



EVOLUTION OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM - A STUDY OF THE STATE UNIVERSITIES IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Quality Assurance System (QAS) was introduced into the state Universities in Sri Lanka fifteen years back to improve quality of higher education (HE). However, the expected performance is not reflected in the reality. This paper aims to reflect upon the evolution of the QAS in the Sri Lankan HE sector and review its impact on the performance of state universities. This study employs qualitative methodology with document analysis, literature review and interviews. Display of compliance to QA standards without integration into the University practices, implementation of the QAS as a separate function, lack of interest and engagement of academic staff and students on QA activities, low emphasis on stakeholder involvement in QA practices are key issues emerged with the QAS. The literature review identified these as common issues prevailing in QAS implementation in global HE sector. There are positives of the QAS to the University performance as well. The policymakers and management are hence called to take appropriate actions to nurture and inculcate QAS in Universities. This study recommends areas to be explored in future research. In-depth research in narrow contexts of QAS implementation in the Sri Lankan HE sector is vital. This paper contributes to the original literature by covering a wide area of QAS in-state University sector in Sri Lanka. The paper presents data and information relevant not only to the local sector, but to the broader international community interested in the implementation of the QAS in the HE sector.

Keywords: Evolution, Impact, Quality Assurance System, Sri Lanka, State Universities.

1. Introduction

Quality Assurance Systems (QAS) is an externally imposed mechanism which plays a significant role in the higher education (HE) sector. Being a concept drawn from the manufacturing industry, QAS emerged in HE in early 1980s and marks its presence in more than 2/3rd of countries today. The challenges arrived with massification, internationalization, privatization and economization of HEIs compelled governments to standardize HE products and processes through the QAS for increased accountability and quality improvement (Agasisti, Barbato, Dal Molin, & Turri, 2017; Martin, 2016; Enders & Westerheijden, 2014; Jarvis, 2014; Houston & Paewai, 2013)..

QAS is receiving attention in the Sri Lankan HE sector with the vision to be the knowledge hub of Asia-Pacific region by 2025 (Ministry of Higher Education & Cultural Affairs, 2018; (Government of Sri Lanka, 2017). The aims of the QAS in Sri Lankan HE sector are no different from other countries. The performance of HE in Sri Lanka in terms of world University rankings (Webometrics, 2019; QS World University Rankings, 2018; THE World University Rankings, 2018), graduate employability (Nedelkoska et al., 2018; Government of Sri Lanka, 2017

), research (WorldBank, MOHE, 2018; Weerasinghe, 2016), University-industry links (Kurt Larsen, Deepthi C. Bandara, Mohamed Esham, 2016) and efficiency in governance and management (Auditor General's Report,2017)is below the expectations. The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the evolution of the QAS of HE in Sri Lankan context and analyze the impact of QAS on the performance of state universities. The analysis will be enriched with the research findings on QAS in HE elsewhere in the world. The findings of the study will contribute to the existing knowledge of QA in HE with new insights and produce information for strategy making related to HE sector development.

The paper is organized under six sections. Section two discusses the methodology of the study. The section three describes the evolution of QAS, followed by the section four on the present performance of Universities. The discussion of findings is on section five. The conclusion and implications for management and future research is attached to section six.

2. Methodology

This empirical study employs the qualitative methodology with document analysis, literature review and interviews. Policy and working documents, reports, correspondence, print and electronic media reports were analyzed since inception of the QAS in 2002. Documents published prior to 2002 were associated to understand the Quality concerns prevailed and evolved within state University system in Sri Lanka. Research papers, documents related to the global QAS were analyzed to assess the Sri Lankan QAS in light of the QA practices in other countries. Interviews were conducted with QAS experts, external reviewers, University management and faculty quality cell members. Data gathered as an insider of the University management and by participating in HE conferences are recorded in the study. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) is used to provide a concise description of the data set.

3. Evolution of QAS in State Universities in Sri Lanka

Systemic Evolution

The origin of Sri Lankan state University system dated back to 1921. Starting with a University College established in the Capital of Sri Lanka, today it has expanded to fifteen Universities and eighteen Higher Education Institutes spread across all key disciplines and geographical locations. With the expansion of the University system in size, location, student and staff population and disciplines, issues such as graduate employability, quality of the degree programs, staff quality were also on the rise(Samaranayake, 2016; Warnapala, 2010; Ariyawansa, 2008; Mel, 1986). Efforts on quality improvement of HE is evidenced since then however, formal and widespread mechanisms were not reported.

Sri Lanka introduced a formal QAS in 2001as a strategic initiative aiming at increased institutional accountability and improved quality of products and processes of state Universities with consultancy British QAS experts(CVCD;UGC, 2002). The UGC appointed a Committee to design and implement a QAS for HE in 2002(CVCD&UGC, 2002).The QAS consisted of four components; codes of practice, subject benchmarking, credit and qualification framework and external quality assessment. Initially six codes of practices covering key aspects in higher education were introduced. In the year 2010/2011, five new codes of practices were added(QAC;UGC, 2011; QAC;UGC, 2010). Subject Benchmark Statements (SBS) were introduced in 2003 to provide common reference points for degree programs, and to facilitate international comparison and competitiveness of degree programs (Narada Warnasuriya; Uma Coomaraswamy et.al, 2015; Peiris, 2007). The Sri Lankan Credit and Qualification Framework was developed in 2004 (Peiris, 2007) to enhance the quality of HE at all levels, facilitate access to higher learning, enhance equity, training and development opportunities, facilitate employers to identify skills, levels of knowledge of graduates, and promote life-long learning. This was

renamed as Sri Lanka Qualification Framework (SLQF) and upgraded later as an integral national framework for learning achievements and qualifications offered by different institutions engaged in HE and vocational training (University Grants Commission, 2015). In 2017, state University accreditation was removed from the QAAC due to impracticality in the local context (Director IQAU, 2018; QAC Authorities, 2019).

The external quality assessment introduced in year 2003 to assess the quality of the institution and academic departments. In 2015, QAC with UGC upgraded the QA Handbook of 2002 and issued new guidelines for Institutional Review and Undergraduate Study Program Review. The review aspects under each category changed and reshuffled under the new guidelines. New program review claims an overall quality assessment of the undergraduates (QAC Authorities, 2019; UGC, 2019).

Institutional Evolution

In 2004, UGC with CVCD Dissolved the Committee of Quality Assurance and established Quality Assurance and Accreditation Unit (QAAU). A Standing Committee for Quality Assurance was set up at UGC with the representation of Vice-Chancellors/ Directors of Internal Quality Assurance Units of Universities and HEIs to over view the QAS implementation. (UGC, 2019). The World Bank funded Improvement of Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education (IRQUE) Project provided financial support and consultancy at initial phase of the QAS. In 2005, QAAU was renamed as Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) (Narada Warnasuriya; Uma Coomaraswamy et.al, 2015; Peiris, 2007). In 2006, QAAC received full membership of International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) (Warnasuriya et al, 2015). In 2017, QAAC was renamed as Quality Assurance Council (QAC) (QAC Authorities, 2019; Director IQAU, 2018).

Recognizing the importance of institutional ownership, in 2005 universities were requested to set up their own Internal Quality Assurance Unit (IQAU). In 2013, a manual was introduced to build a quality culture and to upgrade IQAUs. A team of academics as members of faculty quality cells were selected as champions of internal quality assurance (UGC Sri Lanka, 2013).

QAS is expected to “achieve excellence in Higher Education through Quality Assurance to ensure quality, continuous development, efficient performance of HEIs and gain confidence of the community in their graduates in accordance with internationally recognized evaluation mechanism (QAC UGC, 2019). The end result expected was to produce employable graduates, high-quality and economically viable research, improve University-industry links through efficient governance and management. The Manuals provides guidelines, criteria, and standards of the QAS.

4. Progress of Higher Education Sector: Analysis in Relation to QAS Objectives

Graduate Employability

Creation of globally employable graduates is the prime objective of the QAS. However, skill mismatch is still a critical issue (Nedelkoska et al., 2018; World Bank, 2018; Government of Sri Lanka, 2017). Lack of positive attitudes, communication skills, English knowledge among graduates have been discussed in relation to labour market misfit since 1970s (Ariyawansa, 2008) and remains valid and fresh to date.. Critical thinking and intellectual capacity of University graduates have been questioned (Wijewardene, 2018a; Warakapitiya; Fernando, 2018).

Research

Sri Lanka, aspiring to reach upper middle income country status experiences gross inadequacy in research and innovations from Sri Lankan Universities (Government of Sri Lanka, 2017b; Rambaldi, 2010). This has been discussed since early days of University system (Arachchi, Uswatte; Siriwardene, 2009; Mel, 1986; Pieris, 1965). Against the growth of University research output since 2012 with government incentives for research, the quality of mushrooming research of Universities is at stake (UGC Authorities, 2018).

University-Industry Links

QA criteria promote University-Industry Links (UIL) through outreach and consultancy. Nevertheless, the present status of UIL is reported low (Kurt et al, 2016; Liyanage, 2014). Network between state Universities and Industries are rare in Sri Lanka. This has been identified as one of the major reasons for graduate un-employability, lack of industrial research and over dependence of Universities on government funds (World Bank, 2017).

Efficient Governance & Management

University governance and management is being criticized on failures in providing satisfactory services, uneconomical functions, bureaucratic red tapes, underutilization of funds for development, and on agitations of students and staff. Outburst of student ragging, frequent street protests display inefficiency in University governance and management (Warakapitiya; Kasun; Asiri Fernando, 2018; Wijewardene, 2018; Auditor General's Report, 2017; warnapala, 2012).

5. Discussion

In spite of the QAS introduction, Sri Lankan HE sector has not showed much progress. To understand the gap between performance and expectations documentary analysis along with interviews with stakeholders of the QAS were conducted. Literature on QAS in higher education in other countries has been reviewed to explore parallels and how they overcame such situations.

Non-availability of special government funding for IQAU activities, lack of physical and human resources for IQAU are commonly cited as hindrances for QA implementation in Sri Lankan Universities (UGC QAAC Sri Lanka, 2016). The need of additional resources to implement QAS is questionable, as it is against basic principles of implementing QAS efficiently with existing resources. This demonstrates non-integration of QAS in the University operations. It shows that Universities implement QAS as parallel management systems (QAC Authorities, 2019; QA Cell Leaders, 2018). Literature states that Universities in developing countries find lack of resources as an impediment to implement QAS and depend on the government to supply resources for QA practices (Nguyen et al, 2017). Channeling financial, physical and human resources to QA activities is identified as a necessity by some scholars (Gift & Bell-Hutchinson, 2007). Some suggests that lack of resources becomes a special hindrance when the QAS is adopted from another country (Anshah, 2015; Nguyen et al, 2009). This implies that non-integration of QAS into the University culture is costly.

Academic resistance, ignorance, lack of interest and cooperation are identified as another common obstacle on QAS in Sri Lankan Universities (UGC QAAC Sri Lanka, 2016). External reviewers express that the academics are willing to follow traditional practices and resist new systems (External QA Reviewers, 2018). This argument is supported by academics saying that the resistance and criticisms are common in senior academic staff (Faculty Quality Cell Members, 2018). This is observed in other countries (Trullen & Rodríguez, 2013; Bazargan, 2007). Tedious bureaucracy, increased time and effort on documentation drawing away hours of teaching and research, lack of communication and low involvement in decision making create resistance among academics towards QAS (Hou (Angela) et al., 2015; Wang, 2014; Cardoso, Rosa, & Santos,

2013b).As the involvement of academic staff in QA practices is crucial (Amaral, 2014; Cardoso, Rosa, & Santos, 2013), change of academic perceptions on QAS and extending resources and autonomy in implementing QAS have been recommended to create academic ownership(Elassy, 2015b;Trullen & Rodríguez, 2013). It is identified that only a few academics are recognized in the QAS decision level in Sri Lanka. The lessons from other countries can be accommodated to enhance the academic ownership of QAS.

Student feedback and facing external reviewers' interviews are key forms of involvement of students. QAAC in Sri Lanka has proposed to involve students in IQAU meetings, which has not yet been implemented(QA Standing Committee, 2018b). Many countries have identified lack of student involvement as a drawback to achieve QA objectives (Elassy, 2015; Mourad, 2013). Elassy (2013) has developed a model for increasing student involvement in QA system. This extends to responding to questionnaires; involvement in QA committees; and involvement in the direct QA procedures. She stresses that more the involvement of students in the QAS, higher the effectiveness. HEIs in UK, Nordic and other European countries involve students in QA practices to increase legitimacy of the process(Hauptman, 2018). The Sri Lankan University system can learn the best practices and use theoretical models to promote student involvement in QA activities.

External stakeholder involvement in QA is at an ebb in Sri Lanka. The Institutional Review Manual has set criteria on Community, Industry and Employer involvement. Involvement of industry experts in curriculum review meetings, career guidance meetings, outreach activities such as consultancy to communities and industry are some standards. Universities pay less attention to a formal link with industry and employers, except few ad-hoc arrangements such as graduates internship training. The involvement of industry experts in University decision making bodies is at a low profile(Dundar et al., 2017; Kurt Larsen, Deepthi C. Bandara, Mohamed Esham, 2016). Growing concern on stakeholder involvement and integrated approaches can be seen in contemporary QA discourses (Damian, Grifoll, & Rigbers, 2016). Strategical stakeholder collaboration is beneficial in enhancing quality of graduates, improving research and resource sharing.

University management states that the preparation time to face external quality reviewers is not adequate. Some complains that the reviewers do cross checking and the process is tough (Assistant Registrar/Secretary of IQAU, 2018). QAS experts say that Universities prepare for external quality reviewers in a manner you arrange your house to welcome visitors (QAC Authorities, 2019; QA Cell Leaders, 2018).Similar behavior is demonstrated in the literature and referred to as 'symbolic compliance', window dressing or dramaturgical compliance (Tari & Dick, 2016; Martin, 2016; Enders & Westerheijden, 2014; Van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2010).The focus on in-put and process, emphasis on minimum standards and criteria are some administrative drawbacks identified in QAS implementation (Dao, 2015). Researchers have found HEIs treat QAS as a parallel management system (Jibladze, 2013), where temporary compliance to regulations is displayed and when the requirement was over institutions return back to the ways they normally practice (Liu, 2013).

The QAS evaluation process is drawn from Europe to Asian and African countries and the Sri Lankan system is adopted from Europe. Lots of debates and discussions have taken place between University academics, management and QAC and UGC over the QAS evaluation and evaluators competencies. QAC argues that they make a systematic selection and provide training to external evaluators on institutional and program reviews, and the standards are developed in concurrence. Provisions for Universities to discuss with external reviewers on the problematic evaluations or to consult QAC about recommendations are arranged (QAC Authorities, 2019; QA Standing Committee, 2018a). A study on three European countries has identified that a single method of assessment will not fit and suggests impact assessment by external reviewers

(Kajaste, Prades, & Scheuthle, 2015). Studies suggest that the major purpose of the external evaluations might be more related to steering and governance issues than to assess and improve the quality of student learning (Gynnild, 2007). Competence and suitability of external evaluators is a matter of concern (Bloxham & Price, 2015). Developed countries are basically concerned of quality of external evaluation system. According to research conducted in developing countries external evaluations have advanced the development of HEIs and their reliability (Seema, Udam, Mattisen, & Lauri, 2016). However, the need for understanding 'HEIs inner mentality' has been recommended for QAS (Lockett, 2010).

Conclusion

University management talks about red tapes and barriers for operating effectively and efficiently. Rule makers (MOHE, UGC, QAC) are critical and complaining on management practices, insufficient research and innovations. Lecturers and students are complaining on delays in service and the quality. Employers and industry complain on the skill mismatch. QAS was the solution introduced. Why is it not practiced, how other countries implement the QAS, are there best practices to learn have been discussed in the proceeding section.

Though the QAS is yet to be integrated in to the Universities, positive impact of the QAS cannot be undermined. University authorities and staff argue that QAS has made a positive impact on quality of performance. University academics are more concerned of their performances and Universities are learning to adhere to QA standards(QAC Authorities, 2019;Director IQAU, 2018;QA Cell Leaders, 2018).

Display of compliance to QA standards without integration into the University practices, lack of interest and engagement of academic staff and students, low emphasis on stakeholder involvement are key issues identified in the QAS. These key issues are common to Universities in both developed and developing countries. There are solutions recommended to QAS issues in the literature, where Sri Lankan Universities can learn and adapt. Integration of the QAS systematically in the entire University community and institutionalization of a culture of continuous improvement towards better quality are significant. Are-visit to the QA standards and review Universities focusing their uniqueness and diversity are aspects the QAC can consider.

The study covered significant relevant literature on QA in state Universities in Sri Lanka. The views of the key stakeholders of the QAS are accommodated in the study. Nonetheless, a broader empirical study with wide coverage of interviews would have added to the rigor of the paper. This paves for future in depth research in narrow contexts of QAS implementation in Sri Lankan HE sector.

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