Current Trends and Issues in Quality Assurance Practices: Higher Education Pakistan

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Abstract

The purpose of this research endeavour is to explore the current trends of quality assurance practices in the public and private universities of Pakistan. This study is based on the primary data from a doctoral thesis titled 'a comparative study of the quality assurance (QA) practices in public and private universities' and online data of these universities in 2019 to extract improvement in quality assurance practices. Last ten years QA practices have been reviewed thematically and new trends have been variegated through empirical analysis from online data. Higher Education Commission Pakistan has provided a detailed manual for quality assurance and its enhancement to the universities' quality assurance cells (QECS). The characteristics of these cells have been examined to identify the improvement in QA practices and also the universities which are more dexterous in implementing these features will be acknowledged.

Key Words: Quality Assurance Practices, Public and Private Universities, Online Data, Pakistan.

Introduction

In Pakistan, an emerging knowledge based economy, Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan has taken fundamental steps to promote Quality Assurance (QA) initiatives for ensuring the quality of tertiary education. HEC was established in 2002. It aimed for promoting and raising research based education in Pakistan. In this regard, one of the major considerations was the establishment of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs). It was initially established at twenty public sector universities. But now all HEC recognized public and private universities have these cells to work for the improvement in tertiary education sector (Rasool, 2011).

Quality of higher education institutes (HEIs) is extensively being deliberated and remains in limelight owing to its importance. Most important modifications in higher education sector were carried out by the HEC which was originated from the verdicts of a task force that was designed to recommend procedures for enhancement of the quality of HEIs in Pakistan. Consequently, after its formation in 2002, HEC took several modifications to boost the quality of tertiary education in pursuance of a vibrant, competitive and knowledge based economy and society. HEC has established framework for QA and help HEIs to establish QECs in some HEIs. Currently the main focus of HEC is QA and quality enhancement of the HEIs quality management system (QMS) is relatively a novel term in tertiary education of Pakistan (Ahmed & Ali, 2012).

This study will guide the decision makers to evaluate the perceptions of TQM in the higher education institutions, to identify the potential areas of TQM where improvements are needed and to make comparisons among different higher education institutions. More research is needed to better comprehend TQM practices and develop theories and models related to the tertiary education. The researchers also can examine a number of research hypothesis related to the TQM in higher educational contextual and environmental variables

Background

HEC Pakistan has envisioned to provide equal opportunities for private sector and has reinvigorated private enterprises to inaugurate HEIs. Thus the competition and demand of higher education has also been raised.

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Almost more than sixty new private HEIs have been established in past twenty years. With the increased number of these HEIs, maintenance in QA mechanisms has also become a big challenge for concerned authorities. In this regard, HEC is providing maximum facilitation to boost up the quality. QEC departments are being established rapidly in degree awarding institutes of higher education (HEIs). Almost 653 different program teams for ensuring quality have been institutionalized by QAA (HEC, 2010). These reformations have been acknowledged by this research and a large number of renowned researches (Ahmad, 2010; Osama, et. Al., 2009; & Rehman, 2008).

Steps for enhancement of QA practices will promote enormous high standards in HEIs. However, in Pakistan both government sector and private sector HEIs are lacking in any systematic review of including diagnostic and evaluation plan of taught courses, programs and academic progress of institutes. The external criteria are still absent for meeting these challenges. Although, HEC approval is must to introduce new courses or academic programs (Rasool, 2011).

However 74 percent of successful TQM implementation was recorded in the Sri Lankan public sector HEIs. Though, the recommendations were given on the extent of student and employee involvement into the TQM implementations. The outcomes of this study would be useful for the decision makers and researchers for the decision making and for further research in Pakistani higher education sector and TQM implementation. The study further recommends conducting a similar study in both the private sector and government sector HEIs including both teaching and non-teaching staff members (Indumini, 2015).

It was discovered that controlling authorities are moderately devoted in the direction of the application of quality management system in the HEIs and this may be attributable to their lack of awareness about QMS. It was also established that there were deferrals in applying outcomes of QA. In Sri Lankan HEIs, a study also revealed that authorities are not fully aware of TQM. Administration is more worried about QC and QA but it is not backed up by data through inspection. Therefore it can be concluded that TQM is not implemented in its spirit (Indumini, 2015).

There is also an issue in implementing TQM in HE sector that all the quality gurus got their experience and vision from industry and manufacturing which is quite divergent from education sector. Subsequently, after the successful implementation of TQM in industrial sector, researchers have commenced investigating the possibility of applying TQM philosophies and norms to service sector. Then TQM spreads to service companies such as healthcare, government and education institutions. Nevertheless, TQM values are being appreciated in HEIs almost 03 decades far along as compared to manufacturing sector (Venkatraman, 2007). Although the academies were the central hub for knowledge and innovation by the virtue of their research role, it is sarcastic that they were after the other organizations in acceptance and applying TQM (Indumini, 2015).

Progress in the teaching and research about tertiary education is an important economic growth factor for any society. It not only imparts directly but the community gets some by products through learning and innovation in higher education for example, federal government provides grants through taxpayers' money and then individuals and committees overall get the nation gain through innovation. The resources are an important factor for maintaining the quality and quantity in tertiary education. Unfortunately, to evaluate and maintain the equation of input and output is so much tricky as the measurement of quality and productivity of the performance of institutes cannot be defined. The challenge starts with the graduation cost per students and ends at the measurement of economic growth of the community. There are major components, for example quality improvement, increase rate of graduation students, improvements in learning and research and many others to build up the system. If these factors remain qualify and quantify, the achievement of quality education in affordable ways is possible (Baig, Abrar, Asif, Ahmad, 2015). It is necessary to identify a well-organized system of quality education. As we know, HEIs are controlled by HEC Pakistan and it has provided the guidance to many domains for example, policy making, resource allocation, investment in tertiary education and administration for targeted goals. The attempt to provide the system paralleled with accountability measures is direct persuasion of advances in tertiary education. As the measurement of quality on data provided by HEIs is a very time consuming process. In developed countries, there are certain well defined parameters for example, graduate rate, graduate cost per student and income contribution of per student to the system. Measurement of these parameters should

be assessed by HEC to examine the quality measurements. Meanwhile the adaptation of already successful models can also be used as quick fix for quality control (Batool, & Qureshi, 2010).

Economic boost is concerned with HEIs, therefore in Pakistani monetary system there must be launching of a strong channel between business entrepreneurship and university education. Through HEC, the partnership between business and academic innovations must be encouraged. With formal education, students should also be equipped with skills and trainings needed to grow economic development. It should be coupled with fruitful research projects and their expansion for addressing real problems (Ahmed & Ali, 2012). Besides, Pakistani HEIs should be capable of providing international exposure to their students. International HEIs also provide workplaces and internships to the global talent. With this process, they would build an international linkage. Moreover, the social challenges can also be addressed through HEIs by fostering open debate. Our education system and its impact must improve the lives through enhancing productivity and developing analytical skills in students. In the past decades, the improvement can be seen made by HEC. It has revolutionized through providing funding, monitoring, regulating and accrediting the HEIs all over the Pakistan. It provides a comprehensive service for students, faculties and HEIs for the purpose of monitoring and evaluation of education system. The commission has established and promotes its functions through proper act/ ordinance. It is persuading to more direct return on the community investment, sustainable growth and industrial collaboration in higher education (Mohammed, 2018).

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of current research are to:

1- Systematically review quality assurance practices in higher education sector of Pakistan in the past ten years.
2- Identify the current trends of assurance practices in higher education sector of Pakistan.

Research Questions

For fulfilling the above mentioned objectives, following are the research questions to deal with:

1- What are the improvements regarding quality assurance practices in government sector and private universities of Pakistan?
2- To what extent universities followed guidelines provided by HEC for quality enhancement?
3- What is the difference in the quality assurance mechanism of private and government sector universities?

Methodology

A systematic review of a doctoral thesis titled 'a comparative study of the QA (QA) practices in government sector and private HEIs' (Rasool, 2010) and guidelines of the HEC manual (2006) were undertaken. The principle question behind the present research was: how much the improvements have been implemented in QA practices in government sector and private sector Pakistani HEIs? To address it, online database of 12 government sector and 12 private HEIs, included in the study (Rasool, 2010) were taken into account. On the websites of these HEIs, the description under the head of QEC on homepage of these HEIs has been extracted.

Limitations

The major limitation of the current research is limited to information about QECs available on websites of the HEIs. Sometimes, it is not displayed separately on websites. Sometimes, it is found under other heads for example, 'Administration' as sub-head. In order to realise the improvements in QA practices, only content given under 'QEC' heading have been focused. It lacks the information given in prospectus in this regard.

Discussion

According to Rasool (2011), it was observed that in most of the government sector and private HEC recognized HEIs the HEC model of QA practices was being followed. According to this model, Self-Assessment (SA) is an

integral part. QEC is managerial body of Self-Assessment. It has six major components, i.e. 'goal setting, result oriented, assessment and evaluation of collected data, data collection, analysis & evaluation and decision-making regarding actions to be taken' (Self-assessment Manual by HEC, 2006). Basically, it ensures general upgrading of education and research at institutional level.

Few HEIs have successfully implemented ISO 9000 model of QA. According to this model, third party involves in setting the criteria for organization or educational institutes. Later on, if criteria are well observed, the institutes are certified for fulfilling the management standards. Internationally, this model is followed by Europe and USA HEIs and nationally, NUST Pakistan have attained ISO 9001 certification for all of its divisions. Some departments of NED have also acquired ISO certification.

Although, in most of the government sector and private HEC recognized HEIs, the HEC model of Self-Assessment for QA practices was being followed and QA policy was clearly mentioned in 'mission statements' of both private and government sector HEIs (Rasool, 2010). Some disquieting evidences were discerned while taken into account the private sector HEIs. These are following:

In private sector HEIs, only those courses were offered which had high demand in the job market. Most of the private HEIs were situated in three big cities, i.e. Lahore, Islamabad and Faisalabad. There was shortage of qualified personnel of QA. There was absence of course and program review by potential employer and alumni.

In present research the description under QEC head will be evaluated to keep in view the above mentioned points. As online data source is a quick source of analysis, therefore it is chosen to see current trends in QA policy and practices.
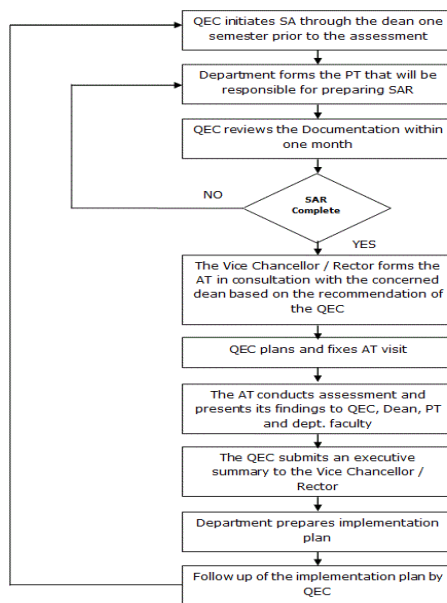

Figure 1: Self-Assessment Procedure (*Source: HEC Pakistan 2019*)

According to the online information found on the websites of 12 private and 12 government sector HEIs, it has been observed that four private HEIs have provided information about QEC on home page with clearly stated the 'message of director, objectives, functions and activities and among government sector HEIs. These are:

1. University of Faisalabad, Faisalabad
2. University of Lahore, Lahore
3. National College of Business Administration and Economics, Lahore
4. National University of Computer and Emerging Sciences, Islamabad

Total seven government sector universities have delivered almost same information,
These are:

1. Govt. College University of Faisalabad
2. Govt. College University Lahore, Lahore
3. Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan
4. University of Education, Lahore
5. University of Sargodha, Sargodha
6. PMAS University of Arid Agriculture, Murree Road, Rawalpindi
7. Islamia University, Bahawalpur

A mission or Vision Statement is an explanation of an institute wishes to be seen by others (Zhang et al. 2000). Vision is the goal or direction of an institute which depicts destiny of this institute. An excellence focused vision and mission will assuredly lead the academia to realize quality in terms of stipulated standards. In the past some of the HEIs may not have a mission or vision statements, but since HEC has included it in its ranking criteria. Almost all the HEIs have clearly mentioned it on their websites (Zubair, 2013).

Findings

Universities and Their QEC Contents on Websites

University of Faisalabad, Faisalabad

On the website of this university under the head of QEC, mission, vision and objectives are clearly stated in details. According to these components, assurance for quality of higher education, maintenance of systematic review process of students learning and enhancement of research activities have guaranteed. Moreover, in the domains of curriculum design and faculty development policies, it is confirmed to develop a standardized procedure. It is also ensured to accomplish the requirements of regulatory bodies and Accreditation Councils. This shows commitment of the university to take initiative of QA seriously. Students and parents can get comprehensive depiction of the university from its website (https://gcuf.edu.pk/qec).

University of Lahore, Lahore

According to the web information of this university, QEC was established in May, 2010 following the model provided by HEC Pakistan to maintain the quality education and research activities. There is provided detailed information starting from the 'message of director QEC and ending with the ranking and accreditation policies. It seems that HEC manual (2006) instructions have been followed in construction of mission, aims and objectives, key responsibilities, self-assessment procedure of teaching and learning and even staff profile (https://www.uol.edu.pk/services/core/qec).

National College of Business Administration and Economics, Lahore

Likewise, University of Lahore, this private sector university has also introduced QEC head on homepage of the institute. Following the message of director, it has clearly stated the vision, mission and comprehensive objectives of quality enhancement cell. Under mission statement, along with the learning and research promotion, one noticeable point is the establishing of t-learning and community services. Likewise, among so many objective one distinguished point is stated to develop procedures for disseminating good QA practices (http://ncbae.edu.pk/structure-of-qaec/).

National University of Computer and Emerging Sciences, Islamabad

Among the above three universities' QEC head information on homepage, this private university stands first in providing maximum description of QEC. It comprises introduction, vision, mission, functions and finally accomplishments. It is following the HEC guidelines for internal and external assessment. It was declared by HEC in 2015 to execute the highest level of QA practices both among local and global standards. In this

university, QEC is headed by dean and he has to report VC of the university directly. Approval of the new programs, departmental review and feedback procedures are clearly mentioned under functions. One remarkable addition is the description of accomplishment is given in detail (http://nu.edu.pk/QEC).

Govt. College University of Faisalabad

According to this university, QEC has been established here in 2005 under the guidelines of HEC. One novelty of QEC office in this university is that every department's faculty member (one) is team member. Following the director's message, it is an active and vigilant department. Among staff description, QEC functions, on this website, membership, accreditation, ranking, program team member and assessment team are also stated in comprehensive way. It seems fully functional here following the HEC guidelines. Under functions, ranking of the university each year has also been defined with great scores (https://gcuf.edu.pk/qec).

Govt. College University Lahore, Lahore

On the website of this university, Rector of the university message has briefly mentioned the goals of QEC establishment here. Moreover, it is clearly stated that QEC is working here for achieving three major goals and these are; QA of research, QA of teaching and QA of organizational efficiency (https://www.gcu.edu.pk/QMQA.htm).

Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan

In this government sector university, the directorate of QA cell has been established here in 2007. It enhanced in 2009 with proper appointment of director and deputy director. Besides message of vice chancellor, message of director, mission of quality enhancement directorate, objectives and function, the most important component among all is future plan given here. Moreover, minute details of academic programs, new courses and laboratories information are elaborated (https://www.bzu.edu.pk/v2_dqe.php).

University of Education, Lahore

Only staff is displayed on website. As there is no information available about QEC and its functioning. It indicates indifference of the UOE towards QA.

University of Sargodha, Sargodha

QEC was established here in 2006 following the model provided by HEC Pakistan to maintain the quality education and research activities. There is provided detailed information starting from the 'message of director QEC and ending with the detailed downloadable performs. It seems that HEC manual (2006) instructions have been followed in construction of aims and objectives, self-assessment procedure of teaching and learning and even formulation of review committee (https://uos.edu.pk/home/qec).

PMAS University of Arid Agriculture, Murree Road, Rawalpindi

QEC was established here in February 2007 following the model provided by HEC Pakistan to maintain the quality education and research activities. There is provided detailed information starting from the 'message of director QEC and ending with important web links. It comprehensively stated vision and mission, self-assessment program, QEC organizational structure, QEC staff, news and events, photo gallery and QEC membership. This can provide as a role model for other government sector and private HEIs. Not only important information is provided but link are also given for the stakeholders to get more information about QA. (http://www.uaar.edu.pk/qec/index.php).

Islamia University, Bahawalpur

QEC head is found there under administration where all other administrative directorate links are available, unfortunately, for the time being it is displayed on the website that the requested page cannot be found (http://iub.edu.pk/iubqec/). It is clear that no data is available online to the stakeholders about QA of this university. This problem is being witnessed in many HEIs.

Conclusion

The principle question behind the present research was: how much the improvements have been implemented in QA practices in government sector and private sector Pakistani HEIs? To address it, online database of 12 government sector and 12 private universities, included in the study (Rasool, 2010) were taken into account. In the websites of these HEIs the description under the head of QEC on homepage of these HEIs have been extracted. Among these HEIs, four private and seven government sector HEIs (Details are given in the table 2 above) have clearly shown the tab of QEC and provided description of its establishment, functions and vision etc. It has been observed that both government sector and private HEIs have clearly stated the mission, vision and objectives but some of them have provided comprehensive scope, functions, accomplishments and staff details in this regard. It ensures the maintenance of systematic review process of student learning, faculty development, accreditation councils' functions and many others. Among the above mentioned four private HEIs', QEC head information on homepage of National University of Computer and Emerging Sciences, Islamabad, stands first in providing maximum description of QEC. It comprises introduction, vision, mission, functions and finally accomplishments. It is following the HEC guidelines for internal and external assessment. It was declared by HEC in 2015 to execute the highest level of QA practices both among local and global standards in this university, QEC is headed by the director QEC ranked equal to dean and he has to report VC of the university directly. Approval of the new programs, departmental review and feedback procedures are clearly mentioned under functions. One remarkable addition is the description of accomplishment is given in detail. Between government sector HEIs, Govt. College University, Faisalabad has provided more inclusive details in this regard. According to this university, QEC has been established here in 2005 under the guidelines of HEC. One novelty of QEC office in this university is that every department's faculty member (one) is team member. Following the director's message, it is an active and vigilant department. Among staff description, QEC functions, on this website, membership, accreditation, ranking, program team member and assessment team are also stated in comprehensive way. It seems fully functional here following the HEC guidelines. Under functions, ranking of the university each year has also been defined with scores.

Recommendations

The present research may inspire the future researchers to carry out more detailed and comparative analysis of the whole employed models of QA. Moreover, this study can also serve the purpose of transparently rating and ranking process for HEIs. Additionally, it will provide direction to use online data as a source of improvement for HEIs to construct a healthy competition among private and public sector HEIs.

Moreover, Rasool (2010) had recommended the following five points for the improvements advances in this regard:

1. Bridge internal and external QA practices in ranking criteria
2. Establish internal and external QA practices in periodic peer review
3. Ensure external academic audit
4. Develop close liaison between universities and industries
5. Organize workshops and training programs

Quality education and relevance to its each component has tremendous importance for higher education perspectives. QEC is one of the initiatives taken by HEC for QA. HEC Pakistan being regulatory authority has alleviated revolutionary steps in this regard. Still there is a great need to review all processes and bodies of maintaining quality of higher education. The current study creates a value addition to past studies based on QA practices in Pakistani universities as quality is an ongoing process. The present review has opened the doors to recognize whole mechanism of QA initiatives of HEC Pakistan i.e. QAA (Quality Assurance Agency), QAC (Quality Assurance Committee), QEC (Quality Enhancement Cell), International Linkage, Accreditation Council and HEIs. It is undoubtedly, a needful demand to research all above areas extensively for the improvement and growth in higher education.

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