Determinants of Quality in Higher Education: Faculty Perspective

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Abstract: *There has been a debate amongst academicians as to what quality means in higher education. Quality means differently in each country depending on the context, political context, rules and regulations as what constitute quality since quality assurance practices vary from country to country as well as quality assurance requirements. Due to these discrepancies, this paper mainly focuses on key players the authors perceive as determinants of quality in higher education and their roles in pursuing continuous quality in the provision of education. They are the institution leaders which include the deans of each school, program directors and team leaders; faculty members, who are active players in the delivery of quality education, have the necessary academic qualifications and commitment and are constantly developing themselves through professional development initiatives; support staff, who provide the technical assistance and support to students and faculty members and the quality of students undertaking programs of study in an educational institution. These people are pivotal in ensuring that each member of the institution takes part in the provision of quality education. The authors believe that quality in education does not exist in paper only but quality means an interplay between the key players mentioned in this paper. This paper also discusses the roles and responsibilities of these important players to ensure quality in higher education.*

Keywords: *Quality Assurance, Higher Education, Quality Education*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a paramount concern regarding the quality of education provided by higher education institutions as competition to recruit new students becomes keen. Unlike in the past wherein universities enjoyed the luxury of filtering the quality and intake of students who would undertake programs offered by them, this kind of scenario is seldom seen nowadays as there are many universities students can choose from. Universities have come up with different strategies which include offering fast track programs, dual programs and other attractive programs to lure customers. This however, has compromised the quality of education provided to students as education is now considered a commodity that needs to be marketed. This becomes the prime concern of quality assurance accreditation bodies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 What is quality in education and how is quality in education measured?

There are many definitions of quality in education and each definition varies from country to country depending on the context, political environment, policies and regulations set by education authorities in those countries. Gordon and Partington (1993) refer to quality of education as "the success with which an institution provides educational environments which enable students to effectively achieve worthwhile learning goals including appropriate academic standards" (Rowley, 1996, cited by Ashraf, et al., 2016). Based on this definition, it

is critical for educational institutions to meet a set of academic standards and criteria prescribed by an accrediting institution or the Ministry of Education to ensure provision of quality education. To ensure meeting these academic standards, educational institutions form different committees to make plans, manage strategies and monitor performance of each unit in the institution to comply with the requirements of the quality assurance board. Reports are written and evidences to support achievement of each criterion are collected for assessment by quality assurance assessors.

However, quality does not exist on papers or documents nor the requirements set by a quality assurance board. From our viewpoint, after a careful study of the quality assurance processes, the performance indicators set do not really reflect quality in education as the link between the two is not evident (Thune, 1998).

To us, quality is action, meaning all people in the organization or the institution are actively and enthusiastically playing their roles and responsibilities effectively and efficiently holding each one accountable and contributing to the attainment of quality in every aspect of teaching and learning in addition to facilities and services offered by the institution. Quality is not only about outputs but it also entails inputs that include faculty members, the leaders in the organization, the supporting staff and students. Based on recent studies, the dimensions identified to achieve quality in higher education are the quality of students, faculty credentials, academic features, and administrative support (Akareem & Hossain, 2012; Asraf, Ibrahim & Joarder, 2009 cited by Akareem, H. & Hossain, S., 2016).

Members of the organization are crucial to the attainment of quality in education. Good and up to date facilities and services do matter in the attainment of quality but if the people mentioned in this paper do not support and complement each other and have a common vision and interpretation about quality, quality cannot be attained. We believe that the key players in providing quality education are the people in the institution. Who are these people and what roles should they play to ensure quality in education?

3. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

3.1 Leaders

It is essential for leaders to understand the context of the institution which they are leading (Peleg, 2012). Leaders have pivotal roles in ensuring that each member of the institution understands what quality means and their roles in implementing quality improvement in all aspects of their educational product (Tsinidou et al., 2010). It is not enough to form committees or delegate quality initiatives to a selected group of people. The leader should lead these initiatives by supporting every unit in the organization, establishing directions and expectations of performance as well as following up the organization's performance (Leithwood & Reihl, 2003). The leader should ensure that the quality management framework enables and supports the continuous quality improvement processes (Shawyun, 2012). The leader's goal is to support people who will   help students to be successful. In addition, institutional leaders should possess strategic and interpretative skills to be able to match the objectives of quality processes and the mission of the institution to establish an interaction between the QA system and the development needs of the institution (Stensaker, 2003, cited by Kis, Viktoria (2005).

Since the level of performance of any education system depends on the quality of the teachers (Whelan, 2009:52, cited by Peleg, 2012), both quality leadership and quality teaching are essential to successful education (Peleg, 2012). In order to achieve this, institutional leaders together with deans, heads of programmes and other team leaders need to have regular interaction on the implementation of programs in which feedback and suggestions on program improvement are discussed (OECD, 2012). They should also define the pedagogical competencies associated with quality benchmarks that teachers need to deliver quality teaching. These pedagogical requirements should be communicated to teachers and could be used for professional development and as bases for improvement of teaching practices (OECD,2012)

3.2 Teachers

Two factors that determine the performance of an education institution are the quality of teachers and the quality of teaching. Education institutions which are willing to invest in people and human resources to attract quality teachers with the right academic qualifications, experience and commitment and who possess effective pedagogical skills to achieve student learning outcomes are more successful in delivering quality education. They are capable of helping their students learn because they have mastery of the subject matter and pedagogy (Darling-Hammond, L., 1998). These are teachers who feel the need for continual professional development and are committed to improving the quality of education.

An education system that aims to offer a quality education for all young people should be able to count on teachers who are well trained and adequately paid. Further, they should be capable of independently following the evolving processes and structure of knowledge, and have the necessary competencies to take into account the growing interdependencies at both the global and local levels that impact on schools" (Quality Education and the Key Role of Teachers, p. 2, cited in OECD, 2012). The management should ensure that human resources policies support the strategic objective of quality teaching reflecting the institution's teaching and learning framework (OECD, 2012).

3.3 Support Staff

Support staff could not be separated from the quality framework of an education institution because they help support the strategic objective of quality teaching and the effective implementation of the institution's teaching and learning framework (OECD, 2012). They should be given clear mandate, well-defined responsibilities and reporting procedures as well as resources to carry them out (OECD, 2012). They should work closely with schools, teachers and other staff to carry out their roles effectively and to be able to offer immediate technical assistance and support to teachers and students. There should be a number of trained staff who could provide accurate information on all aspects of students' studies (Tsinidou, M., et al., 2010)

3.4 Quality Learners/Students

Students are considered important members of an educational institution. Thus, it is crucial that students recruited to undertake academic programs possess the necessary

qualifications and characteristics to cope up with the demands of the academic community. According to Akareem and Hossain (2012), the qualifications of students as well as their background contribute significantly to defining the quality of education.   Students together with the other members of the academic community should help develop a culture of learning and participation in all aspects of university life. Alaniska and Eriksson emphasized that an important goal of educational institutions is to enhance students' learning but this goal cannot be achieved if students do not actively participate in every step of the development process (Alaniska H. & Eriksson, S, 2006). They should be ready to participate and learn (Colby, J., Witt, Miske & Associates, 2000). The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) pointed out the importance of student involvement (Alaniska H. & Eriksson, S, 2006).

Students should not only be active participants in the teaching and learning process but they could also participate in quality assurance system as information provider (Alaniska H. & Eriksson, S, 2006). Students should know the importance of quality in learning and their feedback could be used for teaching and learning improvement and curriculum development.

4. CONCLUSION

Since quality assurance systems in higher education differ from country to country and how quality is perceived, measured and understood by stakeholders and the difficulty in measuring the outcomes of quality in higher education, it is recommended that we focus more on the important players in ensuring quality in education: the leaders, teachers, support staff and students.

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