Quality Assurance Mechanism in Higher Education Institutions - A Thematic Analysis of Experts' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the researchers present the thematic analysis on how Quality Assurance Mechanism affects performance in public and private sector universities of Karachi. The objective of this study is to articulate Quality Assurance Program of Higher Education Commission in administrative bodies, appropriate academic and professional communities in tertiary education institutions. In this large scale study, researchers interviewed a diverse range of experts, the sample was collected from different public and private sector universities by listening and documenting the views of experts including faculty members and administrative members. Twelve themes emerged from the collected data that include: the concept of quality, quality assurance mechanism in institutions of higher education, ranking lacking face value, inadequate funding, inappropriate infrastructure, the impact of globalization on higher education, lack of quality student intake, and inadequate research facilities. This paper concludes with a brief discussion on the impact of Quality Assurance Mechanism in the higher education institutions in Karachi.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is considered as one of the main tools for development and prosperity of any country as it provides it with the human resource and intellectual capital that satisfies its basic social and psychological needs. Higher education institutions produce, train and nurture brains; develop attitudes, skills and dispositions; and open a new world of opportunities for the country and its people.

According to UNESCO'S guides for modification and progress in higher education (2001) the main trends and challenges which higher education all over the world is facing are democratization, globalization, regionalization, polarization, marginalization and fragmentation accompanied by quantitative expansion that delivers fictions of institutional structures and financial constraints related to the research and quality of higher education[1].

The primary regulatory authority in Pakistan is Higher Education Commission (HEC) previously known as University Grant Commission (UGC). Higher Education Commission has been responsible for documentation and formulation of policy guidelines for higher education in Pakistan since 2002. It also enhances the quality in higher education, degree reorganization and development of new institutions.

Quality in Higher Education

Nowadays every institution's main goal is to maintain quality. It includes all the associated activities and functions of the academic life of university system;

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therefore, quality has a multidimensional concept. Quality indicators for the assessment of quality in higher education commission institutions are the quality of teachers, curricula, assessment and learning resources, students and their support services.

According to the Quality Assurance Framework by the Higher Education commission as per higher education commission, curriculum design, quality of faculty, quality of research, available technological infrastructure, administrative policies and accreditation regime are the key factors that influence the quality of higher education.

Quality assurance is the means of ensuring that informed by its mission; academic standards are defined and achieved in the line compatible to national and internationalstandards[2]. Quality assurance mechanism of an institution must respond to the expectation and needs of the stakeholder. Thus quality assurance in Higher Educational Institutions means quality of students, teachers and support services and ultimately the quality of the country.

What is Quality Assurance (QA)?
Quality Assurance is the systematic review of educational programs to ensure that acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being maintained[3]. Globalization and international migration means access of professionals and academic personnel across national borders so both state and institutions adopt and are keen to learn each other's procedure regarding quality assurance in tertiary education[4].

Quality assurance is an activity carried out at two levels i.e. external and internal, external quality assurance (also called as accreditation) is approved by the specialized bodies at national level to make certain the least performance level of educational programs and institutions. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan has established a quality assurance agency (QAA) in 2004 at Higher Education Commission, Islamabad. The major function of quality assurance agency is to incorporate the concepts of quality in higher learning systems and to develop policies for the uplift of education in Pakistan through a viable quality assurance mechanism.

Quality Assurance in Higher Education Commission in Pakistan
Higher Education Commission's main goal is to maintain quality in higher education institution. A proper and suitable road map is created by Higher Education Commission to achieve standard in institutions. Program level and institutions level are two level of quality. Quality assurance operates in three stages. In first stage rules in quality assurance, accreditation and proper guidelines are set. An internal quality assurance system (IQA) is required in the second stage for the establishment of internal system and guideline. In last stage a link is developed with external quality assurance (EQA) system within Pakistan.

Realizing the importance of higher education, quality enhancement cells (QECs) were established in 2006 at ten public universities and in 2007-08, twenty Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) were established for intensifying and improving the teaching, learning and academic standards. In 2009-10 fifteen more public universities and seventeen private sector universities initiated Quality Enhancement Cells. The main function of the Quality Enhancement Cells in higher education institutions is to introduce, define and develop quality assurance policies and also to implement these concepts through quality assurance tools. The main responsibility and function of the Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs) and Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) is to focus on the quality assurance principles, which are fairness, openness, accountability, transparency and equality. The four important issues regarding the characteristics of higher education in Pakistan are quality, access, relevance and governance. By increasing access to higher education without enhancing its quality and relevance to the needs of country, it cannot be expected that the goal of attainment of knowledge would be achieved. It is common belief that majority of Pakistani universities do not fulfil the criteria of international standards. It is a systematic process and planning to determine the required standards of education, infrastructure and scholarship in higher education institutions.

Quality in tertiary education is affected by wide range of factors. These include their vision and goals, capacity and proficiency of teaching staff, well-equipped laboratories and libraries, leadership importance and governance. Quality of faculty members in tertiary education determines the quality of institutions.

Quality Assurance Indicators
Higher Education Institutions' performance can be measured by variety of statistical and non-statistical techniques. Learning productivity, student retention, graduate employment and modification in students' approach are some of the indicators[5].

Quality indicators can be divided into three stages that are educational inputs, educational output and educational process respectively. The key components of educational inputs that are provided by the students at each stage are manpower, physical measures and financial measures. Financial measures are related to student expenditure. Infrastructure condition, classrooms, laboratories and use of international equipment are the components of physical measures.

Number of personnel of different types that is number of students at each level is expressed as manpower or human resource. Educational qualification, experience, academic competencies and attitude are also considered at this stage.

Researches in Quality Assurance in Higher Education
Wong, H. empirically studied antecedents and consequences of quality services in higher education[6]. He developed behavioural intention in students of university and quality service in the context of university. The researcher used focus group discussion with the students who were enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate

level programs at University of Sydney, Australia. The study concluded that administrators, teachers and students have direct and positive relationship with quality assurance mechanism. Service quality is found to have positive and direct relationship with student's satisfaction with apparent service quality as consequence. Behavioural intention and performance are found to have indirect relationship with perceived quality service mediated by trust and satisfaction.

Kiani[7] examined the quality assurance initiative of higher education commission for research based degrees in Pakistani higher education institutions during 2002 to 2010. In this study the researcher focused on three basic pillars of higher education commission: access, quality and relevance. The basic motive behind these criteria was based on three things: entry test, external evaluation and publication of one paper in higher education commission recognized journals. However, he suggested that the execution part of these policies should lie with the universities in collaboration with higher education commission.

Dilshad[8] examined quality of teacher education in Pakistan. The study was planned to evaluate the excellence of education given to teacher at three Govt. colleges. Data was collected by the opinion of 350 students. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. Results revealed that learning environment, practices, contents and outcomes are of low quality but he found fairly good quality of learner. The study emphasized on raising the quality of teacher education and recommended to implement student-cantered approach and updated curricula according to global needs.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
Keeping this important aspect of higher education into focus, this research focused on Higher Education Institution of Pakistan to know how and what practices they employ to assure quality in their institutions as perceived by their human resource. In addition to this, the research also aimed to gauge the influence of accrediting agencies on quality assurance for higher education institutions in Pakistan, with special attention to some of the larger institutions found in Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan.

METHOD OF THE STUDY
This study is based on qualitative research method carried out through the technique of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative analysis. It is used to analyse classification and present themes (patterns) that relate to the data. It illustrates the data in great deals with diverse subject via interpretations[9]. Thematic analysis is considered the most appropriate for any study that seeks to discover using interpretations. It provides a systematic element to data analysis. It allows the researcher to associate an analysis of the frequency of a theme with one of the whole content. Qualitative research requires understanding and collecting diverse aspects and data. Thematic analysis gives an opportunity to understand the potential of any issue more widely[10].

Data Collection and Procedure
A researcher used a purposeful sampling technique for selecting the data by asking 15 administrators, 30 educators and 50 students from public and private sector universities.

Although focused on qualitative research, the interviews covered wide range of issues and consisted of over a period of half an hour, thoroughly exploring the topic at hand. While the structure of these interviews did vary according to category of respondents, generally these interviews focused on the following questions:
- Definition of Quality Assurance in higher education;
- Belief about appropriate Quality Assessment Criteria for higher education;
- Perceptions of skill deficit in this area and the factors viewed as contributing to such deficits;
    Initially, the researcher through mail and telephone contacted Individuals. Many of the individuals that were approached by the researcher were happy to contribute to the project, many suggesting that this was an important area, which needed some investigation.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION
The research study was focused on investigating the impact of quality assurance mechanism at universities in Pakistan, and the participants included university students. The main ethical issues that had to be considered in this study were confidentiality, anonymity and privacy of the participants.

The participants were well informed about the research study. The informed consent letter was signed by the participants, which described the nature of the research and confirmed that the data would be kept confidential, while pseudonym was employed to avoid the disclosure of name as well as institution identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The researcher started data processing through open coding of each participant's responses to concepts and themes. Finally, twelve themes emerged from the collected data. These themes were considered final after a thorough review, and discussion and consultation with some of the respondents and experts. The final themes extracted included the concept of quality, quality assurance mechanism in institutions of higher education, ranking lacking face value, inadequate funding, inappropriate infrastructure, the impact of globalization on higher education, lack of quality student intake, and inadequate research facilities. These themes are discussed below.

Theme 1: Concept of Quality
This was the first word all the respondents reflected on. They believed that quality is an elusive word. They believed that to ensure quality, we have to first look at our criteria for quality. Whatever our universities are imparting is demand–driven and hence we have to understand quality from the point of societal needs. Respondents believed that as a nation we are quite confused about our understanding of quality.

A respondent opines, *"Parents want their children to be economically acceptable and socially smart. They want to see their child holding a big post and speaking fluent English and they consider it quality. They don't care much for attitude change and character building."*

If we consider employability as one of the quality standards, we have to rationally see how far we have satisfied our need. If we consider research to be one of our major objectives, we have to see how it has served the purpose.

It was believed that the level of competence of teachers and the standard of student intake are the main contributing factors in the deteriorating quality assurance of higher education in Pakistan.

Theme 2: Quality Assurance Mechanism in Higher Education Institutions
This was our core theme, therefore our discussion concentrated on it. The respondents believed that reforms in higher education have definitely made a valuable change in the scenario and have provided the higher education institutions with both respect and substance.

A respondent says, *"The process of ensuring quality cannot be fool proof but it has definitely created a change for the better. There is growing consciousness among people and organizations on quality standards and at least we now don't see the mushrooming of higher education institutions as shops completely relying on buying and selling of education."*

A respondent from a public sector university sees the same thing from a different perspective,
> *"Most of the time we engage in research as it is an important institutional requirement for promotion. It is a difficult job, as we don't have resources. We don't have access to digital library, modern statistical software's and internet facility."*

The respondents believed that there is growing consciousness in higher education institutions on change and development. They are trying to make better themselves as well as their human resource. There is a lot of concern regarding faculty development programs, research culture, and curricula.

Theme 3: Ranking Lacking Face Value
Ranking appeared to be the most frequently quoted word by almost all the respondents; therefore it was identified as a major theme. Due to recent reforms in higher education, the interviewed scholars showed obvious concern about whether ranking serves its purpose or not. Many of the respondents were of the view that ranking of universities definitely introduced healthy competition, which serves as self-improvement tool for universities and other higher educational institutions. Impact of ranking on universities was quite obvious in cases where little improvement of system influenced significant improvement in the standards

thus placing the universities on higher position. It was an agreed feeling that ranking of universities is a universal requirement which attracts immediate attention of student community, parents, employers, government, and media. Among others it instigates constructive competition among universities and is ultimately constructive in achieving excellence in higher education.

A respondent quotes:*"We don't want to be so hard and fast, but we have to do it because of the ranking. Many new documental requirements have been introduced in the wake of this ranking fiasco and we do everything as we don't want to lose ranking."*Another respondent says,*"At times we operate on the lines of school where we have specific, measurable objectives to be achieved in the given time period. There is no room for disagreement, clash of views and for ideas to be appreciated on their uniqueness and personal catharsis. With hard and fast lesson plans we are restricted in many ways and this restricts our movement and flight."*

Many of the respondents agreed that while ranking ensures certain standards, it ignores some very important aspects of a growing and developing society. They believed that while quality has definitely been improved through ranking, somehow it has made the higher education institutions more mechanized and externally driven. While they are fighting for the allocation of resources to fulfil the criteria of not just one but many regulating agencies, they have lost the sense of personal vision and mission, and creativity which should be very much a part of an entity which is supposed to prepare scholars who can think an reason in the abstract.

Another concern on ranking also highlighted that assigning numbers on the basis of resources and infrastructure is not justified. Many of the respondents believed that there cannot be a hard and fast criteria as every higher educational organization is unique with respect to its scope, breadth, , and freedom and hence it should be judged according to that capacity.

Theme 4: Inadequate Funding
"Inadequate funding" was extracted as a number fourth theme in the study. Most administrators believed that funding in universities has been inadequate. The University administration faces a lot of pressing problems to ensure required facilities for academic development and quality assurance and under these conditions it is believed to be facing severe resource constraints.

A respondent said,*"For years it has been observed that the Government's budgetary allocation to university education has declined considerably. And the significant feature has been that recurring expenditures have increased rapidly at the expense of development grant".*

Physical infrastructure was also believed to be less developed in public universities as compared to the private sector universities. It was believed that the public universities have stronger faculty as compared to the private sector

universities. Most of the respondents opined that their availability of professors was ensured to some extent by universities but their support in research to PhD scholars was very little. A large number of respondents were of the opinion that universities do not provide adequate research facilities. Students are not provided with sufficient library facility to mature their ideas of researches. There were many flaws and barriers to utilize the research facilities properly.

Theme 5: The Impact of Globalization on Higher Education
Impact of globalization on higher education was another theme that was extracted from the data. Mostly emulating that of developed countries has developed existing models of quality assurance. It was believed that the models developed in United States, United Kingdom and European Union may not cater to the need of Pakistani Higher Educational Institutions. It was believed that lack of indigenous quality assurance framework for Higher Education is a major reason for not achieving results as planned. Quality assurance is part and parcel of all decisions of the higher education whether it is faculty development, research, publications, human resource development, and infrastructure or curriculum development. Over a period of time the general public have also become quality conscious[11]. As a result public and private sector organizations have been compelled to adopt quality standard, as a global strategy, in order to survive the growing completion.

Theme 6: Quality Enhancement
The seventh extracted theme was quality enhancement. It's believed that H.E.C. needs to ensure that appropriate budget is allocated each year for the activities of quality enhancement cell (QEC) for the stability and sustainability of quality enhancement procedures internally & externally. It was believed that there should be regular trainings, workshops or orientation sessions to introduce quality assurance practices and procedures.

Theme 7: Assessment System in Higher Education Institutions
Another very important concern was related to the student assessment system in higher education institutions. The examination and student assessment systems in higher education institutions are being reformed and revamped, and they have been linked up with the assessment of the learning outcomes since the quality of graduates is the best evidence of an efficient higher education.

Theme 8: Faculty Development
Faculty development is another very important extracted theme. The respondents believed that trained faculty members with latest pedagogical skills and up to date knowledge of the subject are central to the success of higher education.

Theme 9: Issue of Service Quality Assurance and Student Satisfaction
Numerous researchers have studied the issue of service quality assurance and student satisfaction for example Hasan[12] empirically investigated the accountability and performance in higher education institutions. Our results show that students are largely dissatisfied with their teachers in the public sector universities where as in

private sector the situation is opposite. Students showed lesser satisfaction about research activities in public sector universities. Overall, the responses of students in both private and public universities regarding research facilities and activities invite serious attention of higher education commission of Pakistan. Students reported that administrative support is satisfactory in private sector universities whereas in public sector it is less satisfactory.

Theme 10: Time pressure
Another theme derived by the researchers is time pressure, mentioned by heads of both public and private universities. They opined that they have to do many other jobs like curriculum planning's, assessments, admissions, students' counselling, administrative meetings and their own lecture preparations. Amongst all these activities, they stress that one-to-one performance review meeting with each faculty member on various matters, in nearly impossible.

Higher Education Commission has taken major steps for promoting research culture in Pakistani universities. Because of these busy activities of semester system, teachers do not have enough time to concentrate on their research work.

Theme 11: Performance Feedback
After taking opinions and interviews from the respondents, the researcher found that there were concerns related to the feedback of performance. Performance measurement exists in the universities but needs more emphasis to establish its worth in the institutes. In order to maintain uniformity in quality assurance mechanism, performance feedback should be shared. When a survey was carried out the respondents reported for the lack of such measurement system. It was reflected that either the performance measures are not available or they are not properly used for this purpose in public sector universities where as in private sector universities the situation is quite better.

Theme 12: Infrastructure and Faculty Development
Another theme generated by the researchers after interviewing administrators was that the administration should be careful in training the employees in order to come up to the expectations of students. In addition to learning environment, there are several other essential facilities which are also important for students i.e. the well managed cafeteria, parking facilities, playgrounds and other arrangement of physical and mental health e.g. clubs and gymnasiums etc.

The administrative executives and managers of higher education institutions should pay attention in developing their educational institutes in the light of various dimensions of students' quality perception. The teacher should have an empathetic attitude towards the students. Infrastructure is also a very important preference of students of HEIs.

CONCLUSION

In the view of research findings it may be concluded that assurance is a cooperative activity owned and ensured by the society, the organization, and the Government. When each one of these agencies contributes its part appropriately, quality is assured. Quality assurance is not the responsibility of solely the university; it is a shared responsibility of the academic communities and the increasing number of university stakeholders. This awareness was guided by data collection, particularly during interviews with members of the academic community.

The findings also supported the need for establishment of quality assurance agencies and quality assurance cells in all public and private universities to uplift the standard of higher education. The findings supported the importance of globalization with reference to quality assurance agencies and quality assurance cells working in institutions. Both findings also indicate that effective assessment of teaching and learning has become a major issue for higher education all over the world.

Overall this study explored and identified trends and best practices in quality assurance mechanism in higher education institutions. The study highlights that the quality assurance mechanism should employ all new tools and practices to accelerate development in higher education institutions. Future studies about impact of quality assurance mechanism on HEC, globalization, internal and external quality assurance mechanisms can be conducted to understand conceptual or methodological weaknesses of quality assurance mechanisms in universities. The study suggests that the quality assurance mechanism highly impacts on improving the quality of higher education.

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