Quality Assurance and Accreditation Practices in Pakistan

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Introduction

Pakistan has embarked on reforming its higher education sector with a view of achieving increased international compatibility and competitiveness. The recommendations of a task force on higher education sector and of the Steering Committee on Higher Education in 2002 [2,6] set in motion a series of reforms that have begun to produce positive results at both the Institutional and Program levels. Task of revamping higher education was entrusted to the Higher Education Commission (HEC) established under a Presidential Ordinance in 2002 [3] to operate as an autonomous body under the Controlling Authority of the Prime Minister.

Higher Education Commission is mandated to design and implement policies for the promotion, improvement and evaluation of higher education, research and development [3]. A five year action plan (Medium Term Development Framework) of HEC identified seven major issues (Fig. 1) that are being accorded top priority. Enhancing quality was recognized as one of the core
cross cutting strategic aims of the reform framework [6]. In fact majority of the powers and functions assigned to HEC make it responsible for ensuring provision of quality education and research.

**Fig. 1. Reform framework at HEC.**

**Higher Education Scenario in Pakistan**

A three tier system of degree programs (Fig. 2) with standardized curricula is now being implemented. A significant change has been made from a two year Bachelors degree program ending after 14 years of schooling to a 4 year BS degree that culminates after 16 years of schooling. Many short term and long term measures to enhance the quality of teaching and research have been introduced in the universities.
The number of universities has increased significantly since the inception of HEC. At present, 124 public and private universities (Fig. 3) with 4 more recently granted the charter are catering to the needs of a population of about 170 million. 57 of these universities are in the private sector. As recognition of degrees and institutional accreditation is responsibility of the Higher Education Commission, the private sector universities also follow the guidelines provided by HEC.
Table 1 shows the types of universities functioning in the country and the student enrolment. Highest enrolment is in the distance education programs. In other higher education institutes the enrolment of 316,014 is 2.3 times higher than the previous low of 135,123 prior to the establishment of HEC. At the same time, the number of scholars in the M. Phil and Ph.D programs has increased significantly. 16752 faculty members are presently serving in the public sector universities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Enrolment by type of HEI 2007-2008</th>
<th>Total Enrolment of Students</th>
<th>Enrolment of MPhil &amp; Ph.D</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Universities</td>
<td>220,733</td>
<td>7,504</td>
<td>11,625</td>
<td>63.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture Universities</td>
<td>27,881</td>
<td>1,087</td>
<td>2,389</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering Universities</td>
<td>30,766</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Universities</td>
<td>11,924</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAIs</td>
<td>18,588</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Institutes</td>
<td>4,107</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>728</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centres</td>
<td>2,015</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIOU &amp; VU</td>
<td>559,289</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>731</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>875,303</td>
<td>11,234</td>
<td>18,221</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Present enrolment and type of universities

To describe the many steps undertaken for addressing the core strategic aims mentioned in Fig. 1 is beyond the scope of this paper. However, one notable endeavor is that through the Digital Library at HEC, online access to all students, faculty and researchers is available to 23000 full text peer reviewed journals and 40000 books of notable publishers [6].
Quality Assurance Agency

No formal system for quality assurance or monitoring of academic programs existed at the national level prior to the establishment of HEC [8]. The public sector universities only underwent an annual financial audit from the government and Self Accreditation (ensuring quality through their own internal processes) was the prevailing practice [9].

Powers and functions assigned to HEC by the Government dealt with evaluation, improvement and promotion of higher education, research and development. These included authority to “set up national or regional evaluation councils or authorize any existing council or similar body to carry out accreditation of institutions including their departments, faculties and disciplines by giving them appropriate ratings.” [3]. Earlier the Task Force on higher education [2] had recommended in 2002 that a central body is needed for facilitating quality assurance in both the public and private institutions. Based on the mandate mentioned above, the Quality Assurance Agency was established at HEC in 2005. Future goal is to provide autonomy to QAA.

A National Quality Assurance Committee (NQAC) comprising of eminent educationists from both the public and private sector was constituted at HEC in 2003 [9]. It focuses on policy work for continuous improvement in the academic quality considering the global advancements and challenges. NQAC also serves as the advisory body of QAA.
Close coordination between HEC and QAA is helping to tackle the myriad of issues related to the introduction and implementation of a quality culture in the country. QAA is headed by a Managing Director reporting to the Chairman and Executive Director of HEC. 22 staff members from both HEC and QAA are presently engaged in quality assurance activities.

Mission of QAA is “to integrate the concept of quality assurance in higher learning with enhanced levels of international compatibility through capacity building. Secondly to safeguard public interest, by enforcing good practices in education and encouraging continuous improvement in the management of quality in higher education.” At the same time, the vision is to develop a viable and sustainable mechanism in higher learning sector to meet the rising challenges of transforming the country into a knowledge economy.

QAA besides being the policy making and monitoring body, also is responsible for setting standards/criteria, provide manuals (self assessments) and guidelines, and assist in building capacity of institutions. These are integrated in the internal quality processes of universities and form the baseline information for external reviews of the institutes thereby creating continuity in the processes of quality assurance and enhancement. The major activities in which QAA is currently involved relate to both Internal and External Quality Assurance.

**Quality Assurance System in Pakistan**

The realization that the previous practice of Self Accreditation in each university with its own set of standards and procedures needed to be streamlined
in accordance with the internationally accepted best practices necessitated strengthening of the internal processes of quality assurance. For this purpose, a number of steps were undertaken at national level. These involved sensitizing the academia and other stakeholders, development of quality criteria, standards, processes, guidelines, effective monitoring & evaluation system and capacity building of the practitioners [5].

All higher education institutes after obtaining approval from their respective statutory bodies like the Board of Studies, Board of Faculty, Academic Councils, Syndicate/Board of Governors have adopted these criteria or are in the process of adopting them. Their implementation is helping in achieving uniformity of standards nationally and enhancing the quality of higher education with increased international compatibility.

For integration of academic standards and quality assurance standards in the universities, Quality Enhancement Cells with well defined roles are being established in all the universities in a phased manner. 30 QEC’s are functional [5,6] with another 15 in public universities and 17 in private universities to become operational before the end of the current year. These QEC’s headed by professionals equivalent to the status of a Professor serve as operational units of QAA in the universities. Major task being managed by the QEC’s is the self assessment of academic programs.

Based on the guidelines and proformae [11] provided by QAA, the Self Assessment reports identifying the weaknesses and strengths of each program are compiled [10]. Presently the proformae being used to obtain feedback relate
QEC initiates SA through the dean one semester prior to the assessment

Department forms the PT that will be responsible for preparing SAR

QEC reviews the Documentation within one month

The Vice Chancellor / Rector forms the AT in consultation with the concerned dean based on the recommendation of the QEC

QEC plans and fixes AT visit

The AT conducts assessment and presents its findings to QEC, Dean, PT and dept. faculty

The QEC submits an executive summary to the Vice Chancellor / Rector

Department prepares implementation plan

Follow up of the implementation plan by QEC

Legend
- QEC: Quality Enhancement Cell
- PT: Program Team
- SA: Self Assessment
- SAR: Self Assessment Report

Fig. 5. Self Assessment Procedure
The internal review and self assessments processes managed by QEC’s form the baseline information for external quality assessment and for continuity of the processes of quality assurance and enhancement.

Institutional accreditation is the responsibility of HEC. At program level, the professional degree programs are being accredited by nine Councils that are empowered by legislation to have their own accreditation rules for recognition of degrees, registration and licensing [5,6]. All institutes offering these professional degree programs had to follow the directives of the respective councils.

However as HEC had also been entrusted to work for improvement and promotion of higher education, research and development, it became essential to avoid conflict arising from the assigned jurisdictions. This problem is presently being overcome by establishing linkages with these professional councils [9]. All degree programs accredited by the Councils are recognized by HEC. At the same time there is general acceptance that framing of policies and academic standards are to be regulated by HEC [7,12]. Further the INQAAHE guidelines [4] on good practices in their modified form [1] are given due consideration by the Councils.

In addition, under the powers vested in HEC and in consultation with the stakeholders, four new accreditation councils have been established [6,9]. These relate to the programs of Agriculture, Business, Computing and Teachers Education. They work under the aegis of QAA and their responsibility is more of peer review rather than accreditation. Future plan is to grant them autonomy.
Mechanisms are being developed to cover the remaining programs through peer review. At present, only the M. Phil/ Ph. D programs of all universities are being reviewed by three Review Committees [6]. Their primary responsibility is to determine the implementation status of the HEC laid criteria.

**Issues Challenges and Future Direction**

The quality assurance measures introduced in Pakistan are still in their infancy and need to be nurtured further. Some measures that need to be undertaken in the short term are granting of autonomy to QAA, introduction of a quality culture, induction of qualified professionals, and external review of programs by foreign experts. These steps would further help to attain international compatibility and competitiveness.

**References:**