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ANTICIPATING AND RESPONDING TO CHANGE: CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES IN QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION – SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT:

The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) in Sri Lanka conducted activities in public universities under the guidance and recommendations of the Standing Committee on QAA. By the end of December 2009, the QAAC was established as a division of the University Grants Commission (UGC). QAAC has become the first quality assured agency in the Asia Pacific Region and has both membership of APQN and INQAAHE.

The concept of QA in higher education is a new phenomenon to the Sri Lankan university system, and as such the need for an active awareness campaign at the initial stage was strongly felt. Awareness programmes for academic staff were launched in the year 2005, and up to now almost all faculties' (82) and departments (478) of all public universities were visited. A detailed account on the activities of the QAA Council as well as the external assessment process is provided through these awareness programs. After the completion of the awareness programs for academic staff, QAA Council intends to launch similar awareness programs for administrative & non-academic staff and students.

The principal achievement of the QAA Council is the successful establishment of a national QA function for public universities. This has achieved a great deal in eight (8) years, including developing of Codes of Practice (13 Parts) and a Credit and Qualification Framework (100% completion), as well as undertaking 17 Institutional Reviews, 318 Subject/Programme Reviews and 15 Library Reviews. Also 44 Subject Benchmark Statements were developed with the participation of senior academics and other experts in other institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The higher education sector in Sri Lanka has been expanding during the last three decades. This includes the establishment of higher education institutions by the government and the private sector as well. Today, there are **15** state universities established under the University Grants Commission (UGC) and in addition, there are various other institutions offering higher education (Diplomas and degrees). Fifteen state universities constitute a total of **82** academic faculties and **478** academic departments. The total number of bachelor's degree programmes (study programmes) offered collectively by the state sector is **129**.

In Sri Lanka preparatory work on quality assurance system was commenced in 2001 jointly by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Directors (CVCD) and the University Grants Commission (UGC). The QA Handbook was published and distributed to all the higher education institutions in mid 2002.

A committee on QA was established under the CVCD and through this committee the initial work on training the reviewers for institution and subject/programme reviews were undertaken. A Standing Committee on Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) and a Department of QAA were established under the UGC by the end of 2004. The Dept. of QAA under the UGC thereafter became a part of the World Bank project on Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education (IRQUE) and renamed as QAA Council by the end of August 2005. By the end of December 2009, the QAAC was established as a division of the University Grants Commission (UGC).

The QAAC has networked very successfully in the Asia Pacific region and has also drawn heavily on the work of the UK's Quality Assurance Agency and the work of the international Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Should it become the basis for the future national QA agency, it is well-placed to build on its contacts and reputation so that it can be at the forefront of international best practice.

NEED OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Industrial models of Quality Assurance (QA) are not easily adapted to the needs of the higher education sector. Customer-Centered definitions are widely accepted throughout industry and commerce and imply that customer perception & opinion is the key element in defining quality of a product or service.

Quality Assurance is a subset of Higher Education. Therefore, major challenges in higher education are common to quality assurance process. Thus, the following challenges can be identified in almost all developing countries.

- lack of relevance of many study programs to cater to the current needs in the employment sectors
- moderate quality of courses and study programs in the majority of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)
- poor mastery of English Language and ICT skills of graduates creating deficiencies in the graduate profiles
- the absence of a National Qualification Framework with pathways between the various types of HEIs, programs and courses
- inadequate Quality Assurance mechanisms for the entire public and private HE sectors

- the large proportion of students (nearly 60%) enrolled in External Degree Programs (EDPs) with minimal academic support;
- the substantially poorer coverage and quality of HE in lagging regions such as the Northern and Eastern Provinces
- weak research and knowledge linkages between HEIs and the industrial and service sectors of the economy
- small and weak segment of short–technical and job oriented HEIs, which constitute a healthy alternative to universities in many countries which have built a successful HE system, responsive to the needs of the economy
- the need for HEIs to play a prominent role in the social and cultural life of the country, particularly to promote a favorable environment for a pluralist, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

The work of the QAAC has given Sri Lanka a leadership role in the Asia Pacific region, as regards the scale and scope of its quality assurance activities at the national level in university first degree programs. The QA process now needs to be broadened and deepened to cover external degree programs, postgraduate degrees, the alternative higher education sector, and open and distance learning.

The analysis shows that the quality assurance process has made an excellent start in the university undergraduate sector. This process now needs to be expanded to cover the entire Sri Lankan higher education system. This is a Priority need to be addressed in the future.

EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSESSMENTS

A significant number of academics also have been trained to carry out quality assurance evaluation exercise. The efforts taken by all concerned to reach the present status in the External Quality Assessment (EQA) is remarkable. However, The QAA Council (QAAC) is currently addressing the issues related to gaps in the process of developing the basic framework, to ensure total and sustainable quality assurance in all aspects. For this purpose, concerted effort is being made to educate the administrators and other staff carrying out diverse duties in their respective fields and departments. The QAAC believes that once the recommendations made in the reports of reviewers are fulfilled, the quality of the education in the universities of Sri Lanka will be enhanced to be compatible with the universities that have risen to the top levels in the international ranking.

The QAA Council is carrying out several activities to bring out information in quality culture and sharing good practice to promote quality in the programmes conducted by the higher education institutions. One of the main functions of the QAA Council is to review the standard and quality of the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and its programmes of study and to publicize the outcome to all stakeholders to achieve accountability. For this purpose the QAA Council conducts external quality assessments for Institutional Reviews (IRs), Subject/Programme Reviews (SR/PRs) and Library Reviews (LRs).

External Quality Assessment (EQA) is the major component of QA framework in Sri Lanka. The main function of EQA is to review the standard and quality of the HEIs and its programmes of study and to provide the outcome to stakeholders to observe their expectations.

Considerable progress has been achieved so far with regard to the SR process. The QAA Council was able to complete the first review cycle in public universities. This is the first time that their own performance has been assessed by professional colleagues in a systematic way. It is welcoming to note that many have accepted the benefits from an external assessment.

The QAA Council has completed the 1st review cycle of EQAs in public universities and so many valuable information is available but hardly used by anyone. At the same time there was no organized mechanism to monitor and evaluate the outcome of the EQAs in universities. The web based monitoring and evaluation system for EQAs were designed to overcome these difficulties

The implementation of the web based monitoring and evaluation system for external quality assessment would be an important landmark of quality assurance sector in higher education if achieved successfully. The relevant officials can periodically monitor and evaluate the performance of each university and respective faculties. It provides the officials of the UGC/Ministry/other Donor Agencies with bases for policy options in higher education and its decisions for development assistance and incentives to HEIs.

However, still there are some academic members within the system who consider the entire QA programme as an additional burden. They feel that more emphasis on documenting evidence is a time consuming distraction from the real business of teaching and research.

Student/Learner base Teaching Methods and Student Assessments

The most highlighted challenges in introducing student/learner-centered teaching methods to the Sri Lankan HEIs include: (1) the need for rapid, but significant, changes to conventional curricula/courses; (2) the lack of competent manpower to act as curriculum developers and competent trainers to train them; (3) inadequate physical infrastructure (i.e. lectures halls, audio-video aids etc), and (4) the lack of exposure and/or negative attitudes of certain academics/administrators towards a radical change in their teaching methods and assessment criteria. In fact, most of these issues arise coupled with their lack of awareness on the use and effectiveness of such techniques to achieve the desired level of quality in teaching.

Despite the issues mentioned above, over the last few years, we have observed, and possess evidence to show, that the majority of academics have recognized the importance of being innovative in teaching, and in turn, the faculties / degree programs / courses have made substantial efforts to move away from the least effective traditional teacher-centered methods (i.e. lectures) by transforming such, at least in part, into novel student-centered approaches.

Given the pressure from various external forces; mostly from the direct stakeholders to make the degree programs innovative and job-oriented, today the academics who are also the administrators in their faculties for the most part, take the initiative to revise their lecture plans with the incorporation of at least a few number of student-centered methods to make them more attractive for students. Though the resource-base needed to carry out such methods in full-scale is limited (e.g. web-based teaching, audio-video conferring), most teachers are in a position to bring the students back to class and encourage their participation and attentiveness through continuous assessments and student-oriented class work (e.g. debates, role-play, brainstorm sessions, power point presentations, preparation of portfolio, group work simulations, demonstrations etc.). Introduction of peer review and student

feedback mechanisms at the level of faculties and departments have helped both teachers and students to discuss and implement new ideas to fill the gaps identified in delivering the course content.

In addition to the difficulties and challenges we have highlighted elsewhere, insufficient lab space, disoriented lecture rooms, transport and other logistics make it difficult for academics to reap the maximum out of their work. In fact, the majority of academics are used to practicing a limited number of such innovative activities in class and also the lack of recognition in terms of rewards for the use of these techniques, accreditation of degree programs/courses etc. can be seen as limiting factors hindering the adoption of these effective and efficient methods in teaching.

Currently almost all faculties in the university system have completed or are in the process of revising their curricula by incorporating innovative teaching and assessment criteria. Thus, there is a pressing need to support curriculum revisions to achieve the required changes. Most academics try their best to experiment at least one simple innovative technique with the available resources and modify these through peer reviews and student feedback while attempting to update themselves with more new ones. Their desire to learn and implement the novel techniques is quite evident by their interest to participate in trainings to investigate the latest and effective methods in use.

Curriculum Revision and Reforms

The subject/programme reviews conducted by the QAA Council indicates that about **55%** curricular of academic departments are in the good category and **42%** is satisfactory with the rest being in unsatisfactory category. Though the percentage of departments in unsatisfactory group is low, it is a matter which needs a serious concern because this is an issue dealing with the quality of higher education. The satisfactory category appearing with a percentage of **42%** is also an issue which needs to be addressed. Among the universities, only one university has been able to get good grades for 100% of departments with contrast to 6 universities recording below **50%**. This again gives individual universities to think about their situation with regard to curricular.

has conducted **24** such workshops on curriculum revision. The total number of related workshops conducted by QAA since 2007 is **29**.

In major discipline wise (*Figure 1*), 2% each in Agriculture and Science are unsatisfactory in their curricular. All other disciplines do not carry unsatisfactory grade for the same aspect, however a majority of disciplines have a considerable fraction fall in satisfactory category.

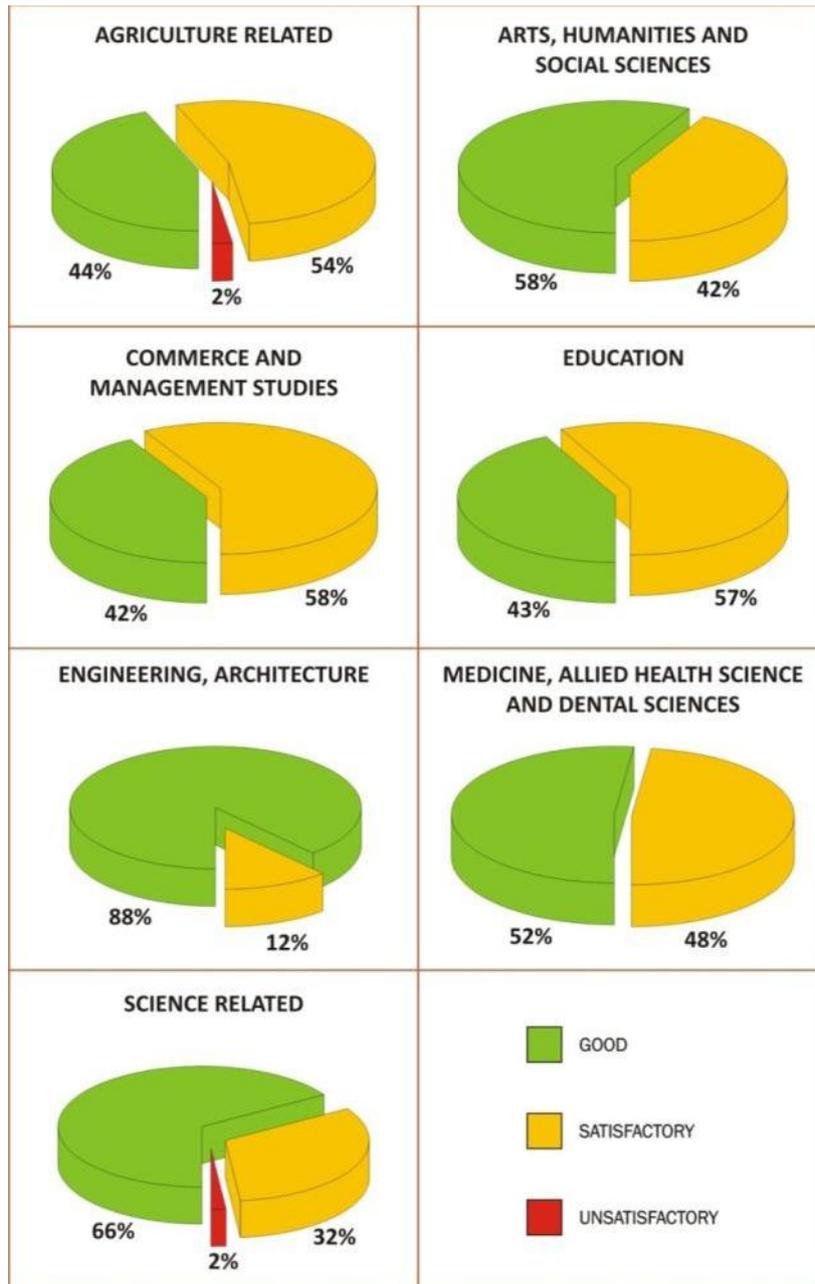


Figure 1. Review Outcome of Curriculum Design, Content and Review in Major Disciplines

The attention paid by Universities and UGC on upgrading what the university delivers to the country was very low till 2001. There was a slight improvement in this process during period from 2001 to 2005. This was the same time period when the new form of educational reforms was first introduced to universities. However, at that a large majority of study programmes was not interested in these reforms. This could be partly due to insufficient knowledge about need for reforms, scarcity of knowledgeable persons in the sector, and not trying a systematic procedure of introducing and implementing reforms by the authority.

The subject benchmark statements as well as others pertaining to teaching learning, assessments, postgraduate degrees, student feedback etc., issued by the QAA Council of the UGC provide guidelines for quality of study programmes and should be adopted and used for improvement of quality in many universities.

It wishes to commend many universities have taken to develop the necessary documented quality assurance procedures (i.e. Academic Quality Procedures Handbook, together with Academic Regulations, Codes of Practice and Guideline) which would help all the Departments to assure quality of the programmes offered.

The following points are illustrated the some of the success of the EQAs in university system:

- Devising a very comprehensive strategy for quality assurance at both University and Faculty levels and completing all reviews,
- Establishing functional quality assurance mechanism within the university, and initiating action to develop the necessary documented quality assurance procedures,
- Providing incentives, such as the Outstanding Research Awards scheme to academic staff to improve research output and getting patents owned jointly by the university and the respective academics.
- Helping the younger universities to develop their staff by offering research-based postgraduate programmes.
- Student feedback of teaching is obtained through questionnaires. Performance of academics is subjected to peer reviews. Newly recruited staff is inducted through programmes of the Staff Development Centre (SDC).

SUBJECT BENCHMARKING

Student Assessment is one of the cornerstones of quality in higher education. This main purpose of the assessment is the evaluation and certification of student learning outcomes, both knowledge and skills, in relation to learning objectives. Assessment is also linked to maintenance and enhancement of academic standards.

The current practice of student assessments faces a number of major challenges. The foremost one is the lack of universal clear standards or benchmarks that specify the student learning outcomes for all subjects/disciplines at each level. However, work on this has begun under the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) and the UGC is setting up a number of inter-university subject committees to develop subject benchmarks. Another major challenge is that assessment results are hardly used to provide feedback to students on how well they learn, and to academic staff on how well they teach.

In order to address these issues, one of the strategies recommended in the National Policy Framework on Higher Education is the development of benchmarks for learning outcomes for every program. What is also critical is capacity building for academic staff on assessment methodologies, as well as on how to use assessment results to improve learning and teaching. In addition, there should be an entity in place at the university or faculty level, where appropriate, to ensure that adequate training is provided for academic staff on student learning assessment at graduate and postgraduate level, and that the assessments are properly conducted and used.

Subject Benchmark Statements (SBSs) provide a set of reference points to show how the key features of a programme, its intended learning outcomes and the standards that derive from these intended outcomes, relate to what is deemed appropriate by the subject community.

It is happy to note that the following Subject Benchmark Statements were produced in 45 disciplines and distributed among universities and other institutes.

1. Accounting	16. Fine Arts	31. Mechanical Engineering
2. Agriculture	17. Food Science and Technology	32. Medicine
3. Architecture	18. Forestry	33. Microbiology
4. Archaeology	19. Geography	34. Nursing
5. Botany	20. Geomatics	35. Pali and Buddhist Studies
6. Civil Engineering	21. History	36. Performing Arts
7. Chemistry	22. Indigenous Medicine	37. Philosophy
8. Chemical and Process Engineering	23. Information Technology	38. Physics
9. Computer Science	24. Information Systems	39. Political Science
10. Dentistry	25. Journalism and Communication Studies	40. Sinhala
11. Education	26. Language Studies	41. Tamil
12. Economics	27. Library and Information Science	42. Vet. Medi. & Animal Sci.
13. Electrical Engineering	28. Livestock	43. Zoology
14. Electronics	29. Management	44. Sociology
15. English	30. Mathematics & Statistics	45. Software Engineering

SBSs provide

- the institutions and academic staff with a framework for articulating the intended learning outcomes of programmes;
- the institutions with a minimum standard for the award of a degree in a particular subject area;
- peer reviewers with a reference point for making judgments about the appropriateness of programme outcomes and their achievement;
- students, employers, professional bodies and others with the information about the range of provision in particular subject/discipline areas, the qualities developed in graduates, and the standards that would of graduates;
- the public at large with the information about the nature of higher education awards.

IMPLEMENTATION OF SRI LANKA QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK

Sri Lanka Qualification Framework (SLQF) is a new framework aimed at improving quality of higher education and training through recognizing and accrediting qualifications offered by different institutions. It identifies different levels to which the qualifications offered in the entire higher education sector in Sri Lanka are included. It helps to interpret qualifications and judge the relative value of a qualification.

Final Document on SLQF prepared by the National Committee appointed by the Ministry of Higher Education and decided to adopt it for implementation in the university system.

Main Objectives of the SLQF are as follows:

- To enhance quality of Higher Education and training at all levels
- To aware employers
- To facilitate lateral and vertical mobility and progression
- To provide guidance in comparing qualifications offered by different institutions
- To recognize prior and lifelong learning

SLQF will be useful to all stakeholders of higher education including students, parents, employers, as well as education and training providers as illustrated in figure 2.

SLQF enables all stakeholders:

- to identify the full range of qualifications offered in the higher education system in Sri Lanka and comparable levels of vocational education and training.
- to understand how qualifications are related to each other and how they contribute to the enhancement of knowledge and understanding, and improvement of intellectual abilities including analytical skills, evaluation skills, problem solving skills and soft skills.

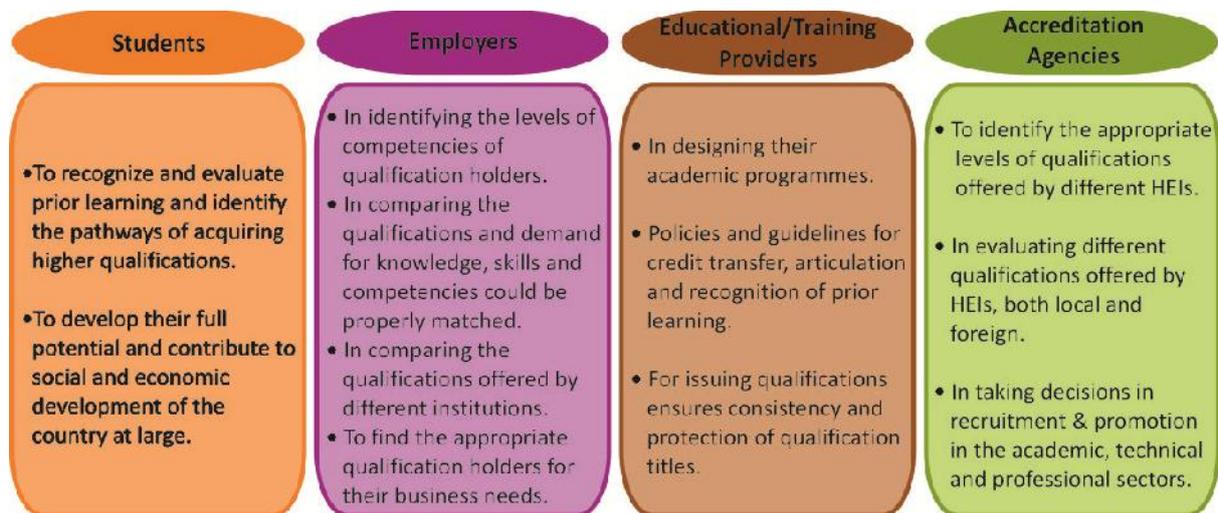


Figure 2. Advantages for stakeholders

Awareness Programme on SLQF in Universities and other Institutes has been initiated with the participation of Vice-Chancellors, Directors of Postgraduate Institutes, Deans, Heads, Administrative Staff, Internal QA Members and other Academics in Universities.

SLQF Booklets have been circulated among Vice Chancellors, Rectors, Directors of PG Institutes, Librarians, Deans of faculties and Chairmen/Chairpersons of Internal QA Units in Universities and Private Higher Education Institutes.

- Electronic Version of SLQF Booklet is available in QAA Council Website (www.qaacouncil.lk) and can be downloaded (http://www.qaacouncil.lk/publications/SLQF_First_Edition_June_2012.pdf).

INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

All over the world, as 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.

Internal quality assurance units were set up in the universities on the recommendation of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the CVCD during 2004 – 2006, to carry out the university's quality assurance activities and co-ordinate these with the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC).

The principal internal support systems for QA and quality enhancement are those University cells already referred to; there is no evidence on the QA staffing and support in the other sectors. However, some private sector institutions have expressed interest in external quality audits.

Purposes of IQA

- 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

Remarks 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.

Difficulties encountered when conducting activities on Quality Assurance in Universities

- Limited number of academic staff interested to promote activities pertaining to quality assurance
- There is no permanent cadre position for IQA Chairman or any similar position. One of the academic staff members serving as a chairman. Due to heavy load of academic responsibilities, they are reluctant to take the responsibility of the IQAU
- The quality assurance cells in some Faculties were not very active
- Regular meetings were not conducted to promote QA activities

The ultimate goal of the internal QA mechanisms is to create (or inculcate) the ‘quality culture’ within the institution, that would be based around an internal system of continuous quality which seeks to provide quality education through a holistic approach on a day to day basis.

A manual for IQA has been produced and distributed among universities and other institutes. The electronic version can be download from:

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

POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION

There is a significant variation in the postgraduate degree awarding criteria as well as in the structure of the degree programmes conducted by different, faculties/universities and postgraduate institutes within the Sri Lankan university system.

Hence, there is an urgent need to improve the quality of postgraduate programmes offered in public universities. The quality depends upon the designing of courses by the experts in the concerned areas, qualification of teachers and availability of other resources.

It is a pleasure to inform you that the QAAC, with the guidance of the UGC, will take necessary initiative to begin external quality assessments in postgraduate institutes/graduate faculties in the University system.

To prepare for external quality assessment, a Quality Assurance Handbook for Postgraduate Degrees in Sri Lanka has been developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders and uploaded to the www.qaacouncil.lk.

The QAAC has identified the following assessment criteria to serve as the basis of the assessment.

1. Vision, Mission, Goals and Objectives
2. Curriculum Design Content and Review

3. Teaching Learning and Evaluation
4. Research, Consultancy, Extension and Community Contribution
5. Facilities, Equipment and Learning Resources
6. Quality of students, Student Support and Progression
7. Organization, Management, Governance and Administration
8. Healthy Practices