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Quality Assurance of Undergraduate Education in Sri Lankan Universities

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Abstract

Quality assurance scheme in the Sri Lankan University system was initiated in 2001 by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Directors in collaboration with the University Grants Commission. The main activities carried out in this scheme include subject reviews and institutional reviews.

In the subject reviews, the aspects that are evaluated include Curriculum design, content & review; Teaching, learning and assessment methods; Quality of students including student progress and achievements; Extent & use of student feedback; Postgraduates studies; Peer observation; Skills development; and Academic Guidance & Counseling.

The aspects evaluated in the institutional review include University goals and corporate planning; Financial resources & management; Research; Quality management & administration; Quality assurance; Learning resources & student support; External degree programmes; and University–industry–community linkages & other extension activities.

Subject reviews and institutional reviews are carried out by trained external reviewers. These reviews are not yet mandatory in the Sri Lankan University system and are carried out only on voluntary basis. Of the 15 Universities in Sri Lanka, three have undergone institutional reviews by the end of March 2007. Of the 413 academic departments, 81 departments have undergone subject reviews by the end of March 2007.

Subject benchmark statements for 11 subjects/subject streams have also been completed under the quality assurance scheme by the end of March 2007. These include Accountancy, Botany, Civil engineering, Economics, Geography, Mathematics & Statistics, Mechanical engineering, Medicine, Physics, Veterinary medicine & animal science and Zoology. In addition, Codes of Practice on six key aspects have also been developed. These include Codes of Practice on Assessment of students; Career guidance; External assessors; Postgraduates research; Programmes approval, monitoring & review; and Student support & guidance.

Internal Quality Assurance Units have also been established in all universities to ensure that quality assurance activities are successfully carried out. At the University Grants Commission, a Standing Committee on Quality Assurance has been established and this committee meets every month to monitor the quality assurance activities in the universities.

The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council, which functions under the University Grants Commission coordinates all quality assurance activities in the Sri Lankan university system. Information on these activities are available on the website www.qaacouncil.lk.

Key words: Subject review, Institutional review, Bench marking, Codes of Practice

Introduction

Sri Lanka has an education system dating back to the 3rd Century BC. The new institutions of tertiary learning in Sri Lanka had emerged from about 1870s (Mendis *et al.* 1996). At present there are 15 universities in Sri Lanka including the Open University and 16 undergraduate and postgraduate institutions affiliated to these universities.

The in-campus undergraduate student population in the 14 conventional universities is around 40,000. There are about 20,000 students enrolled in the Open University. In addition, around 100,000 students are registered as off-campus students for open and distance mode learning in the conventional universities. Annual intake of undergraduate students for the conventional Universities is around 17,500. About 25,000 students register annually for open and distance mode learning in conventional universities. However, not much tuition is offered by the University to these students. The syllabuses are prepared by the Universities and the students are trained in private institutions on which the Universities have no control. The examinations for these students are conducted at the end of the academic year by the Universities.

Quality assurance in Sri Lankan universities was initiated in 2001 by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Directors (CVCD) in collaboration with the University Grants Commission (UGC). Initially, a group of senior academics were trained as subject reviewers and institutional reviewers with the help of the Quality Assurance Agency in the U.K. Some of the senior academics serve as resource persons in subsequent training programmes.

The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) in Sri Lanka was established as a department of the UGC in 2005. At present, it coordinates all quality assurance activities in Sri Lankan universities. The QAAC carries out these activities under the guidance of the Standing Committee on Quality Assurance of the UGC. This standing committee, which is chaired by a member of the UGC, comprises of several Vice-Chancellors nominated by the CVCD, and the representatives of universities, private higher educational institutions and professional institutions.

The activities carried out in quality assurance include conducting subject reviews and institutional reviews, preparation of subject benchmark statements, and development of codes of practice and Sri Lankan credit and qualification framework.

Subject Reviews

Subject reviews are carried out in academic departments by external evaluators. The external evaluators are specialists in the subject who have undergone training in the subject review process. Initially a self evaluation report is prepared by the Department of study and sent to the QAAC. The evaluators are selected by the QAAC from a panel of trained experts and informed to the Department of study for concurrence. The Department can object to any evaluator giving valid reasons. The names of evaluators, to whom the Department concerned is agreeable, are then approved by the Standing Committee on Quality Assurance of the UGC.

The self evaluation reports are sent to the reviewers about three weeks before the review visit. Eight aspects are evaluated in subject reviews. These are as follows (CVCD/UGC 2002).

     (i)   Curriculum design, content and review
     (ii)   Teaching, learning and assessment methods
     (iii)   Quality of students including students' progress and achievements
     (iv)   Extent and use of student feedback

      (v)   Postgraduate studies
      (vi)   Peer observation
      (vii)   Skills development
      (viii) Academic Guidance and Counseling

During the review visit, which is carried out over 3 – 4 days, the external evaluators meet the academic staff, students and non academic staff of the Department and examine the documents available including question papers, answer scripts, marking schemes, external examiners reports, students' work and minutes of Departmental meetings. They also observe teaching sessions.

Each of the eight aspects is evaluated as either Good, Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. The subject review report is sent back to the Department and any disagreement regarding the review judgments are resolved through discussions. When the reviewers and the Department agree, the judgments are made public and the Department is expected to take action to improve the quality of unsatisfactory aspects within six months.

These subject reviews are not yet mandatory in Sri Lankan Universities. Of the 413 academic Departments in the 15 Universities in Sri Lanka, 123 Departments have submitted self evaluation reports to the QAAC and 81 have undergone evaluation by the end of March 2007 (QAAC 2007).

Institutional Reviews

Institutional reviews are also carried out by trained external evaluators. These evaluators are those who have held a post of Dean or above in the university sector or Senior Managers/CEOs of other governmental or private sector institutions. As in subject reviews, the consent of the Institution is obtained for the panel of reviewers and these panels are approved by the Standing Committee on QA of the UGC.

A self evaluation report is prepared by the University and is made available to the members of the review panel at least three weeks before the review visit.

The aspects evaluated in institutional reviews are as follows (CVCD/UGC 2002).
      (i)   University goals and corporate planning
      (ii)   Financial resources and management
      (iii)   Research
      (iv)   Quality management and administration
      (v)   Quality assurance
      (vi)   Learning resources and student support
      (vii)   External degree programmes
      (viii) University, industry, community linkages and other extension activities.

As in the subject review, during the review visit, which is carried out over a period of 4 – 5 days, the external evaluators meet academic staff, non academic staff, administrative staff and the members of the Governing Council and also examine all relevant documents. The eight review aspects are evaluated as in the subject reviews and before making the review judgments public, the review reports are sent to the University for comments. Any disagreement on review judgments is resolved through discussion. When the reviewers and the University agree, judgments are made public. The University is expected to take action to improve the unsatisfactory aspects within six months.

Of the 15 Universities in Sri Lanka, only three have undergone the institutional review by the end of March 2007 (QAAC 2007).

Subject Benchmark Statements

Another activity carried out under the quality assurance scheme is the development of subject benchmark statements. This was started in 2003 and by the end of March 2006, benchmark statements for 11 subjects/subject streams have been completed. These are Accountancy, Botany, Civil Engineering, Economics, Geography, Mathematics & Statistics, Mechanical Engineering, Medicine, Physics, Veterinary Medicine & Animal Science, and Zoology. Subject Benchmark statements are prepared by a committee comprising all Professors and Heads of Departments of the relevant subject/subject stream. At present, subject benchmark statements for 10 subjects/subject streams are being developed. These include Agriculture, Chemistry, Dental Science, Electrical Engineering, English, History, Philosophy, Sinhala, Sociology and Tamil.

Subject benchmark statements stipulate the minimum standard required for the award of the degree in a particular subject area or stream. Further, these are useful in developing student learning outcomes that are expected from the students after following the course of study. In addition, the subject benchmark statements provide the subject reviewers with reference points for making judgments.

Codes of Practice

Another activity carried out under the QA scheme is the development of codes of practice. Six codes of practice on key aspects in the university system have already been developed. These are as follows.

- (i) Assessment of students
- (ii) Career guidance
- (iii) External assessors
- (iv) Postgraduate research programmes
- (v) Programme approval, monitoring and review
- (vi) Student support and guidance

These codes of practice provide reference points covering the main aspects of academic standards and the quality of education and provide guidance on good practices (CVCD/UGC 2003). The Universities are expected to use these codes of practice in carrying out their activities.

Credit and Qualification Framework

Sri Lankan Credit and Qualification Framework was developed in 2004 as a part of the QA scheme to maintain uniformity in the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes by way of comparable credit standards (CVCD/UGC 2004). This credit and qualification framework facilitates student mobility between universities through lateral entry and exit of students. It helps the transfer of credits between the universities enabling the transfer of students during their undergraduate career to an institution where relevant subject expertise and resources are available.

In the credit and qualification framework, qualification descriptors for each level in credit measures indicating the volume of learning that a student is expected to achieve are described.

Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) and some conventional universities conduct courses in open and distance mode for large number of students. Therefore, in Sri Lanka, attention is paid to quality assurance in open and distance mode learning too.

The OUSL, in collaboration with Commonwealth of Learning, Canada and the UGC, has developed a framework for quality assurance and a manual for self evaluation of open and distance learning institutions (OUSL 2006 a). In the framework for quality assurance in open and distance learning, 10 aspects have been identified (OUSL 2006 a). These are as follows.

  (i)   Policy and planning
  (ii)   Human resource provision and development
  (iii)   Management and administration
  (iv)   The learners
  (v)   Programme design and development
  (vi)   Course design and development
  (vii)   Learner support
  (viii) Learner assessment
  (ix)   Technology for learning
  (x)   Research, consultancy and extension services.

In the evaluation process, all these aspects are considered.

The self evaluation report is the basic document, which initiates the process of quality assurance assessment in open and distance learning as in subject reviews and institutional reviews. Format and guidance for the preparation of the self evaluation report is given in the Manual for Self Evaluation of Open and Distance Learning Institutions in Sri Lanka (OUSL 2006 b). During the review visit, validation of the self evaluation report is carried out by a team of external reviewers. After the review visit, an assessment report is prepared and the outcome is discussed with the Institution, and the report is then published.

Internal Quality Assurance Units

In all universities, quality assurance activities are coordinated by Internal Quality Assurance Units (IQAU). These are established in all universities and are usually headed by a senior academic. All Faculties are represented in the IQAU.

Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC)

Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council in Sri Lanka (QAAC) functions as a Department of the UGC. As described earlier, it coordinates all subject reviews and institutional reviews. In addition, it conducts training programmes for subject reviewers and institutional reviewers and also awareness programmes for the staff on various aspects of quality assurance. Such programmes include those on Teaching and learning process, internal quality assurance, student feedback, peer observation, and quality assurance in libraries. The activities they carry out are published in the website, www.qaacouncil.lk

Conclusion

Although quality assurance activities are new to Sri Lanka and external quality assessment is still not mandatory, it is encouraging to note that many academic Departments are willing to undergo subject reviews. Although there are 413 academic Departments in the 15 universities in Sri Lanka, since entire programmes are reviewed in Medicine and Dental Sciences, there are

only 331 subject/subject stream reviews to be conducted. By the end of March 2007, 81 subjects/subject stream reviews have been conducted and already 123 Departments have submitted their self revaluation reports.

At present, although eight aspects in subject reviews are evaluated separately, an overall judgment for the Department is not given. This is because there is no guidance provided to give an overall judgment. Although three levels of overall judgment have been identified by CVCD/UGC (2002), in the earlier reviews, there had been no consistency in arriving at the overall judgment. The QAAC is in the process of developing specific guidelines for this purpose. However, in the case of the three institutional reviews carried out, overall judgment of "confidence" had been given to all. The other two judgment levels are 'limited confidence' and 'no confidence'.

At present, the QAAC is not an independent body. It functions under the UGC. The view of most academics is that the QAAC should not function as a department of the UGC but as an independent body. However, in order to establish an independent QAAC, the Universities Act has to be amended.

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