Quality Assurance and Enhancement Mechanism in Tertiary Education of Pakistan: Recent Status, Issues and Expectations

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Abstract

Higher education commission of Pakistan is trying hard and strongly emphasizing to streamline the universities to adopt quality assurance and enhancement mechanism to improve the quality of Tertiary education and research. For this specific purpose, Higher Education Commission (HEC) has established Quality Enhancement cells (QEC) in public sector universities of Pakistan. The main purpose of these cells and centers are to enforce sound standards in higher education quality criteria in Pakistan. This paper would provide an insight about how to recognize the progress of Quality Enhancement Cells as per expectations and what measures are being taken to face the challenges for assuring and enhancing the quality of education in different institutions. This qualitative research study addresses and highlights the current status of quality enhancement in Tertiary Education of Pakistan with special reference to progress, issues and expectations in new era, together with this research paper also investigate the perspectives of Head of department and students regarding quality enhancement cells and quality of services, their working in universities for the sake of quality education. This paper mainly aimed to look into, Students teacher perspectives about quality enhancement in universities, Major success and issues for working and implementation of quality enhancement criteria in universities and Major expectations regarding quality enhancement in universities of Pakistan. The paper is based on the review of literature and interviews from 20 Head of Departments and 40 students from four public sector Federal universities to investigate the perceptions and expectations, progress and issues about quality enhancement mechanism and services in universities of Pakistan. The paper recommends that Quality Enhancement Framework should have following five foundations. Ownership of Quality and benchmarks,

Enhancing the quality of student learning outcomes ,Involvement of all associated people ,awareness of International points of view, Independence, and association .

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Quality Enhancement Cell, Tertiary Education, Higher Education Commission.

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Introduction

Countries worldwide are paying greater attention to the regulation and promotion of quality within their higher education sectors. An in-depth study of institutional perceptions and practices related to quality assurance measures could help to create a better understanding of the possible opportunities for and potential challenges to implement an existing system or emergence of any other type of quality assurance system for learning programs. This information can help to guide stakeholders and policymakers in deciding whether the quality assurance system should be revoked, amended, or implemented. External quality assurance is a relatively recent phenomenon for most of the countries and Pakistan is not an exemption in this regard. Additionally, research findings show that aspects of institutional culture, such as leadership perceptions and actions, may be more important in bringing about change and improvements in quality than establishing or adopting external standards and processes. Attitudes, beliefs, and actions of key institutional personnel play a central role in determining whether quality assurance mechanisms succeed or fail (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005)

Higher education has immense significance in the advancement and development of a country. For over a decade, developing countries have been working to strengthen their educational system and the standard by providing quality higher education to their future generation but there are many obstacles and hurdles in its way. These challenges are Quantity, Equity, and Quality.These are very common in nature but require a proper procedure to address in the best manners. As a result, the Job of renovating higher education was endowed to the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan towork as an independent body under Presidential Ordinance in 2002. Higher education Commission is commanded to plan and execute strategies for the advancement, change and assessment of advanced education and innovative work. Hence in five-year action plan (Medium Term Development Framework) HEC recognized noteworthy issues that are being concurred top need, in which, Improving quality was perceived as one of the center and core task in higher education of Pakistan (http://www.hec.gov.pk/)

Before two decades higher education sector in Pakistan was seriously neglected but in recent years, it has undergone a revival (Country Summary of Higher Education, 2002). In Pakistan at higher education an enormous and significant change has been formed with the help of standardized curriculum and degree program duration, now two

year Bachelor's degree program end in 14 years of education and 4 year BS degree that end after 16 years of education. Numerous momentary and long term measures have been initiated and introduced in the institutions to upgrade the quality of teaching and research. Primarily since the commencement of HEC, the number of the institution has been expanded. At present, 124 public sector universities including two distance education universities and 57 institutions are in the private sector catering about 170 million students. The private sector institutions take and follow the rules given by HEC for quality education in Pakistan as recognition of degrees and institutional accreditation is the responsibility of the Higher Education Commission. (Higher education commission report, 2002-2008)

The US Department of Education (2002) defines the quality of education by its fulfilling the national educational goals and objectives. These objectives may broadly be classified into three categories:
•   National Excellence
•   Social Excellence
•   Academic Excellence

Lemaitre (2008) says that quality enhancement identifies that the commitment of quality existing in the higher education institutions; it additionally concentrates on their capacity to create and apply compelling approaches and system for self-regulation, and the processes with progression towards quality.

Quality is not any single thing but rather an emanation, an air, and an overdriving feeling that the establishment is doing everything with Excellence (Rauf, 2004)

As a matter of fact, civilized nations rely upon the nature and quality of higher education. Quality higher education has turned into a benchmark for the triumph of a country. The nations those have understood its significance and are taking adequate measures to upgrade the standard of higher education are placed in the best positions in top universities ranking. HEC has been putting its believable endeavors into practice to guarantee the standard of education, however, the real avoidance are the absence of conferred workforce (faculty).

Mohanthy (2000) conceives that nature of higher education relies on a culture of society and boost up the committed staff those are really eager to direct research with a specific e goal to update their knowledge and skills. Further, Husain (2007) remarks that research is an authentic business so a university instructor should produce quality exploration. HEC is seriously making a well-mannered attempt to streamline the

universities to enhance quality assurance strategy and the quality of their teaching and research.

The higher education commission is making intensive efforts to improve the quality of higher education which can meet international standards. In this regard HEC has a focused and precise approach for achieving best results and for consistency in the process of the quality assurance & enhancement in higher education in the country. (Batool, Z., and Qureshi, R.H. 2006).

It reflects an effort to sensitize higher education institutions in taking place internationally and bring higher education in Pakistan into complete harmony with the shifting paradigms. Thus, HEC aimed in various long and short run initiatives particularly for improvement of the quality of knowledge, being imparted at the universities and other higher education institutions. Rehman (2007) states that HEC lays an in-depth underline on the foundation of quality enhancement, affirmation, accreditation mechanism .Therefore in overall universities of Pakistan acceptable change in the delivery of higher education requires the improvement of a mechanism for uninterrupted and self-regulating change of the structure. In short, an instrumental methodology and practical approach have been proposed suggested by HEC to improve the quality of higher education which starts by setting up a mission, trailed by the capacities that must be done to accomplish the goals. A quality management framework and the system is then prescribed to guarantee the programs quality. A vital reason is that it will enhance the quality and significance of their graduates and research projects and along these lines empower university to assume a more successful part of the national economy. (Tovey, 1992).

Rationale of the Study

The standards of quality of higher education in Pakistan need to be improved significantly to achieve the goals of competitiveness with international standards and to create the foundations of a knowledge economy and compatibility. It has turned into commitments that establish higher education. It shows the adequacy of their educational plan in giving brilliant working out that absolutely affects the associates. This has driven the Higher Education Commission to create routines for surveying the quality of academic schemes and programs. As a result, foundation of Quality Assurance Agency at Higher Education Commission was chosen in the NQAC meeting that Quality Enhancement Cells will be built up at all universities to establish the

inward quality assurance process with a unique focus on quality of higher education, to fill the gap between status of quality education and training.

Hence, the issue of quality has been renowned as the considerable issue going up against the higher education sector in the Medium Term Development Framework (MTDF). A component of the foundation of QECs has been created by the Quality Assurance Committee to enhance the benchmarks of nature of advanced education systematically with consistency across the overall country. Furthermore, in 2006-07 the Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) have been built up at ten public universities, whereas in 2007-08 twenty more QECs were set up in public sector universities for development of their educational, performance and learning measures. The QEC family is being stretched out to another fifteen private sector institutions in 2009-10 and in twenty-four public institutions in 2010-11. Recently overall in public and private universities 148 QECs centers are working for quality education.

Quality in tertiary education is a multi-dimensional idea, which incorporates all the related capacities and exercises that frame a scholastic's academic life in a university. Along with these lines, in any system quality ought to consider the nature of pupils, instructors, student support services, administrations, educational program, evaluation and learning resources. Various elements, for instance, internationalization, promotion, growth, enmity, development of higher education and more noteworthy accountability have brought the concern of the quality of higher education to the cutting edge of national open debate. There are following quality indicators of quality education at higher level.

a.   The quality of Staff and committed Faculty
b.   The quality of Students/ and student support services
c.   The quality of curriculum
d.   The quality of Infrastructure's and facilities
e.   The quality of Management and Governance
f.   Quality of Accountability
(Hamidullah, http://www.intconfhighered.org/)

In compliance with internationally collective recognized best practices arerequired for healthy procedures of an internal system of quality enhancement. For this reason, various steps were taken at the national level. These included sharpening the scholarly world and different associates, improvement of quality criteria, principles and standards, structure, policy checking & assessment framework and capacity building of the professionals. All higher education organizations

succeeding to getting approval from their separate statutory bodies like the Board of Studies, Board of Faculty, Academic Councils, and Syndicate/Board of Governors have received these criteria. Some are in the procedure of adopting it. Their practices and executions are helping in accomplishing consistency of models and upgrading the quality of higher education with expanded worldwide connections. For inclusion of intellectual values and quality assurance guidelines in the institution's Quality Enhancement Cells with the well-structured manner and properly defined roles are being built up in all universities in an effective manner. Therefore, in this scenario 30, QEC's are positively functional beside this another 15 in public sector universities and 17 in private colleges to wind up operations before the end of current year. These QEC's working under the experts equivalent to the status of a Professor who serve as Heads of operational units of QAA in the universities. An important job being supervised by the QEC's is the self-evaluation of academic programs. In light of the rules given by QAA performance and management of the Self-Assessment reports are accumulated. This Performance is being utilized to acquire positive/ negative criticism relate to course evaluation and teacher evaluation by student, faculty course review report, the survey of graduating students, research student progress review form, faculty survey, survey of department offering Ph.D. program, and alumni survey. (http://www.hec.gov.pk/). In the evaluation, strategy described the organization program group serves as the contact group for the period of the evaluation phase. Evaluation group includes 2-3 individuals who may be from inside or outside the university.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study were to explore,
1. Perception of Students, Teachers, and Heads of Departments about quality assurance and enhancement in universities in Pakistan
2. Major success and issues for working and implementation of quality assurance enhancement policy in universities in Pakistan
3. Major expectation regarding quality assurance and enhancement in universities of Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. How quality assurance and Enhancement is perceived by academicians, Head of Departments and students in federal universities in Pakistan?
2. How do the universities are currently following quality assurance policy and assure (assess, monitor, improve) quality?
3. How do academicians and students of universities perceive quality assurance and Enhancement system of their respective university?
4. What implications do these conceptual issues (e.g., the values, beliefs, and attitudes of major decision-makers) as well as contextual issues (e.g., institutional infrastructure, guiding policies, and current practices) have for quality assurance and Enhancement policy for universities in Pakistan?

Significance of the Study

A study on quality assurance and Enhancement mechanism can prove valuable for all institutions of higher learning as well as policy makers at the national level to develop a system for quality assurance and Enhancement for all universities and to develop a mechanism for non-formal/distance learning institutions. Additionally, the study can provide a starting point for Higher Education Commission (HEC) for developing a quality assurance and enhancement mechanism suitable for formal as well as distance education programs. Taken together with future studies involving other stakeholders and aspects of the issue, the study can contribute to the data needed by policymakers to develop and implement a workable and effective quality assurance and Enhancement mechanism for universities in Pakistan.

Methodology

It was a descriptive study. The Qualitative analysis was done to reach the findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The related literature collected from two sources: HEC reports and different articles on QEC in Pakistan. For present study small-scale Semi- structured interviews were conducted with the purpose to figure out and targeted issues and challenges regarding internal factors and problems for quality enhancement in higher education of Pakistan. For present study, Semi-structured interviews technique is used for data collection because it's a very stretchy fair and reliable technique for mini research. It also involved thematic analysis of the qualitative data.

Population and Sample

All the head of departments of social sciences discipline's in the federal universities of Islamabad Pakistan were the target population for present study. In Islamabad four universities those have QEC (Quality enhancement cell, were selected for study. These universities include Allama Iqbal Open University, National University of Modern languages, Bahria University and National University of Science and Technology. Purposive sampling technique was used for data collection. Creswell points out rational of this sampling technique in qualitative research and stated that in this type of research the purpose is not to simplify a population, but to develop a comprehensive investigation of a central phenomenon, which is best achieved by using purposive sampling strategy. Hence from 4 universities, 20 head of Departments and 40 students of final semester (session 2015-2016) at master's level were selected as sample conveniently.

Instrument of the Study

The interview protocol was used as instrument .it was composed of 20 questions divided into four areas. In the present study, the researchers allowed the participants to explore in details and discuss issues which were noted during the interview. The protocol was developed by the researchers for an interview under following main themes.

- Quality education and its assurance and enhancement problems
- Status of Quality Enhancement Cell in university
- Current issues of institution regarding Quality Assurance and Enhancement
- Future challenges of higher education Institutions for quality assurance and Enhancement

Data analysis Techniques

The data collected through Semi-structure interview was analyzed thus a comprehensive edition provides specific step by step process of qualitative data analysis explains by Creswell (2009) was followed. The standard process of data analysis is demonstrated below. There are following steps of data analysis procedure:

a.   Transcribing Interviews.
b.   In-depth Reading the Data
c.   Generating Codes and Themes
d.   Interpreting the Meaning of the Theme

Results

Table 1
Interview results of respondents (Head of Departments)

Themes	Broad Codes	Sub-codes	Frequencies	Percentage
Quality Education its Assurance	Role of HEC	Institutional vision	15	73%
		Quality Education framework	11	53%
	QEC Centers	Awareness of faculty	11	53%
		Clarity of Objectivities	09	46%
Status of QEC in universities	Administration and management	Atmosphere & facilitation	09	46%
		Commitment for Quality	11	53%
	Work autonomy	System Efficiency	12	60%
		coordination and linkage with departments	12	60%
Currents issues of QEC regarding institution	Resources Related problems	Physical infrastructure	12	60%
		Misconception about work related problems	13	66%
		Human Resources	12	60%
		Financial Resources	12	60%

Future challenges of quality for higher education.	Ownership of quality and standards	Honest academic research work	12	60%
		safeguarding standards	11	53%
		Involvement of students and teachers	08	40%

The results are presented according to the main themes mentioned in a semi-structured interview. Main result of this study is presented in tabular form. The information gathered through Semi-structure interview, was transcribed and segregated into themes codes, then sub-codes by using above mention framework. Complete Results are shown in the table with the heading of Coding structure with themes, codes, and sub-codes. The table presents the number which assigned the frequencies and percentage from the text passage to each sub-code to present the challenges and problems faced by QEC and university faculty & students. All tables and graphs are self-explanatory.

Table2

Interview results of Respondents (Students)

Themes	Broad Codes	Sub-codes	Frequencies	Percentage
Quality Education its Assurance	Role of HEC	Institutional vision	26	66%
		Quality Education framework	20	50%
	QEC Centers	Awareness of students	22	56%
		Clarity of Objectivities	18	46%
Status of QEC in universities	Administration and management	Atmosphere & facilitation	24	60%
		Commitment for quality	25	63%
	Work autonomy	System Efficiency	24	60%
Currents issues of QEC regarding institution	Resources Related problems	Physical infrastructure	25	63%
		Misconception about work related problems	24	60%
		Human Resources	26	66%
		Financial Resources	28	70%
Future challenges of quality for higher education.	Ownership of quality and standards	Honest academic research work	30	76%
		safeguarding standards	25	63%

Involvement and Use of feedback from students and teachers	20	50%

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Table 3

(Summary of Results) Major challenges and problems faced by Respondents

Themes	Main areas	Major issues
Quality Education and its Assurance	Assessment and Evaluation Related Problems	Plagiarism policy and its awareness with implementation
Status of QEC in Universities	Atmosphere & facilitation	international Standards of education
Currents issues of QEC regarding institution	Commitment for quality	Honest academic writing of teachers and students Financial Resources
Future challenges of quality for higher education.	System Efficiency	infrastructure(ICT)
	International compatibility	Resources Related problems
	coordination and linkage with departments	Research and development

Themes	Broad Codes	Sub-codes	Frequencies	Percentage
Quality Education its Assurance	Role of HEC	Institutional vision	26	66%
		Quality Education framework	20	50%
	QEC Centers	Awareness of students	22	56%
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Status of QEC in universities	Administration and management	Atmosphere & facilitation	24	60%
		Commitment for quality	25	63%
	Work autonomy	System Efficiency	24	60%
Currents issues of QEC regarding institution	Resources Related problems	Physical infrastructure	25	63%
		Misconception about work related problems	24	60%
		Human Resources	26	66%
		Financial Resources	28	70%
Future challenges of quality for higher education.	Ownership of quality and standards	Honest academic research work	30	76%
		safeguarding standards	25	63%
		Involvement and se of feedback from udents and teachers	20	50%

The Quality Assurance Agency of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has suggested the foundation of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) in all universities and establishments of tertiary education with a specific end goal to efficiently enhance quality in higher education. It is observed that principal responsibility of developing Quality Assurance and Enhancement policy is on Higher Education Commission. QEC are working in their capacity but a lot of training and resources are needed for their better functioning. There is a lack of coordination among the stakeholders. Distance education institution is demanding Quality Assurance policy developed on their parameters because their instructional design and mode of delivery is different from formal universities. Commitment for Quality, system efficacy, International Compatibility and coordination and linkage with research and development sector are in dire need of the time.

Findings and Conclusion

The results are presented according to the main themes mentioned in semi-structure interview protocol. The information gathered through this interview protocol, was transcribed and segregated into themes codes, then sub-codes. Complete Results shown in tables with the heading of Coding structure with themes, codes, and sub-codes are self-explanatory.

As far as quality assurance and enhancement problem is concerned, most of the respondents were of the opinion that in universities quality enhancement cells are working but most of the respondents are unaware of work , there is no guidance and counseling services are available for faculty and the students. They further replied that in university mostly faculty are unaware of university policy regarding quality and its assurance in different university most of the faculty and students are aware because of open policy and standards. In universities, there is a need to properly recognize this fact that quality is not one-day effort matter , it's a continues process , therefore all associated people and stakeholders should understand and work together for desirable change. Because quality is never on account of an accident. It is constantly based on continuous and committed efforts. Further, more on Status of QEC in universities Most of Head of Departments were of the opinion that in universities QEC are functional but they have no idea about working and responsibilities of this cells. As for as students respondents, they replied that in the 4th semester they got to know QEC

because of thesis Turnitin reports. QEC related problems were also investigated universities those have big budget and lot of finances working efficiently but in some universities human and financial resources available such as in NUST they are working on best level as compared to Bahria Foundation University , NUML, and AIOU but still these three universities really accomplish their task in best manner Most of the respondents whether students and teacher collectively agreed on QEC proper establishment and its functional working for the sake of quality in tertiary education. Respondents from Allama Iqbal Open University were of the opinion that Quality Assurance and Enhancement criteria and mechanism is not suitable as it is developed for formal universities. As now many other open distance learning institutions and directorates has been established under directive of higher education commission so HEC should take steps to develop a separate Quality Assurance and Enhancement criteria and mechanism by involving the stakeholders from these institutions of Open Distance Learning

Hence one of the significant issues standing up to higher education in Pakistan is that of quality. The Quality Assurance Agency of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has suggested the foundation of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) in all universities and establishments of tertiary education with a specific end goal to efficiently enhance quality in higher education. Finally, it is concluded that principal responsibility of developing Quality Assurance and Enhancement policy is on Higher Education Commission. QEC are working in their capacity but a lot of training and resources are needed for their better functioning. There is a lack of coordination is observed among the stakeholders. Distance education institution is demanding Quality Assurance policy developed on their parameters because their instructional design and mode of delivery is different from formal universities.

Recommendations

1.   The main concluding points drawn from the findings of the study are that it is clearly found that HEC is much more committed to quality assurance and Enhancement and for this purpose developed QEC and spending enormous expenditures. Yet sustainability of quality criteria is vital to enhance the standard of education.
2.   In universities the Quality Enhancement Framework should have five foundations:
    - Ownership of Quality and benchmarks
    - Enhancing the quality of student learning outcomes

- Involvement of all associated people
- Awareness of International points of view
- Independence and association

3. There should be a separate Quality Assurance and Enhancement mechanism for Distance Education Universities like Allama Iqbal Open University because of their unique system of course development and delivery. Stakeholders from faculty, administration, services and students should be involved in developing Quality Assurance and enhancement mechanism

4. An academic dialogue is mandatory among all the stakeholders to develop a quality assurance and Enhancement policy.

5. All the faculty. Students and other stakeholders may be given awareness about the functioning of Quality Enhancement Cells and their voice should be reflected in policy development

6. Quality Enhancement Cells in the universities may be strengthened financially and academically for better functioning for the purpose of quality assurance and enhancement.

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