Establishment Quality Assurance System & Development of Internal Evaluation in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract

During the last two decades, many higher education systems in the world has attempted to evaluate and improve the quality of education, research and services at the university and higher education level. Countries which have been successful in these attempts have initiated continuous evaluation and applied internal evaluation as a basis for promoting quality culture. Quality assurance as a comprehensive term encompasses all policies, processes and actions maintaining and developing higher education quality. Quality assurance emphasizes on external goals of evaluation, one of which is to assure learners, public and government that each unit, department, program or institution manages its quality. Thus quality assurance focuses on accountability. In Iran, also, implementation of continuous evaluation projects started in 1996. Then: attempts were made to institutionalize departmental internal evaluation at the university level. This article describes importance of Quality Assurance and internal evaluation and necessity to conduct it and elaborates on challenges facing the development of Internal Evaluation in Iran.

Keywords: Quality Assurance System, Internal Evaluation, Iran.
Introduction

Policy-making and management of higher education have traditionally been concerned with the maintenance and enhancement of academic standards and processes. The expansion, diversification and privatization of higher education systems worldwide have brought with them an increased concern with the quality of higher education, in both developed and developing countries. In addition, globalization is widely affecting higher education and is creating new challenges for its regulation. An increasing number of students travel abroad to study in foreign countries. In addition, institutions and programmers move across borders in the form of e-learning, franchising or branch campuses, and add considerably to the traditional offerings of local public higher education institutions.

While the provision of higher education is becoming ever more diversified, increased mobility among professionals requires greater standardization among qualifications so that they can be assessed by national authorities for decisions relating to recognition. New instruments to assess qualifications are also needed to combat the academic fraud that accompanies diversification of higher education. Within this context of change, new methods of quality assurance such as accreditation systems have become a concern in higher education policy agendas. (Martin & Stella, 2007).

According to Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea (2004) quality assurance has the following meaning: “Quality assurance: An all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (as assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programmers. As a regulatory mechanism, quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgments (not ranking) through an agreed and consistent process and well-established criteria. Many systems make a distinction between internal quality assurance (i.e. intra-institutional practices in view of monitoring and improving the quality of higher education) and external quality assurance (i.e. inter- or supra-institutional schemes of assuring the quality of higher education institutions and programmers).

Quality assurance activities depend on the existence of the necessary institutional mechanisms, preferably sustained by a solid quality culture. The scope of quality assurance is determined by the shape and the size of the higher education system. Quality assurance varies from accreditation in the sense that the former is only a prerequisite for the latter. Quality assurance is often considered as a part of the quality management of higher education, while sometimes the two terms are used synonymously” (Vlăsceanu et al., 2004: 48-49).

Importance of issues like quality, evaluation and quality evaluation and quality assurance in the process of reforming higher education systems is extensively appreciated and is frequently confirmed. Establishment of an evaluation system for quality of education provides a tool for universities to revise their activities, to determine their strengths and weaknesses and to choose suitable options to reform their programs. Related experiences show that the first step in path, internal evaluation, leads to participation of all staff of educational system not only in education and research but also in propitiation, finance and management.

An accountable system provides opportunities to run debates between institutions, and experts on one side and interested parts of society on the other side, therefore leads to survival and development of the entire higher education system. It has been proved through experiments that whenever external experts are consulted, change and development will begin more easily (Kristoferson, 1998).

Evaluation helps quality improvement in higher education and makes higher education accountable. Maintenance and improvement of higher education quality are considered as
shared responsibility of every person in an academic institution (Barnett, 1995). In this respect; the process of quality improvement (QI) requires faculty members to play a major part. This could be achieved through internal evaluation (Bazargan, 1995). Higher education system structure in Iran is composed of more than 80 universities and about 1000 center of higher education. Higher education system in Iran divided into two major sub-systems:
1). Medical university system (MUS).
2). Comprehensive higher education system. (Bazargan, 2006).

The MUS is under the Ministry of Health and Medical Education and the comprehensive higher education system is under the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. In 2007 about 2.5 million students enrolled in higher education institutions. Furthermore enrolment in private higher education accounted for about 52% of total enrolment. In recent years, several attempts have been made to measure and enhance quality of higher education in Iran. In 1990 a proposal was prepared to assess academic activities of universities and rank them according to certain national criteria.

In 1996 the Ministry of Health, Treatment and Medical Education, which is responsible for medical sciences universities, initiated a project on internal evaluation(self-evaluation). One of the purposes of the project was to motivate faculty members to participate in the process of quality improvement of their departments. (Bzargan, 2000). the impact of the pilot internal evaluation project was so impressive that the ministry of Health Treatment and Medical Education decided to request all the departments of internal medicine, at the medical sciences universities, to carry out an internal evaluation project. Based on this, during the past decade, more than 400 university departments in the medical sciences and comprehensive universities have indicated willingness to conduct self – evaluation. However, only 10% of them have been successful in completing the process and prepare a comprehensive final report. (Bazargan, 1999).

In this context, the question is "what is Quality Assurance?" Therefore in answering this question, this article, first, reviews briefly definitions of quality in higher education & a Short history of the Internal Evaluation of programs in higher education systems. It then elaborates on challenges facing the development of Internal Evaluation in Iran.

**Global Initiatives for Quality Assurance Capacity in higher education levels (GIQAC)**

Education quality at all levels is a key to poverty reduction and economic growth. Stakeholders frequently lack reliable information about the quality of the education being provided. Governments wish to assure stakeholders that students are receiving a minimum Standard of quality. Quality assurance (QA) in higher education is a systematic process of assessing and verifying inputs, outputs, and outcomes against standardized benchmarks of quality to maintain and enhance quality, ensure greater accountability and facilitate harmonization of standards across academic programs, institutions, and systems. QA is typically conducted by QA agencies - government and NGO bodies. Nevertheless, there is a need to strengthen capacity for quality assessment in many developing countries. (UNESCO, 2008, p.2).

Over the past two decades developed and developing countries alike have increased their efforts to apply evaluation approaches to measuring and improving the quality of higher education in this regard, differences in condition between the developed and developing countries have been particularly striking: the former are using ever more sophisticated means to give their higher education system the highest possible level of performance; many
Quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms are being applied to collect data and to determine the extent to which higher education systems (programs /department/schools/universities) meet the criteria of merit. These criteria include pre-established standards or stated programme goals that have served as the source of criteria of merit. (House, 1994, P.83). Hence, according to this fact, one of the main concerns of higher education institutions is quality. The issue of quality is becoming more complicated as higher education is increasingly pressed by the external environment. Despite the progress being made through research and debate, and a considerable amount of literature in the area, there is still no universal consensus as to how quality should best be managed within higher education (Mehralizadeh, 2005; Becket and Brookes, 2005; Luckett, 2004; Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003; Campbell and Roosnyai, 2002; Middlehurst, 2001; Cheng and Tam, 1997; Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996; Harvey and Knight, 1996). Quality assurance refers to the means by which an institution can guarantee, with confidence and certainty, that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced (Harman, 1998).

Quality assurance at the university and departmental level has two parts: self-evaluation by the departments and external evaluation by an external review committee consisting of experts. Internal evaluation is a form of action research and is an organizational intervention focused on practical concerns shaped by political and organizational constraints. Consequently, the results of internal evaluation may be organization specific and not generalizable. (Cowin, 1994). Internal evaluation as a mechanism for quality assurance is sometimes called self-study, self-assessment, or departmental review, and is becoming a feature of academic life in higher education institutions in many countries. Studies on quality assurance in higher education have focused on two separate but related issues, namely internal and external evaluation (Brink, 2003). For the purpose of this paper, we addressed those aspects of the study that deal with internal evaluation. When we look at the research in the area of internal evaluation, we can see various recurrent themes. For instance, Yonezawa’s (1999) study focused on identifying the strengths and weakness of the Japanese system and showed that self-evaluation reflects market differences which different types of universities face. In South Africa, the National Plan for Higher Education paved the way for major restructuring, transformation and quality assurance, and identified internal evaluation as a steering element in the transformation process (Wilkinson, 2003).

The European student handbook on quality in higher education recently addressed the concept of quality culture. The term “quality culture” is currently the focus of a joint EU-European Union project. Van Berkel and Wolfhagen’s (2002) evaluation of the Dutch system of external quality assessment revealed that the mere existence of the system does affect the way of thinking within the university. Perhaps the most important effect of an external quality assessment can be described as “promoting the quality debate” (Vroeijenstijn, 1995, p. 145).

Common’s (2003) study revealed that self-assessment makes a major contribution to improving the quality of college provision for students and also promotes a range of management practices, especially evaluation. Hulpiau and Waeytens’ (2001) research focused on the introduction of systematic internal evaluations at the University of Leuven-Austria in 1993 and 1994. They found that the problems which frequently appear are of a didactical type or relate to either educational or organizational conditions. Problems of the organizational
conditions concern infrastructural facilities, staff, internationalization and integral quality assurance.

Their results also indicate a lack of follow-up for the majority of problems detected in the course of an evaluation process. Some of the research results in relation to internal evaluation in Iran have provided conflicting messages. Bazargan (1995, 2000) conducted research on improving the relevance and quality of higher medical education in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The research concluded that through the process of engaging faculty members in empowerment evaluation, they are motivated to revitalize the department in which they are members. This has developed a positive attitude towards responsiveness in higher education and planning continuous improvement of activities. Bazargan asserted that the process of self-evaluation (internal evaluation) would develop the necessary culture and conditions for accountability in higher education systems. Nevertheless, the results of Saedy (2004) on internal evaluation in statistics department and of Mehdipour (2005) on evaluation in Iran’s schools of physical education show management and cultural resistance to internal evaluation.

The above studies indicate a continuing debate about the importance and role of internal evaluation in higher education. Thorn (2003) notes that there is a significant lack of formal research into the effectiveness of the self-evaluation process in bringing about improvements. Thorn (2003) and Sallinen and Konttinen (1994) reported that internal evaluation has positive effects on institutions. Other studies pointed out that the limitations of self-evaluation and peer review include the inherent subjectivity and lack of clarity in the criteria being used to make decisions, lack of sufficient time, the fact that self-evaluation takes place at a busy point in the academic year, and the absence of hard data (Valimaa, 1994; Brennan et al., 1998). Valimma also notes a lack of research into the criteria used for making judgments and the “interpretative process” undertaken by peers (Lillis, 2005).

The author (2009) conducted research with titles "Quality Evaluation of PHD Program on Persian Language and Literature at Tehran city Universities Based on Managerial Self-Evaluation Framework". The research concluded that through the process of engaging managers in improvement evaluation. He showed which Because the role of PHD program in training specialists and knowledge production, quality evaluation of PhD programs is of noticeable importance. So today quality evaluation of PhD program is considered by universities evaluation systems. However, the above studies clearly show a number if lessons. First, there is growing awareness of the need to strengthen an internal quality culture & planning and management for it that has its origin in a range of factors that have prompted universities to become more pro-active in quality matters. These factors include increased autonomy from governments, increased demands for accountability; an increased need to diversify income sources, the rise of the “knowledge society”, increased internationalization and increased globalization. Second, there is management and cultural resistance to applying and implementing internal evaluation in higher education.

**Overall purposes of EQA (Education Quality Assurance)**

EQA in higher education refers to a wide range of purposes and related methodological frameworks. Some of these reflect governmental interest and demand, whereas others more directly address the internal needs of institutions. Consequently, the purposes of EQA are closely related to the use that will be made of information outcomes. Accreditation in institutions of higher education usually serves the following purposes: quality control; accountability/public assurance; and improvement in teaching/learning, each of which will be elaborated upon in the following paragraphs. Quality control refers to the traditional function whereby governments make sure that higher education provision is in line with the minimum
requirements for quality. When the majority of higher education systems were public, this function used to be less prominent because it was assumed that sufficient input steering would produce acceptable levels of quality.

This is now questioned and, in addition, the ongoing process of privatization (and in particular the proliferation of private national and international providers) has enhanced the need for national governments to check on minimum levels of quality, even if only to protect national consumers and make sure that the higher education provision relates to national development objectives in one way or another. Secondly, EQA geared towards accountability is commonly also commissioned by public authorities as part of their higher education policy agenda. It is frequently linked to value-for-money concerns, transparency and public assurance. Accountability and compliance concerns reflect the need to provide public information and make achieved. EQA conducted with a predominant accountability objective is commonly used to provide assurance to external stakeholders on levels of quality, acceptable or high-level standards, as well as the international comparability of both public and private providers (Harvey, 1999: 24).

Through the quality model it uses and the setting of criteria and standards to be measured, accreditation is one of the standards-based approaches among the EQA models. It can be used by the government to make higher education institutions more coherent with policy preferences in general and recent reform initiatives in particular. It is certain that accreditation standards communicate a detailed framework of preferences against which institutions know they will be judged. Together with legal frameworks and funding methodologies, EQA has become a strong instrument for steering academia. This is particularly the case with regard to systems of reporting between institutions and governmental authorities, which can be highly enriched through regular provision of data and reports from quality assurance agencies. Thirdly, EQA may also be explicitly geared towards the improvement of existing practices. In order to achieve this purpose, it will have to rely largely on an involvement of the people responsible for teaching and research activities, the academic staff be it individually or collectively. It seems logical to expect that EQA will lead to improvement, partially through the compliance objective, and partially through the setting of so-called ‘high-level standards’, which institutions and their departments should strive to reach.

It is argued that ‘transformative’ quality improvement occurs more easily when academics openly assess their true teaching. Otherwise, an EQA system may simply produce what has now become known as a ‘compliance culture’. There has been lengthy discussion over whether control, accountability and improvement objectives are compatible or mutually exclusive. While it is certainly true that EQA systems address them all in one way or another, they are usually geared more towards one than the other.

Short History of Governmental and Private Higher education in Iran

Modern tertiary institutions in Iran date back to the 19th century. However, the University of Tehran, as a pioneer, was established in 1934. Then, gradually, provincial and other national universities were established in the following four decades. During this period student population increased slowly so that the total enrolment reached 176,000 in 1979 (IRPHE, 1992). This number accounted for about 5% of the age group 18-24 years. Therefore, in 65 years history of university education in Iran, the growth rate of the student population was very low during the first four decades. After the 1979 Islamic revolution, enrolment in higher education increased rapidly. The proportion of student population to the age group 18-24 years which was 7% in 1989, reached 16% in 1996. At present, total enrolment at tertiary institutions is about 1,300,000; 47% of students are studying at
government tertiary institutions and 53% at private tertiary institutions. Growth rate of enrolment at private tertiary institutions has been remarkable. Average growth rate of student population at the government institutions, during 1989-97, was 9.8%, while that of non-government institutions was 20.8%.

This increase was mainly due to the establishment of a non-government university called Islamic Azad University (IAU). The IAU, which was founded in 1983, mobilized local resources and assistance. This initiative, within a short period, covered many urban centers throughout the whole country. There are more than 130 IAU units around the country. In 1997, enrolment at the IAU system accounted for about 51% of the total enrolment in higher education.

Considering that the population has almost doubled in the past 20 years, it is of interest to note that the growth rate of students was much higher than the population growth. The number of students per 100,000 population which was 9.1 in 1989 and increased to 34.9 in 1997.

Generally, the quality assessment model applied in Iran is comprised of a collegial self-evaluation followed by external quality assessment. Based on this, during the past decade, more than 400 university departments have indicated willingness to conduct self-evaluation. However, only 10% of them have been successful in completing the process and prepare a comprehensive final report. Self-evaluation is sponsored by the state, through the Centre for Evaluation Studies and Research (CESR). It is mainly concerned with the allocation of budget to the university departments for conducting self-evaluation. Although the CESR is willing to be considered as a national quality agency, it lacks operational autonomy.

The CESR has neither been able to gain the confidence of the faculty members, nor influence policy-makers at the national level to arrange a framework for the self-evaluation for the provision of rewards /incentives, policies/structures related to promotion of evaluation culture at the institutional and national level. Furthermore, the process of self-evaluation that is in practice at Iranian universities requires the participation of academic staff & a cultural transformation. However, in practice the level of academic staff participation depends to the commitment of a departmental self-evaluation steering committee. Through the process of self-evaluation, assessment is made about the quality of the department through a set of 25 indicators.

These are composed of input, process, product, output and outcome indicators of the departmental system (Bazargan, 2002). Then, judgment against the departmental objectives is made. Finally, recommendations are made for quality improvement of the department. Subsequently, external assessment is conducted through peer review. However, the numbers of departments that have completed external assessment are less than 10% of those that conducted a self-evaluation. To improve this situation, planning and management of evaluation systems in Iran, should be encouraged and promoted. Such values should be practiced by management process in higher education. In this respect, there is much room for improvement.

Challenges facing of the quality management and assurance system in Iran

The higher education system in Iran, as in many other developing countries, is concerned about equity, access and quality of higher education. To address these issues, the quality management and assurance system should be institutionalized we will present a six-stage conceptual model of capacity building for quality management and assessment system. Based on this, Iran has gone through the first four stages. Among the challenges facing institutionalization of the quality management and assurance system in Iran, there are two
stages to be undertaken: organization development and implementation of quality management and assessment mechanism at the institutional level. Based on the above, there is a need for commitment and attention from policy-makers and managers. Toward this end, and in order to develop capacity to link knowledge to economic growth, higher education decision-makers are expected to give higher weights to evaluation culture. In this regard, six dimensions of evaluation culture should be strengthened. These dimensions are as follows:

1. Awareness and participation of all faculty members in the voluntary self-evaluation.
2. Holistic view in quality enhancement.
3. Practical approach in making recommendation for quality improvement.
4. Applying the recommendations of self-evaluation report as feedback to departments and at the institutional level.
5. Promoting institutional responsiveness through self-evaluation.

It is evident from the above dimensions that an important challenge is to have a holistic view of quality through systems thinking. The importance is due to the fact that a system thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes, recognizing patterns and interrelationships, and learning how to structure those interrelationships in more effective, efficient ways’ (Senge & Lannon-Kim, 1991).

Therefore, one of the challenges is to consider the relationship between the motivations of academic staff to participate in quality enhancement and enhance their ownership of the quality management and assurance system, and stimulate the academic environment to develop confidence in the other stakeholders of higher education. Although an attempt has been made to institutionalise the quality management and assurance system through establishing a central council of self-evaluation (CCSE), due to sociocultural factors this council has not been successful. The major reason is that the CCSE was considered as an administrative body in the ministry, rather than a policy-making body. Improvement of higher education systems in developing countries requires a selfreflection practice. This could be achieved through self-evaluation. In this context, there is need for developing increased capacity for self-reference, self-correction, self-direction, self-organisation and self-renewal in the higher education environment (Betts, 1992).

Brennan and Shah (2000) have argued that central to the establishment of quality management and assessment systems, are questions of power and values. In general, the national quality management and assessment system should be in balance with the extrinsic socio-cultural structure of the country. However, in developing countries, where there is a deeper need to develop capacity to link knowledge to economic growth, such balance requires concerted efforts from academic staff in general and managers of higher education in particular. Iran has been active in designing and implementing a pilot programme for internal quality assessment since 1996.

A national self-assessment programme at major departments was implemented in the years following 1996. Although a national quality management and assessment system has been designed, it has not yet been fully implemented. The University of Tehran, as a pioneer in higher education, is the only institution that has developed a Centre for university quality assessment in Iran. With regard to the quality assessment process, the University of Tehran could be considered as a self-accrediting university. In this regard, experiences gained at the University of Tehran could be followed by the other universities in the country.
Conclusion
Higher education Strong academic commitment is needed for EQA to become an instrument for quality enhancement in all cases. However, it may also be necessary to put in place a system of quality assurance oriented towards controlling minimum standards when it is known that there are many low-quality providers in the system. Review of internal evaluation in the universities of Iran and other world universities, revealed new lessons for policy makers in higher education. We came to the conclusion that internal evaluation processes are potentially valuable. But if this value is to be realized on a continuous basis, it needs to become an integral part of each department, university and nationally accepted framework of quality assurance and management. However to ensure that internal evaluation functions in a useful way in Iran’s higher education we should bear in mind that first of all we need a restructuring of university management and decision making. Higher education policy needs to be more concerned with the creation of greater autonomy in structure and management systems. Higher education institutions should give priority to developing effective decision-making and planning processes at all levels within their institutions and these processes should be integrated within a national quality assurance system. Furthermore, we need a cultural transformation. Failure to focus on the big picture in developing and implementing internal evaluation leads to unsuccessful programs for the improvement of departments. Therefore, working towards a cultural transformation and developing a big picture of quality assurance and internal evaluation in the management of higher education are two important questions which need to be investigated more thoroughly by future researchers in the higher education systems of developing countries. As a final point, it should be mentioned that although the private higher education institutions account for more than half of total enrolments in higher education in Iran, they have neither participated in the self-evaluation process nor in the external evaluation practice. Therefore, to institutionalize a fully-functional quality management and assurance process for the whole higher education system, there is need for participation of both public and private higher education institutions in the policy-making, planning and implementation processes. Towards this end, there is much to be desired.
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