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Theme: Has external QA made an impact? Looking back at the decade of Quality Assurance.

INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE: Experiences of Sri Lankan Universities

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ABSTRACT:

Higher education grows rapidly and its cost continues to rise in both public and private sectors, there is increasing interest in quality and standards. Any country that aspires to become a knowledge-based economy must demonstrate that it takes the quality of its higher education programmes and awards seriously, and is willing to put into place the means of assuring and demonstrating that quality.

Quality assurance needs to be a continuous, on-going process. Everyone working in an institution must take responsibility for building it into their day-to-day, routine activities. This can be brought about only through Internal Quality Assurance (IQA). Hence, IQA is considered as the corner stone of QA in higher education.

The set of internal processes that help institutions to improve their performance is sometimes referred to as 'quality enhancement'. The European *Standards* recommend that external quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of such internal quality assurance processes. In some countries the external quality assurance agency has a defined role of promoting internal quality assurance within institutions. IQA units established in all public universities in 2005 and a broad framework has been prepared. IQA procedures need to be strengthened along with EQAs.

Areas that are considered of particular importance in internal quality assurance include:

- policy and procedures for higher education;
- approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards;
- assessment of students;
- quality assurance of teaching staff;
- learning resources and student support;
- information systems; and
- public information.

INTRODUCTION

Quality Assurance is not a science with a concrete theoretical ground; it is developed base on good practices. Quality assurance has been introduced to the higher education in Sri Lanka in 2005, and major proportion of study programs in the public sector has been assessed. A quality assurance system could be implemented in a variety of institutional arrangements. It could be implemented at least in two different ways at the same time, i.e. internally driven and externally driven. Internally is the best and the most ideal way. It is a mechanism within the institution itself to ensure quality that include among others, periodic self-evaluation, monitoring, good practices, good governance, and good management. In order to be effective, an internal quality assurance system needs a strong leadership and institutional commitment towards the quality improvement.

Providers of higher education have a primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance, and as such, quality assurance must be a continuous and an on-going process. Though the top management may set policy and priorities, quality assurance is the responsibility of everyone in an educational institution. Assuring quality should not be considered as a one-off activity that takes place only in preparation for external quality assurance procedures.

Quality assurance systems in higher education established in many countries comprise of two basic components: an internal component and an external component. Internal quality assurance refers to internal processes that an institution has developed in order to monitor and improve the quality of their students' learning experience and ensure achievement of established goals, objectives and standards, whereas external quality assurance brings in a third party, to review the learning experience offered by an institution or a study programme and achievement of established goals, objectives and standards. Moreover, internal quality assurance must be a continuous, on-going process whereas external quality assurance can usually be conducted only at intervals, perhaps several years apart, and at supra-institutional levels Hence, external QA alone cannot bring about sustained improvements in the quality of the learning experiences offered by any institution, but can help in assessing the credibility of the results of internal evaluation.

Quality assurance needs to be a continuous, on-going process. Everyone working in an institution must take responsibility for building it into their day-to-day, routine activities. This can be brought about only through internal QA. Hence, internal QA is considered as the corner stone of QA in higher education.

Areas that are considered of particular importance in internal quality assurance include:

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- information systems; and
- public information.

The objectives of the Internal QA Unit are:

- To ensure continuous improvement in the entire operations of the University and
- To ensure stakeholders connected with higher Education, namely parents, teachers, staff, would be employers, funding agencies and society in general, of its own quality and probity.



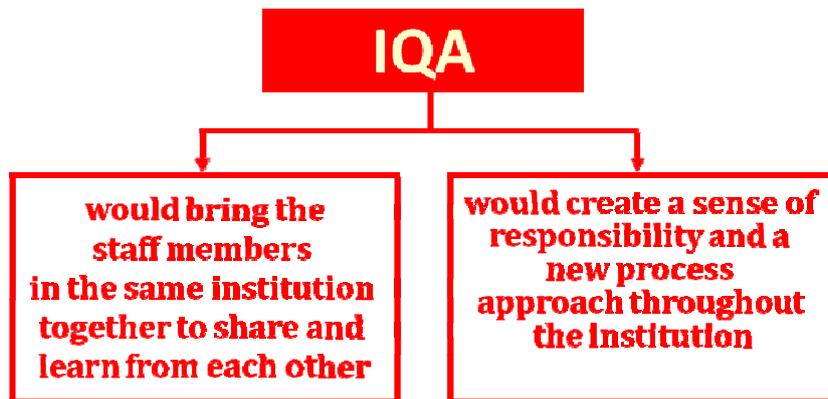
Source: Internet

Purposes of the IQA are:

- Continuous improvement
- Curriculum change & staff development
- Public confidence and information
- External profile
- To encourage the development of quality systems and ensure compliance
- Consolidate research activity and infrastructure
- Harmonise workloads

Integration between Internal and External Quality Assurance

Internal and external quality assurance procedures complement each other in many ways. An internal quality assurance process with preparation of a self-assessment report is a critical core element of the external quality assurance process. A set of standards and criteria, pre-determined by the national quality assurance system, usually forms the basis for the self-evaluation report.

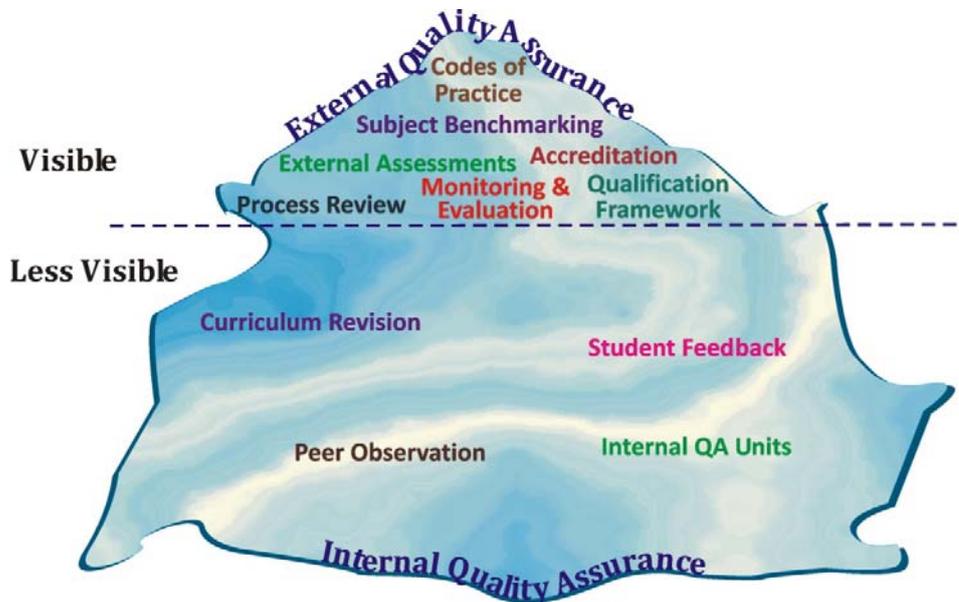


Such standards and criteria are usually developed through nation-wide consultations to ensure wide participation of the stakeholders. A thorough quality assurance exercise needs a good set of information on the pre-determined criteria and standards to sustain quality judgments.

There is a Close Link between IQA & EQA

- *“Internal Reviews and Assessments are more accurate and fruitful than those done by outside agencies”* [Martin Trow, 1995]
- *“There can be a synergy between external and internal assessment processes, but external monitoring can never stand alone and will never be able to replace valuable internal quality monitoring”* - [Kristensen, 1997]

External quality assurance can play a very important role in strengthening internal quality assurance. Identification of the criteria used for external quality assurance can inform institutions of what they need to focus on in developing and strengthening their internal quality assurance processes. Explicit acknowledgement by the external quality assurance agency that the effectiveness of internal quality assurance practices in an institution will be taken into account during the external review process will help to further strengthen internal processes. External quality assurance can also help an institution to identify which internal processes are working well and those that need to be strengthened further, as well as those that may need to be introduced because they may be currently non-existent in the institution.



When considering Internal and External QA, we can notice the effect of the ice-berg concept as in the above figure. Internal QA is the most important aspect whether it is less visible.

Suggested composition of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit

In 2005, it was suggested that Internal Quality Assurance Units (IQAU) in Sri Lankan Universities be appointed by the Senate with the following minimum composition:

- Chaired by a Senior Academic appointed by the Senate;
- Deans of all Faculties and / or a nominee from each Faculty, recommended by the Faculty Board;
- Registrar or his nominee;
- Bursar or his nominee;
- Librarian or his nominee;
- Director, Staff Development Centre.
- Convener/Secretary to be elected by the Unit from among its members.

The Chairperson should report directly to the Vice-Chancellor.

It was further suggested that the Vice-Chancellor be invited to attend meetings that discuss issues of particular importance.

Functions and Responsibilities of the IQAU

It is suggested that the responsibilities of the IQAU should include among others the following activities:

- Co-ordination of all QA related activities within the institution;
- Liaising with UGC/QAA Council and other external QA agencies;
- Implementation of QA Reviews/Audits and follow-up action;
- Preparation of institutional self-evaluation report;
- Provision of advice on QA to all Faculties and Departments
- Monitoring and guidance in Faculty level QA activities;
- Organization, where necessary, of awareness programmes on QA for the staff members;
- Quality and QA aspects in the institution's corporate plan;
- Facilitation of identification and sharing of good practices between academic Departments;
- Preparation of QA-related guidelines and manuals for use within the institution (e.g. academic regulations, equipment manuals, laboratory manuals etc.)
- Ensure the necessary Academic Regulations/By-Laws are in place, and if not, make recommendations for remedial action.

Suggested activities include:

- Establishment of a well equipped IQAU in Universities;
- Conduct Faculty level Awareness Programmes among staff members;
- Establishment of Faculty QA Cells, and defining their duties and responsibilities;
- Initiate and support preparation of SER for Institutional Reviews;
- Motivate as many Departments as possible to prepare SERs for Subject/Programme Reviews.

It is expected that IQAU will report to the University Senate on a monthly basis.

Activities of the IQAU are Establishment of a well equipped IQAU in Universities, Conduct Faculty level Awareness Programmes among staff members, Establishment of Faculty QA Cells, and defining their duties and responsibilities, Initiate preparation of SER for Institutional Reviews, Motivate as many Departments as possible to prepare SERs for Subject/Programme Reviews.

There are several difficulties encountered when conducting activities on Quality Assurance in Universities: limited number of academic staff interested to promote activities pertaining to quality assurance, the quality assurance cells in some Faculties were not very active, Regular meetings were not conducted to promote QA activities, Lack of lecture/tutorial rooms/exam halls and Inadequate lab equipment & consumables.

Several remarks are identified to upgrade the QA activities among the University consortia

- To explore the possibility conducting a need analysis and implementing comprehensive curricula for the degree programmes so as to increase the demand in the job market and also to enable exploring new dimensions for graduates to expand their horizons
- To introduce credit transfer system teaching/learning among inter Faculty, inter Department in order to facilitate students to upgrade their knowledge and skills
- To encourage the development of quality systems, ensure compliance, consolidate research activity and infrastructure
- To obtain the assistance from Alumni to improve the quality of its graduate's to cater the employment demand
- Promote the University while regularizing QA activities to ensure the quality of the degree programmes in order to reach new dimensions
- To share good practices of Universities/Faculties which QA Units are very much active and share their knowledge with others
- To activate the QA Cells in Faculties
- To implement proper monitoring and evaluation mechanism in order to ensure that the activities are aligned with the specified objects of QA Project.

By-laws

The University Council should appoint a central body, which may be named the Internal Quality Assurance Unit, headed by a Chairperson, to plan, organize, develop, facilitate and monitor all internal quality assurance programmes and activities.

The Chairperson should be appointed for a period of three years. He/she should be a Professor or a senior academic staff member of the university with substantial experience and knowledge in staff development. The university authorities should provide office space, supportive staff, and logistics for the Chairperson / IQAU to carry out his duties smoothly. The IQAU should prepare an annual work plan and submit it to the University Senate and the Council for approval before commencing a calendar year.

CONCLUSION

There should not be any strict directives/instructions as how to develop IQA mechanisms within the context of each institution. Idea is for each institution to develop their own system which is most appropriate to the institutional environment and uniqueness. It is expected that IQA mechanisms would bring the staff members in the same institution together

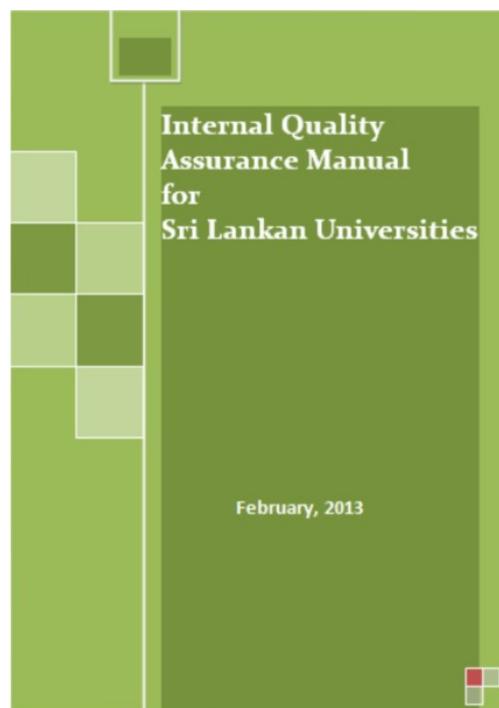
- to share and learn from each other
- to publicize the good practices and
- to appreciate the achievements & contributions of one another.

Implementation of IQA mechanisms would create a sense of responsibility and a new awareness of process approach throughout the institution. The ultimate goal of the IQA mechanisms is to create the '*Quality Culture*' within the institution

- that would be based around an internal system of continuous quality improvement which seeks to provide quality education through a holistic approach on a day to day basis.

REFERENCES

- Internal Quality Assurance Manual for Sri Lankan Universities



Source: (<http://www.qaacouncil.lk/publications/Internal%20QA%20Manual%20-%202013.pdf>)