Sri Lanka’s Quality Assurance System
by
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1. Sri Lanka’s Higher Education Sector

University education in Sri Lanka is offered by 14 conventional public universities with an enrolment of 40,000 students and an Open University having an enrolment of 20,000 students. This represents a participation rate in university education of less than 3 percent of the age cohort and stands in sharp contrast to the higher rates in other South and South East Asian countries. Furthermore, the quality and relevance of many courses has led to high graduate unemployment with up to 40 percent of recent graduates being unemployed.

The Ministry of Education (ME) has given priority to address the above issues and concerns of the present undergraduate education system. The priority areas identified include legislative and administrative reforms; a revised university funding formula, establishment of an autonomous board of quality assurance and accreditation; inclusion of social harmony within curricula; developing learning materials to teach competencies and skills needed in the labour market; improvement of the teaching skills of the teachers; upgrading equipment and facilities including IT; strengthening labour market linkages; and increasing university intake in priority disciplines in high demand in the labour market.

2. QAA Council of Sri Lanka

2.1. Mandate

Proposed Activities of the QAA Council

- Evaluation of new Curricular and Courses, new Degree Programs, including Distant Learning Programs, establishment of new Departments, Faculties, Institutes, including Postgraduate Institutes, Centres of Study, Schools in the Universities and Private Sector Higher Educational Institutes. Also the staff availability and infrastructure.
- Evaluation of Degree awarding status of Institutes and upgrading into Postgraduate status.
- Quality Assurance of self-accreditation universities, their curricular and courses of degrees, staff and infrastructure.
- Develop criteria and procedures for the recognition of new universities (Public and Private).
- Accreditation Higher Educational courses offered by non-self-accrediting Institutes.
- Assessment of the quality of foreign degrees and delivery arrangements and agreements on mutual recognition of awards accredited by Foreign Quality Assurance Agencies
- Report on, and making recommendations regarding national quality assurance and accreditation arrangements.
- Conduct Subject and Institutional Reviews in Public and Private Higher Educational Universities/Institutes
- Establishing Benchmark Statements for subject disciplines.
- Training of Reviewers, Auditors and Accreditation Inspectors.
- Establishing Internal QA Units in Universities/Private Institutes.
Main Components of the Sri Lankan QA Programme
- Institutional Review
- Subject Review
- Subject Benchmarking
- Codes of Practice
- Credit and Qualification Framework
- Accreditation

2.2. Legal Status
At present the QAA Council functions under the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Education.
Considering the fact that the UGC is the funding agency for public universities in Sri Lanka, it is obvious that QAA Council should be independent of UGC. On the other hand, present parliamentary Act on Universities does not have any provision for such an independent body. Hence, the approval of the Cabinet of Ministers is sought for an amendment of the Universities Act so that the provision will be made to establish the QAA Council as an independent body.

2.3. Governance Structure
At present, the decisions with regard to the activities of the QAA Council are taken by the UGC Standing Committee on Quality Assurance and Accreditation. This Standing Committee composed of 13 members.
As mentioned earlier, with the establishment of the QAA Council as an independent body, it will be governed by a Board of Management which will be appointed by the Minister of Education.

2.4. Cost and Financing Structure
The World Bank sponsored Improving Relevance and Quality of Higher Education (IRQUE) project of the Ministry of Education provides the financial support for the activities of the QAA Council during the project period, i.e. until the end of 2009.

*When the IRQUE Project completes, it is expected that the Ministry of Education and/or the UGC will bear the expenses of the QAA Council. Further, it is anticipated that income could be generated by the QAA Council through Quality Reviews and Quality Audits of Private Higher Educational Institutes.*

3. Assessment Methodology
At present, the QAA Council conducts two types of reviews, namely Institutional Review and Subject Review.

Institutional Review (IR) focuses on the powers and responsibilities, which universities hold for quality and standards. It is concerned with how a university assures itself and the wider public, that the quality and standards it sets for itself are being achieved.

IR analyses and tests the effectiveness of an institution's processes for managing and assuring the quality of academic activities undertaken by the institution. It evaluates the extent to which internal quality assurance schemes can be relied on to maintain the quality of provision over time.
Purposes of IR are

- to instill confidence in an institution's capacity to safeguard standards, both internally and externally, through a transparent process;
- to achieve accountability through external review and public report of an institution's evidence of its own attentiveness to quality and standards, and of actions taken to improve and be responsive to feedback;
- to provide systematic, clear and accessible information on the standards and quality claimed by an institution so as to inform the choices and decisions of potential students, employers, funding bodies and other users;
- to promote improvement by identifying and sharing through peer review, good practice and encouraging innovation and active use of national and international standards and benchmarks.

Aspects of Evaluation under IR

- University Goals and Corporate Planning
- Financial Resources and Management
- Research
- Quality Management and Administration
- Quality Assurance
- Learning Resources and Student Support
- External Degree Programmes
- University/Industry/Community/Other Extension Activities.

Subject Review (SR) evaluates the quality of education within specific subject(s) or programme(s). It is focused on the quality of the student learning experience and on student achievements. SR is designed to evaluate the quality of both undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes.

The main features of the SR are

- production of an analytical self-evaluation by the academic staff delivering the programme(s);
- review against the aims and intended student learning outcomes contained in the self evaluation;
- peer review, a review visit of 3 to 4 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 SR. Reviewers evaluate the quality of education in the subject(s) or programme(s) under review according to the aims and learning outcomes aspired to by the Department. Reviewers do not use any externally set standards against which the programmes are judged.

Aspects of Evaluation under SR

- Curriculum Design, Content and Review
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment Methods
- Quality of Students, including Student Progress and Achievement
- The Extent and Use of Student Feedback, Qualitative and Quantitative
- Postgraduate Studies
- Peer Observation
- Skills Development
4. Information Dissemination Practices

- Awareness Programmes on QA Activities and the Review Process
  Detailed account on the activities of the QAA Council as well as the Review Process is provided to all Universities/Faculties/departments through these awareness programmes.

- Sharing of Good Practices through Workshops/Seminars
  The QAA Council has commenced a serious of workshops on Peer Observation and Student Feedback with the aim of sharing good practices.

- Quarterly Newsletter – QAA News
  The first issue of the QAA News was published in November 2005, and the second issue (May-Aug 2006) is in press. All the academic and administrative staff members of all universities are provided with a copy of this Newsletter.

- Distribution of other Publications
  Other publications of the QAA Council such as QA Handbook, Code(s) of Practice, Subject Benchmark Statements etc. are also distributed among the staff members of all universities.

- Dedicated web site – www.qaacouncil.lk

5. Sanctions for Poor Performance and Rewards for Good Performance

At present, the Quality Assurance system in Sri Lankan public university system is not a mandatory process. Therefore, universities were given the autonomy to introduce sanctions or rewards for their poor/good performances.

6. Other Noteworthy Characteristics

- Considerable progress has been achieved so far with regard to the Subject Review Process. During the period from November 2004 to May 2006, the QAA Council was able to conduct 40 Subject Reviews in different public universities.

- Sharing of Good Practices

- Internal QA along with the external assessments – Quality Culture