An Exploration into the University Quality Assurance Practices for Maintaining the Students' Retention

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Abstract: *This qualitative study was a follow-up study of a quantitative study that was conducted to investigate the impact of quality assurance practices on university students' satisfaction and retention. The sample has been selected purposively from the already selected sample for the quantitative study. The sample consisted of six respondents who have extensive experience in the higher education sector more specifically in the quality enhancement department/cell. An interview protocol was developed focusing on research questions to collect their responses of them regarding the "exploration of the role of the Quality Assurance practices in students' retention and satisfaction". The conversations commenced with the introduction of the interviewees and the researcher and followed by opening questions transitioning to key questions. It was reflected by the participants' responses that there is a strong role of quality assurance practices in attaining students' satisfaction and retention.*

Introduction

The concept of Quality is generally linked with the development sector. For the last few decades, it has changed its structure and is used in different ways. Initially, the concept of quality was introduced by American scholars in the United States whereas the Japanese were the pioneers who utilized this concept in their manufacturing field (Adina-Petruta, 2014). The Japanese strongly accepted the ideas of W. Edwards Deming and Joseph M. Juran, on quality management along with numerical quality control while engaging in the industrial sector as a developed nation (Bunce, 2017). In recent times, organizations around the world have begun to embrace quality ideas and processes, and quality programs in the public sector are being actively implemented by different public entities/ governments (Carter & Yeo, 2016).

The introduction of QA procedures in higher education embedded a clear indulgence of 'quality'. If one definition of 'quality', however, is not found in past studies. There are different debates that show the intricacy of dividing the definition of quality, answering an easy response to a complex inquiry (Renée, et al., 2022). The quality, we know about it but indeed we do not. It is right, some things are better than others, that is, they are considered as of quality (Fierro, 2022). If someone attempts to define the term quality, apart from the things it has, everything goes well. If everyone is unfamiliar with it then it is not existing and

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at the same, it is existing for all practical resolutions (Bates, 2017).

Quality means the fitness of the predetermined purpose. Harvey & Green (1993) classify the concept of quality as follows:

- Unique quality (something which has been distinct and connected to good performance);
- Quality as a whole (constant or perfect result);
- Quality as objective fit (satisfying customer requirements);
- Quality as value for money (return for the paid value); and
- Quality as conversion (student development).

It is reflected in the above-mentioned categories that quality has been defined with different aspects ranging from the general concept of 'quality' to 'the latest' zero defect '(perfection), the principle of consumer correction and direction (fitness for purpose), and, eventually, the concept of quality change, focusing the concept of quality for higher education (Chen, 2017). Governments often prioritize public opinion on how much money is needed in the civic sector for efficient and effective operations (Borsellino, Carta, & Varia, 2022). From the centre of the concept of quality, financing is the accountability theory. There were a few additions to the existing idea of quality. This includes quality as an 'initial point or baseline' and as an 'improvement'. So quality is considered subjective and also multi-dimensional (Clark, 2017).

The systems and processes of Higher education are operationalized with the help of different stakeholders, including policymakers, administrators, teachers, researchers, students, support staff, government institutions, employers, parents, and educational and technical organizations (Pechmann & Haase, 2022). They have varied kinds of interests with different values and their attention may be very dissimilar. Employers need to focus on knowledge, skills and attitude when the government offers to prepare graduates with subsidized finances and as per international standards (Zhu & Sharp, 2022).

The preparation of graduates at higher levels of education is linked to their personal interests, development, and specific position in society (ENQA, 2015). In addition, educational personnel may emphasize good academic training based on the transfer of good knowledge and a good learning environment and a good relationship between teaching and research. Nothing prevents these players

from choosing their definition of quality (Barbato, et al., 2022). Moreover, they recognize that those who achieve high ranks in higher education programs, reliant on their strengths, co-operatives, and guidelines, contribute to existing characterizations of quality (Gunn, 2018).

If specifically it is compared to developing countries, the quality is a concern for a well-functioning, continuous classroom system and states that it occurs in the classroom, in the marketplace, and. in the wider community (Huisman & Stensaker, 2022). The comments on the quality of education in less developed regions are linked to the higher level.

The discussion above in an effort to define quality raises numerous prospects. First, although the discussion on the concept of quality in higher education is extensive, however, a single definition of this is not enough. There is no single quality definition that should be excluded from all others (Fleming, 2017).

Second, the generally used definition among the above appears to be 'fit for purpose', which is a useful measure of quality. As per that definition, if education achieves its defined objectives, it is assumed that education is of quality (Zavale, 2021). The mission statement of every institute reflects the purpose which demonstrates the quality of that advantage. However, participants may explain the objectives differently (Hanssen & Solvoll, 2013).

Third, quality perceptions change and transpire as the conditions change in the entity under which the higher education institute operates. In higher education, different stakeholders are involved and each of them percept the quality through a lens of the goal they set to be achieved (Weenink et al., 2021). The definition of a concept of quality depends on the person who sets the goals. The defined goals may be mutually exclusive, however, there may be a contradiction (Keykha, Ezati, & Khodayari, 2021). Therefore, at best, we should clearly define as far as possible the methods used by each participant when judging quality and that those competing ideas be considered in quality assessment (Dhaqane & Afrah, 2016).

Fourthly, the core of the discussion on the quality of higher education is a matter of appropriateness of the concepts derivative in the development division and this applies to higher education, which is the civic/public sector (Dottin, 2021). Manufacturing sectors focus on the customers' contentment. In

higher education systems, many groups can be defined as 'clients' of higher education and ... their needs are sometimes in conflict (Legemaate et al., 2021). These may consist of students, employers, the general public, or government paying for higher education, or peers of education. Additionally, many interactive variables within the higher education system propose to view it as an intricate system of input, transformation procedures and outputs (Grebennikov & Shah, 2013).

The term 'quality' seems to have many implications, and the concept of quality assurance is also tough to define. It seems to have entered into the discussion of a new higher education policy through the development and commercial sector in Western (industrialized) realms (Ahmed et al., 2021). Quality assurance is the mechanism that ensures that the product or service met specific standards. Thus, starting in the 1980s, economic domination, which delimited the policy context of Western governments, established the basis for quality-building ideas, both in higher education and in other sectors of society (Zafar & Ahmad, 2018).

The word 'quality assurance' appears to be difficult to understand since the idea of 'quality' is so broad. The industry and commercial sectors of Western (industrialized) nations appear to have influenced the new policy discourse on higher education (Pitman, 2014). The goal of quality assurance was to make sure that criteria for a product or service were set and constantly met. As a result, in the 1980s, Western governments' policy environment was dominated by economics, which supplied the conceptual underpinnings for building quality in higher education and other public sector institutions (Abou-El-Sood & Ghoniem, 2021). New ideas from the corporate sector have found their way into higher education as a result of the neoliberal or "New Right" administrations that arose in certain industrialized nations in the 1980s (Jungblut et al., 2015).

As the discussion and demand for quality in higher education intensified, new definitions and meanings of QA were developed. QA was said to be an ongoing process of continuous improvement in which everyone engaged participates and strives for the best possible outcome (Pitman et al., 2015). Here, he emphasizes the significance of comprehending the system in place, using it effectively and having a sense of ownership over it. Word QA is easy to understand in terms of national QA practices (Zavale, 2021). National studies on quality and QA offer a variety of

approaches to QA. Most nations' early attempts at quality assurance (QA) were dominated by concerns about "control" and "compliance" (Leiber et al., 2015).

The level and quality of higher education in Western Europe appear to be considerably more homogeneous and higher than in the United States due to these types of government regulations (Alfy & Abukari, 2020). The first European QA systems (such as those in the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, and Denmark) revealed the variety of the higher education systems in those countries and the size of the countries themselves (Alzafari & Kratzer, 2019). The level of state control was far lower in the early British tradition than it was on the continent. As a result of their charters, the British HEIs had more authority and autonomy, and they were allowed to create their quality control systems (McKenna & Boughey, 2014).

The QA is defined as accreditation. However, the way this phrase is used and implemented in other nations is very different. Peer-driven and collaborative processes culminate in deciding whether or not an institution may be labelled as accredited in the United States (Andleeb & Jusoh, 2020). 'Accreditation' refers to determining if an institution, staff, or program fulfils particular standards. In many cases, accreditation standards are already established. These predetermined benchmarks serve as the basis for all evaluations (Kajaste et al., 2015).

However, under Australia's current QA landscape, there is no longer any need for public or private universities to be accredited themselves. Academic boards and institutional governing councils were in charge of overseeing academic standards in educational institutions under this system (Darojat et al., 2015). Australia has made an enormous shift in viewpoint during the past 15 years. Australia's first university quality agency, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), came into being in 2001 (Das et al., 2016).

New Zealand's higher education quality assurance emphasizes the quality of services and the providers. Four different organizations give qualitative accreditation for tertiary education. Except for universities, the NZQA is responsible for all institutions' quality assurance (Cardona-Rodríguez et al., 2016). It is also responsible for approving and accrediting all degree programs offered by institutions other than universities. The New Zealand Qualifications and Curriculum Council (NZVCC)

commissions an independent audit of university credentials (Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). South Africa is implementing a new QA system as part of a slew of educational changes. Using a blend of internal validation and external validation through peer review, the newly piloted method is comparable to those used in other nations (Barandiaran et al., 2012).

According to a recent study, worries over "quality has led to a substantial growth" in "external quality review" (EQR) activities outside of higher education institutions. As a result, EQR firms have sprung up all over the place (Badran et al., 2019). The governments of under-developed countries remain dominant over higher education either in terms of finance or regulations. Generally speaking, quality assurance (QA) systems in underdeveloped nations are subject to a considerable lot of state oversight (Italy, 2012).

As controversy and concern about the quality of higher education improved, new definitions and concepts of QA also emerges. It has been drawn on the corporate zone, which topped the broader progressive vision of QA development in which all the members struggles to achieve excellence of quality (Bloch, Degn, Nygaard, & Haase, 2021). On this view, it emphasizes the significance of indulgencing, applying, and identifying the identity of the existing system (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). QAs are to ensure that there are processes, procedures and procedures in place to ensure that the desired standard, or defined and measured, is delivered (Giraleas, 2021). QA is not just defining certain standards for measuring or controlling quality. Rather it is the systematic improvement of the quality which remains continuous regarding quality assurance (Shabbir & Khalid, 2016).

During the 1990s the flood of QA was evident in many developed countries. The change also made it clear that if the means are available, the standard can be guaranteed (Abou-El-Sood & Ghoniem, 2021). It is highlighted that for 1990 years there was a risk of defining quality "by the existence of appropriate QA procedures. It is said to be true in the quality programs of the development sector of British Standards, except that of the UK's higher education universities (Liu, 2015).

Often the concept of 'quality assurance' is perceived, it includes all the guidelines, procedures and activities which focus to ensure consistency in quality and improvement. It can easily be understood as world-class practices in QA (Seyfried & Reith, 2021). The different quality and QA concepts have

been advocated by National studies. The ideas of 'control' and 'compliance' often dominate the first QA that was introduced in many republics (Mwiya et al., 2017).

Quality control is maintained through input, process, and output control methods, concerning the European background. These regimes seem to ensure that the European higher education standard is almost similar to that of the UK. The variety of higher education programs has been shown by the first European QA programs (Zineldin, 2011). At the beginning of British rule, it was not up to the level of the central model. British HEIs, therefore, had more power and independence over their licenses and were autonomous in designing their standards of quality control (Mussawy & Rossman, 2021). In a nutshell, quality concerns "have led to a significant increase in outdoor activities in higher education institutions" are considered "external quality reviews" (Ali, Ishfaq, & Ahmed, 2018).

Research Question

RQ 1: What is the role of Quality Assurance Practices in Universities on students' satisfaction and retention? (Qualitative)

Methodology

This qualitative study was a follow-up study of a quantitative study that was conducted to investigate the impact of quality assurance practices on university students' satisfaction and retention. The sample has been selected purposively from the already selected sample for the quantitative study. The sample consisted of six respondents who have extensive experience in the higher education sector more specifically in the quality enhancement department/cell. An interview protocol was developed focusing on research questions to collect their responses of them regarding the "exploration of the role of the Quality Assurance practices in students' retention and satisfaction". The conversations commenced with the introduction of the interviewees and the researcher and followed by opening questions transitioning to key questions.

Results

RQ 2: What is the role of Quality Assurance Practices in Universities on students' satisfaction and retention? (Qualitative)

Measurement of Students' Satisfaction

The responses of the participant reflected that student satisfaction is a crucial aspect in the overall process of quality because all the procedures and activities are being carried out to provide quality education to students to develop them to compete at the international level while inculcating 21st-century skills in them. It was unveiled by the participant:

There is a proper mechanism in place to measure the satisfaction level of students regarding certain courses, instructors, degrees/programs and overall facilities, etc. Students record their responses after the completion of the course and then after the completion of the degree program. Moreover, research students' feedback is also collected to maintain the quality standards (D3).

A survey questionnaire is distributed to students to collect their feedback:

A detailed standardized survey questionnaire for students is developed by the HEC which is published in the manual. This questionnaire is filled by the students at the time of course completion to record their responses on a rating scale that informs about their level of satisfaction regarding a certain course. It includes questions related to the content, learning environment, pedagogy, learning material, instructor, assessment methods, etc. (HoD3).

Another participant explained that:

"At the end of the degree program, a survey questionnaire is distributed among graduate students to record their feedback concerning overall facilities and aspects along with suggestions to improve the program in the future. (D2).

It was evident from the responses of the participants that students' satisfaction is measured and the results of the data are utilized to make improvements in the courses, programs, and other facilities. One of the participants said:

To measure the level of students' satisfaction, the feedback is collected during the degree program (after the course), at the end of the degree program (before awarding the degree), and after awarding the degree (alumni). Alumni are requested to share their perspectives and experiences regarding the facilities and services which Universities provided to them (HoD1).

Almost all the participant shared the same point of time except one:

As far as my experience is concerned, all the things are perfect in black and white to present as a document but the ground realities are different. It rarely happens that the department/institute collects the feedback of students during the degree program/course for future improvements. But on the other, some universities have introduced an online platform for the graduates to record their feedback (D1).

Students' Satisfaction and Retention Linked with QA

It was reflected by the participants' responses that there is a strong relationship between students' satisfaction and their retention at HEIs, and satisfaction is robustly linked with the service quality of the institute. However, the reality cannot be denied that students retain even if dissatisfaction is dominant. One of the participants said:

"At the educational institute, students' satisfaction is directly linked with services including physical facilities and educational facilities. If both the facilities will be up to the mark then the retention rate will ultimately increase" (D3).

Satisfaction is associated with service quality and it leads to increased/decreased retention rates. If universities' QA practices are up to the criteria of HEC then certainly students will be satisfied but if the quality of services is not up to the predetermined criteria given by the HEC then the situation will be reversed which significantly impacts retention (HoD1).

Although participant responses exhibited that satisfaction is directly linked with retention some of them shared diverse points of view and considered that satisfaction may link with learning but not with retention. One of them uttered:

Honestly speaking, at the higher level, satisfaction is not linked with retention because students got admission after proper scrutiny (more specifically in public Universities) where there is tough competition and complete their degrees irrespective of the fact whether the infrastructural, human and learning facilities are enough to learn in a conducive environment or not (HoD3).

Another participant shared a similar point of view:

It is a fact that students' satisfaction is robustly linked with retention and drop-out but at the higher level, students persist even if they are not satisfied with the learning and other facilities because they are

apprehensive of drop-out and getting admission to any other University when the rate of competition is too high (D1).

Suggestions for Improvement

The participants explicitly shared their points of view and put forwarded some suggestions to improve the existing practices of the QA at HEIs:

1. Great importance should be given to the provision of quality education and counselling sessions in the Universities must be conducted when admissions are opened to get students well aware of the pursuance of a certain degree along with its scope.

2. The degree programs at the HEIs must be launched focusing on a demand-driven rather than supply-driven to developing students as per the market demand to reduce the rate of unemployment. Additionally, the degree programs must be accredited before their launching if it is a demand in the market.

There should be consistency in the process of the QA to achieve desired results and sustain the effectiveness and efficiency of the education.

Conclusion

It was reflected by the participants' responses that there is a strong role of quality assurance practices in attaining students' satisfaction and retention. It also has been suggested by the participants that Great importance should be given to the provision of quality education and counselling sessions in the Universities must be conducted when admissions are opened to get students well aware of the pursuance of a certain degree along with its scope.

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