EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AT PROGRAM LEVEL: STANDARDS & PERSPECTIVES

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EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AT PROGRAM LEVEL: STANDARDS & PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT:

Universities are public institutions. They hold and must conscientiously exercise, and be seen to exercise, their responsibility for quality and standards. Higher education is a 'public good' and is of crucial importance to the health, wealth and well being of society and the economy in Sri Lanka. University accountability for quality and standards is a key factor in promoting and safeguarding public confidence in Sri Lankan higher education. The following **General Principles** apply to the quality assurance procedures adopted for the purpose of programme review in Sri Lanka:

- To safeguard the standards of awards and the quality of delivery of academic programmes in Sri Lanka

- To encourage good management of academic institutions

- To identify and share good practice in the provision of education

- To develop a national quality assurance system in Sri Lanka that combines institutional review, with programme level review

- To implement procedures that are based on academic peer review, combined with strong administrative support at national and institutional level

- To provide sufficient funds nationally to cover the central costs of the quality assurance system, to support quality assurance in individual universities/institutions

- To enable funding judgments to be taken on the basis of the outcomes of reviews

- To recruit a national team of academic reviewers, all of whom will receive training for institutional and Programme review

- To implement the system in such a way as to make use of existing structures, documents and other materials wherever possible, rather than to introduce additional bureaucracy.

INTRODUCTION

Programme Review (PR) evaluates the quality of the student learning experiences at programme level. It is about management and assurance of quality at programme, rather than institutional level. Internal evaluation of the quality of education at programme level is normally part of a university's quality assurance scheme.

The main features of the programme review method are:

- Teaching staff conduct an analytical self-evaluation according to pre-set review aspects and submit report

- An external peer review is conducted by an external review panel, consisting mainly of academic staff with significant experience as programme review practitioners

- The site visit enables the external review team to:

  - Review relevant supporting documents such as : examples of student work, student handbooks, statistics covering student progress and achievement, external examiner's reports, minutes of programme review committees

  - Observe teaching

  - Hold discussions with Programme staff to discuss statements made in the self evaluation and supporting documents

  - Hold discussions with support and administrative staff concerning university quality assurance and resources matters

  - Obtain students' views on the quality of learning experience in their programme of study

Main Features of the PR

- Peer review

- Production of an analytical Self-Evaluation by the academic staff delivering the programmes

- Review against the aims and intended student learning outcomes contained in the Self-Evaluation

- Review visit of 3 days

- An overall judgment, contained in a short report

The aims and learning outcomes contained in the self-evaluation provide an important reference point for PR. Reviewers evaluate the quality of education in the faculty/degree programme(s) under review according to the aims and learning outcomes aspired to by the subject team. Reviewers do not use any externally set standards against which the programmes are judged.

Aspects of PR

1. Curriculum Design, Content and Review
2. Teaching and Learning

3. Assessment Methods

4. Quality of Students, including Student Progress and Achievement

5. The Extent and Use of Student Feedback, Qualitative and Quantitative

6. Postgraduate Studies

7. Peer Observation

8. Skills Development

9. Academic Guidance and Counseling

Review against Aims and Intended Student Learning Outcomes

The aims and learning outcomes contained in the self-evaluation provide an important reference point for programme review. They are also published in the programme review report. Reviewers evaluate the quality of education in the programme under review according to the aims and learning outcomes aspired to by the programme team. They do not use any externally set standards against which the programme is judged.

This means that the university mission, the staff and student profile and the nature of the programme is evaluated according to the aims and learning outcomes set by programme itself and allows the programme review process to take account of diversity of institutions and students.

Checklist of Criteria for Program Review Process

A checklist of criteria has been developed in relation to each of the nine educational aspects under review. For more information refer Annex1. It is given in the following tables as a **guide** for reviewers to check if they have collected the necessary information and have covered all the areas pertinent to each review aspect. Reviewers are **not** expected to verify all of the criteria given in the list, but to check on as many as possible during the review visit.

Reviewers should feel free to add any extra criteria that they feel are important, but are not included in the checklist.

1. Curriculum Design, Content and Review

This section should review the effectiveness of the content and the design of the curriculum in enabling students to achieve the intended learning outcomes of the programme under review. It should refer to the relevant aims and learning outcomes in the introduction of the self evaluation, and summarise how the curriculum enables these to be achieved. In summary, this section should be written to address the following questions. In relation to the design and content of the curriculum, the reviewers are likely to ask how appropriate the curriculum design is to the intended student learning outcomes.

They will take into account whether:

- The programme and units within it are at a suitable academic level;
- There are sufficient opportunities for students to gain suitable subject knowledge and Understanding, intellectual and analytical skills and personal transferable skills;
- There is both sufficient breadth and depth in terms of subject coverage;

- The programme is organised so as to make suitable intellectual demands on students as they progress through the curriculum;
- There is sufficient flexibility and student choice;

2. Teaching and Learning

This section should begin with a summary of the teaching and learning environment associated with the programme being reviewed.

Then, there should be an overview of the teaching and learning methods used in the programme. There should be a rationale for the use of different teaching and learning activities, saying why each has been chosen for the various parts of the programme.

It is often helpful to append to the self-evaluation a matrix for each programme, showing how the different learning outcomes (subject-specific, intellectual and analytical ability and personal/transferable skills) are: (a) acquired through the learning opportunities provided in the various core modules, and (b) assessed. This matrix can then be referred to in the self evaluation.

Reviewers will consider, overall, how teaching and learning methods enable and facilitate the acquisition of the specified learning outcomes by students. Questions they may ask include the following:

- What is the teaching and learning strategy for the programme being reviewed?
- How does it articulate with the programme stated aims?
- Does it enable students to achieve intended learning outcomes?
- Are learning outcomes clear to students and staff?
- From the evidence provided (including external examiners' reports, teaching and learning materials, student feedback, teaching observations, meetings with students), what strengths and weaknesses emerge?

3. Assessment Methods

This section should begin with a summary of assessment methods used in the programme being reviewed. These shall be categorized into 'summative' and 'formative' assessments. There should be a rationale for the use of different assessment methods, saying why each has been chosen for the various parts of the programme. It is good to show how these methods are used to achieve the learning outcomes specified (subject-specific, intellectual and analytical ability and personal / transferable skills) in matrix format.

Questions the reviewer may ask include the following:

- What are the different types of assessments methods use in the programme?
- How do they articulate with the programme stated aims?
- Do they enable students to achieve intended learning outcomes?
- Are assessment requirements clear to students and staff?
- Are assessment methods suitably balanced, e.g. so that there is not undue reliance on unseen examinations, and do they test whether learning outcomes have been achieved?

4. Quality of Students, including Student Progress and Achievement

This section should cover the recruitment and admissions procedures in the programme being reviewed, the effect of teaching, learning and assessment strategies on student progression, and the extent of academic support that is provided for students in the learning process (and how this varies depending on the quality of the students being recruited).

Recruitment and admissions
There should be a brief description of the recruitment and admissions process, together with a rationale for the procedures used and how they contribute to meeting the programme aims. Issues concerning the selection of students and also the practicalities of the admissions process should be explored. There should be an analytical account of the student profile and how it fits with the programme aims in the introduction to the self-evaluation.

Progress and completion
reference should be made in the self-evaluation to statistical information, which will include data on year-on-year progress with the programme. Comment should be made on whether progress and completion rates are satisfactory, identifying trends and evaluating the reasons for unusual or unexpected statistical evidence.

This section should also comment on student achievement, in terms of academic standards, with reference made to institutional academic standards and national subject standards, including the requirements of any accrediting organisations. Where relevant, reference should be made to the national and institutional qualifications frameworks.

Student achievement
Student achievement should correspond to:

- The level at which students enter the programme;
- The "added value" anticipated as a result of studying at the institution;
- The intended learning outcomes for the programme.

Reviewers will use the examples of student work provided to help them assess whether or not student achievement is satisfactory, together with the statistical information provided and any other relevant information. They will also use meetings with students to evaluate this element, and external examiners' reports.

5. Generic Skills Development

Embedding of student skills development in academic programme is considered a priority by all major stakeholders in higher education. The way in which this is done is important to the success with which students develop skills. Skills development is more likely to succeed if teaching, learning and assessment methods in the subject they are studying are designed to enable development of personal skills at the same time as acquisition of subject knowledge and understanding.

Reviewers will be looking for evidence of opportunities for students to develop personal skills and will be interested in whether they are assessed on these abilities, as well as subject-specific knowledge.

Questions they might ask include the following:

- Does the programme have a strategy for skills development as part of the curriculum?
- If so, how is this achieved - is the strategy successful?
- If not, are there special modules dedicated to student skills development?
- What are the skills the programme intends students to acquire?
- Are these clearly expressed in student learning outcomes?

6. Academic Guidance and Counseling

This is an important area of student support. The self-evaluation should indicate the extent of academic guidance and counselling available to students, and by whom it is provided. It might be that this section of the document will also touch on personal guidance and counselling, because of the frequent links between academic and personal problems.

The self-evaluation should make clear the strategies for academic support in the programme, including making clear what individual responsibilities are. Any peer mentoring, for example by final year students for first years, should be included here.

Questions reviewers might ask include the following:

- What is the programme's strategy for providing effective academic guidance and counselling to students?
- How do they know whether or not it is working?
- What training do staff (and, if appropriate, students) receive in preparation for their role as academic counsellor or personal tutor?
- Do students receive effective academic guidance from the point of application to receiving their final award?
- Do arrangements for academic guidance match the student profile, the way in which the curriculum is structured and the teaching, learning and assessment methods used?

7. The Extent of Use of Student Feedback

This section should cover the programme's use of student feedback, both qualitative and quantitative. Reviewers might expect to find evidence of the use of student questionnaires, student forums, student/staff liaison committees, etc. As with student progression and achievement, reviewers will use the meetings with students to check the extent to which the programme regularly seeks and acts upon students' views.

Questions reviewers might ask concerning this section are as follows.

- How is student feedback obtained and at what intervals?
- Does the feedback cover both module and programme information?
- What methods does the programme use to seek student feedback?
- Is there student representation on programme's committees?
- Is there a dedicated student/staff liaison committee?
- What do the minutes of committees on which students are represented indicate?

8. Peer Observation

Reviewers will expect to find some evidence that the programme monitors the quality of teaching provided to students, has mechanisms to share good practice, and has procedures for enhancing the quality of teaching. This section should describe the peer observation practices used by the programme and also evaluate the extent to which this is used to improve teaching performance.

Questions reviewers are likely to ask include the following:

- Does the programme have a procedure for observing teaching?
- Does this apply to all staff, including part-time and visiting staff?
- Is the quality of teaching carried out by research students monitored?
- Are peer observation procedures effective?
- What is the evidence for this?
- Does the staff perceive the peer observation process to be helpful in enhancing teaching quality? Is academic staff external to the programme involved in peer observation?

9. Postgraduate Studies

This part of the self-evaluation should cover all aspects of the support, guidance, facilities and training provided for research students. It should look in detail at supervisory arrangements, expectations about completion, suspension and / or extension of studies, training opportunities, including research methods, etc.

Questions reviewers might ask about this aspect are as follows:

- What are the numbers of research students in the programme?
- Are staff numbers sufficient to support them generally?
- Is the quality of staff sufficient to provide academic guidance and leadership for the dissertation topics students are currently engaged in?
- What are the supervisory arrangements for students?
- Are there programme's mechanisms to ensure that supervisors have sufficient time to spend with research students?
- What are student completion rates?
- How are students funded?

Annex 1 – CHECKLIST OF CRITERIA FOR PROGRAMME REVIEW PROCESS

The checklist below can be used to evaluate whether the programme in concern is *"SATISFIED" (ST)* or *"UNSATISFIED" (US)* with respect to each of the criterion explained below:

1. Curriculum Design, Content and Review

Scope: The effectiveness of the design and the content of the curriculum in enabling students to achieve the intended learning outcomes of the study programme under review.

Criteria	*Sources of Evidence*	*ST / UN*
1.1 The programme objectives are clearly defined in the curriculum	University or Faculty Handbook for students; Curriculum document(s)	
1.2 The programme objectives and intended learning outcomes (ILOs) focus on development of appropriate knowledge among students	Curriculum document(s)	
1.3 The programme objectives and intended learning outcomes (ILOs) focus on development of appropriate skills among students	Curriculum document(s)	
1.4 The programme objectives and intended learning outcomes (ILOs) focus on development of appropriate attitudes among students	Curriculum document(s)	
1.5 The programme objectives and intended learning outcomes match the standards specified in the relevant Programme Benchmark Statement (SBS)	Programme Benchmark Statement; Curriculum document(s); Interaction with academic staff	
1.6 The courses and credit hours in the curriculum are appropriate to the relevant degree programme	Programme Benchmark Statement; Curriculum document(s); Interaction with staff and students	
1.7 The course contents include all core areas identified in the SBS (or all important areas)	Programme Benchmark Statement; Curriculum document(s)	
1.8 The curriculum provides student choice and flexibility as recommended in the relevant SBS	Programme Benchmark Statement; Curriculum document(s); Interaction with staff and students	
1.9 The curriculum incorporates multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary elements	Curriculum document(s); Interaction with staff	

2. Teaching and Learning

Scope: How teaching and learning methods adopted by the Department enable and facilitate the acquisition of the specified learning outcomes by students.

Criteria	*Sources of Evidence*	*ST / UN*
2.1 The Departments / Faculty has sufficient staff (academic and non-academic), and the academic staff possesses appropriate academic qualifications, skills and expertise for their positions	University / Faculty handbook Interaction with academic staff, Dean and Vice-Chancellor	
2.2 The institution has a realistic academic calendar that is followed meticulously	Year planner, learning and teaching plan, operational schedules, discussions with VC, Dean, and HOD, interaction with staff and students	
2.3 The available teaching and learning facilities (lecture rooms, laboratories, library, internet access, etc) are satisfactory	Observation of facilities by the review team, Interaction with academic and non-academic staff and students, Discussions with Dean, HOD, Librarian, Director/IT	
2.4 The students are aware of the ILOs for each course unit / module	Interaction with students	
2.5 The learning system is student-centered rather than teacher-centered	Interaction with staff and students Observation of timetables and curriculum documents	
2.6 Course materials such as course outlines and handouts, are made available to students in a timely manner; they are relevant and quality assured	Observation of course materials by the review team, Interaction with staff and students	
2.7 Students are given sufficient opportunity to acquire relevant subject-specific skills through scheduled work in laboratories, the field, community, industry, etc.	Observation of facilities, course materials and timetables by review team; Interaction with staff and students	
2.8 The teaching-learning process enables students to achieve the stated ILOs	Interaction with staff and students Observation of timetables and curriculum documents	

3. Assessment Methods

Scope: How the assessment methods adopted by the Department enable it to assess the achievement of intended learning outcomes by students.

Criteria	*Sources of Evidence*	*ST / UN*
3.1 A range of different methods are used to assess students in an objective, unbiased and confidential manner	University / Faculty handbook for students; Test papers observed by review team; Interaction with staff and students	
3.2 The system of assessment ensures that students have achieved the ILOs (including subject-specific and generic skills) and programme objectives	Curriculum document(s); Past test papers, answer scripts and course work submitted by students; Interaction with staff and students	
3.3 Students are aware of how and when they will be assessed	University / Faculty handbook for students; Interaction with students	
3.4 Question papers are moderated by senior academic staff	Examiner lists in minutes of Faculty Board / Senate meetings; Interaction with academic staff	
3.5 Marking schemes are used in marking answer scripts	Past test papers and marking schemes	
3.6 Answer scripts are second marked by senior / external examiners	Examiner lists in minutes of Faculty Board / Senate meetings; Interaction with academic staff	
3.7 Examination results are usually released in a timely manner (preferably within 6 weeks of completion of exam)	Minutes of Senate meetings; Notices of examination results	
3.8 Students are given an opportunity to appeal examination results	Interaction with staff and students University / Faculty handbook for students	

4. Quality of Students, Including Student Progress and Achievement

Scope: The recruitment and admissions procedures for the programmes under review, the effect of teaching, learning, and assessment strategies on student progression.

Criteria	*Sources of Evidence*	*ST / UN*
4.1 Entry requirements and other prerequisites for programmes and courses are clearly specified prior to entry	UGC prospectus on students admission, Faculty hand book, brochures, etc.; Interaction with students	
4.2 Students entering the study programme are of high quality as judged by GCE Advanced Level examination z-scores or 1st examination results	Summary documents provided by Departments / Faculty	
4.3 The programme has an up to date and integrated database about students and their academic progress	MIS, student profiles, discussion with officials	

Criteria	Sources of Evidence	
4.4 The programme monitors student progress by semester with summary of examination results, as well as data on progression in subject, award of classes, drop-out rates and completion rates; such rates are satisfactory	Summary documents provided by Departments / Faculty; Interaction with staff and students	

5. Generic skills Development

Scope: Opportunities within the study programme for students to develop personal as well as subject specific skills.

Criteria	Sources of Evidence	ST / UN
5.1 The curriculum encourages students to develop generic skills pertaining to proficiency in English and Information Technology	Curriculum documents; Course materials; Timetables	
5.2 The institution has sufficient facilities and staff to facilitate students development of proficiency in English and IT	Observation by review team; Interaction with staff and students	
5.3 The students' proficiency in English and IT are assessed	Interaction with staff and students University / Faculty handbook for students; Past question papers / answer scripts	
5.4 The programme has strategies for development of soft skills (especially presentation skills and teamwork) among students, including the availability of a range of extra-curricular activities	Curriculum documents, Time tables, Course materials; Interaction with students; Discussions with staff with oversight of extra-curricular activities	
5.5 The programme has links with other student support services in the University (eg. Career Guidance Unit)	Discussions with staff and students	
5.6 The programme has consulted relevant stakeholders regarding the generic skills that graduates should possess	Curriculum development documents Minutes of Departmental / Faculty Board meetings	

6. Academic Guidance and Counseling

Scope: The extent of academic guidance and counseling available to students and by whom it is provided.

Criteria	Sources of Evidence	ST / UN
6.1 The programme has strategies to provide academic guidance to its students at appropriate levels, on a regular basis	Interaction with academic staff and students; Curriculum documents, timetables, course materials	
6.2 The programme has strategies for providing academic counseling to individual students who need it	Appointment letters issued by higher authorities; Interaction with academic staff and student counsellors; Discussions with VC, Dean	
6.3 The students are aware of how the programme provides academic guidance and counseling and they make use of this facility	Interaction with students	
6.4 The students receive effective academic guidance	Interaction with students	
6.5 Student progress is regularly monitored in a formal manner	Interaction with staff and students; Summary data provided by Dept	
6.6 Academic staff members are trained in providing students with academic guidance and counselling	Interactions with academic staff	

7. The Extent of Use of Student Feedback

Scope: The department's use of feedback from students, both qualitative and quantitative.

Criteria	Sources of Evidence	ST/ UN
7.1 The programme has formal mechanisms and procedures in place to obtain feedback from students	Department records on student feedback; Interaction with staff and students	
7.2 Student feedback is obtained regularly, analysed and utilized to enhance the quality of teaching	Department records on student feedback; Interaction with staff and students	
7.3 Student views are taken into consideration in curriculum revision and other decision-making processes	Department records on student feedback; Interaction with staff and students, Curriculum development documents	
7.4 Students are aware that feedback from them has informed the teaching-learning processes and decision-making processes adopted by the programme	Interaction with students	

8. Peer Observation

Scope: The department's strategy for monitoring the quality of teaching provided to students, its mechanisms to share good practices among academic staff, and its procedures for enhancing the quality of teaching.

Criteria	Sources of Evidence	ST/ UN
8.1 The programme has a formal system of peer review of teaching, which is practiced by all academic staff members on a regular basis	Departmental records on peer observation; Interaction with academic staff; Discussions with Dean	
8.2 Peer observation outcomes are triangulated with students' feedback to enhance quality of teaching	Departmental records on peer observation and student feedback; Interaction with academic staff Discussions with Dean	
8.3 The programme has regular meetings to discuss academic matters.	Minutes of departmental meetings Interaction with academic and non-academic staff	
8.4 Senior staff are involved in moderation and scrutiny of question papers if they are set by junior staff	Examiner lists in minutes of Faculty Board / Senate meetings Interaction with academic staff	

9.0 Postgraduate Studies

Scope: All aspects of the support, guidance, facilities and training and training provided for post graduate and research students.

Criteria	Sources of Evidence	ST / UN
9.1 Academic staff of the programme are involved in postgraduate teaching and research	Academic staff profile and their CVs Publications by academic staff Interactions with academic staff and PG students	
9.2 The programme conducts taught postgraduate programmes of study	University / Faculty handbook on PG degree programmes; Records on PG students enrolment; Interaction with PG students	
9.3 The programme has post graduate students registered for research degrees	University / Faculty handbook on PG degree programmes; Records on PG students enrolment; Interaction with PG students	
9.4 Supervisors of postgraduate students have adequate qualifications and experience	Academic staff profile and their CVs	
9.5 Facilities available for postgraduate research in the programme are adequate	Observation of facilities; Interaction with staff and PG students	

13