department and gradually extended to other departments of their universities.

Referring to the Progress Review Table prepared by QAA of HEC, following are the outcomes of the exercise:

- More than 700 Program Evaluation Teams are working on self assessment.
- More than 280 reports have been produced.
- More than 180 external evaluations of Self Assessment Reports have been carried out.

Towards the Network of Quality Assurance:

Up till this stage, it is evident that QAA has successfully established a network of 45 universities where QECs have been established. The Quarterly Meetings and capacity building workshops which are organized by QAA have strengthened this network. During such meetings, the officials of QECs present their progress through a power point presentation and then the forum is open for discussion. The Chair of the meeting accepts questions and a very healthy input is given for handling issues and concerns relevant to a particular QEC.

The forum also passes resolutions, prepares recommendations for different bodies, and gives suggestions for over all QA issues. QAA documents all this proceeding and a proper follow up is done for positive outcomes.

QECs also arrange awareness sessions, training programs, and orientations for which the services of officials of QECs from other universities are solicited which ultimately leads to uniformity in practices. This is another benefit of this network.

Thirdly, QAA and some of the QECs have established 'yahoo groups' through which certain discussion topics, articles and conference call for papers are shared.

With the expansion of this QEC network, private sector universities initiated efforts for establishing these cells for their universities. QAA facilitated them by providing them with financial support and capacity building progress. Thus, this network is getting stronger and its efforts for program evaluation have led to quality education in higher education.

Conclusion

The upshot of the above is that the journey that started in 2006 with the establishment of QAA has now reached to a stage where there are offices working under the umbrella of QAA. These Cells submit a Quarterly Progress Report (QPR) on regular basis and meet on quarterly basis to share their experiences and concerns. These meetings and documented progress reports have connected all the QECs with a single aim of provision of quality education in the higher education institutions in Pakistan.

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