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Perception of Academics on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Academic staff, being one of the main stakeholder groups, has a major responsibility to maintain quality standards in higher education. Their perception has a significant impact on the quality of the higher education system in any country. However, academics' perspective on quality assurance (QA) in higher education has not been well explored yet in the existing literature, in particular in the Asian context. Thus, this study was conducted with the aim of finding out academics' perception on QA in higher education in Sri Lanka. Purposive sampling technique was used to select academics from ten faculties namely; Faculty of Agriculture (n=68), Faculty of Engineering (n= 85) Faculty of Medicine (n=91), Faculty of Humanities and Social Science (n=115), Faculty of Management and Finance (n=81), Faculty of Allied Health Science (n=23), Faculty of Technology (n=39), Faculty of Science (n=80), Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Science (n=30), Faculty of Graduate Study (n=1) of the University of Ruhuna. A Google form questionnaire consisting of five-point Likert scale questions (1= strongly disagree 5= strongly agree), closed ended questions and check list type questions, was prepared to collect primary data and it was sent to all academics via their university emails. The link was disabled after 14 days of circulation and 67 responses were obtained and the response rate was 10.9%. According to the results, 58.2% respondents were little aware and their knowledge on QA in higher education needs to be further enhanced. Wilcoxon Sign Rank test results obtained from the responses with respect to each statement on impact of QA on teaching and learning process revealed that all statements were valid and significant (p=0.000). According to the results of Wilcoxon Sign Rank test, the impact of QA on academics to develop their professional performance(p=0.000), enabling their continuous learning, motivating to involve in university activities, improve teaching strategies and methods (.000), helping to develop curriculum and course content(p=0.000) were significant. Majority (85.1%) of participants stated that identifying strengths and weaknesses in quality assurance practice is the major responsibility of the internal quality assurance system while 76.1% respondents identified best practices in educational delivery in Sri Lankan universities as the major requirement for the nationwide QA system in Sri Lanka. From the sample, 83.5% of respondents highly expected providing a national QA framework for respective higher educational institutes as a

task of the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) of the University Grants Commission (UGC). Among the challenges faced by QAC, 73.1% of respondents identified lack of continuous monitoring and tracking system as the major challenge. The most important criteria that should be included in internal QA framework were; teaching, learning and assessment procedure (91%), assessment method of student progress and achievement (91%), research and extension (91%), curriculum content, design & review based on graduate profile (92%).This study finally concludes that academics has a positive perception on quality assurance in higher education and it must be further improved with removing the institutional, student and resources barriers in delivering a high quality education. Further, it suggests improving the internal QA framework QAC based on academics' views. The research findings will contribute to bridge the knowledge gap in the existing literature by introducing an effective implementation and development of the QA system within the Sri Lankan higher education system.

Keywords: Academics Perception, Quality Assurance, Higher Education, University System

Introduction

Recently, the higher education system in Asia and European countries has been going through a significant restructuring process. In both the UK and Australia, quality assurance in higher education has been identified in their empirical studies. Quality assurance in higher education can be defined as "an ongoing process of evaluating the overall quality in terms of education system, institutions or programs (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg and Pârlea, 2007). Accordingly, the aim of the internal quality assurance is to improve the core mission of the institution including quality teaching and learning outcomes, quality research and community engagement activities besides the external quality assurance effectively safeguard the quality of output and the standards of higher education while enabling quality improvement (Coomaraswamy et al., 2014).In many countries, higher education policies are initiated in relation with the quality assurance to enhance the quality education, ensure the university accountability and transparency in allocating public funds and collaborating with diverse stakeholders (Shah et al., 2011).

In Sri Lanka, the Quality Assurance Council (QAC), established in 2005, is the government agency responsible for overseeing the quality assurance of 15 state universities. This council has established a quality framework and has established internal quality assurance departments at all universities over the last decade and has been widely adopted. Sri Lanka's existing QA process involves conducting reviews of institutions, programs, and subjects, and has a special system for reviewing library facilities in higher education institutions (Edgar et al, 2020). Academic staff, being one of the main stakeholder groups, has a major responsibility to maintain quality and standards in higher education. In fact, as dominant role players within the teaching and learning improvement process, academics are the group

that is most competent to assess the perception of quality assurance (Westerheijden et al., 2007). Even though this has been well recognized among the developed nations (Anderson, 2007), this has not been adequately discussed in the Asian context. Therefore, this paper examines the academics' perspective of quality assurance in higher education in Sri Lanka and the research findings will contribute to bridge the knowledge gap in the existing literature by introducing an effective implementation and development of a quality assurance system within the Sri Lankan higher education system. The specific objectives of this study were; to ascertain the perception of academic staff towards quality in higher education, to identify the academics' perceptions of development of quality assurance system in higher education, to examine the impact of quality assurance on teaching and learning from the perspective of academics and to identify factors included in quality assurance framework from academics' point of view.

Methodology

The present study utilized purposive sampling technique and all academics which represent the ten faculties namely; Faculty of Agriculture (n=68), Faculty of Engineering (n= 85) Faculty of Medicine(91), Faculty of Humanities and Social Science (139), Faculty of Management and Finance (81), Faculty of Allied Health Science (23), Faculty of Technology (39), Faculty of Science (80), Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Science (30), Faculty of Graduate Studies (01) of the University of Ruhuna were selected as the respondents of the study. Furthermore, the participants included in the sample were in different academic positions in the University. A Google form questionnaire was prepared to collect primary data and it was sent to all academics via their university emails. The initial questionnaire was prepared after a careful evaluation of the available literature. Accordingly, the questionnaire was designed to assess academics' perspective on quality assurance in higher education in Sri Lanka. It consisted of five sections which are used to assess the demographic features of the academic staff members, their perception towards the quality in higher education and the development of an effective and efficient quality assurance system in higher education. Further it contained different questions to ascertain the impact of quality assurance on teaching and learning process and the academics' opinions to develop a quality assurance framework. The link was disabled after 14 days of circulation and 67 responses were obtained. Secondary data were collected from Central Bank reports, research paper articles, newspaper articles, journals, and other websites etc. IBM SPSS version 25 software was mainly utilized for analytical purposes. Collected primary data were analyzed by using descriptive and inferential statistical methods such as the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test.

Results and discussion

More than half (52.2%) of the sample were males and 34.3% respondents belonged to the 45-55 years age category. Majority of respondents were reported as probationary lecturers. When taking the highest education qualification to account, the majority of respondents (56.7%) had a PhD. The highest number of respondents was reported from the Faculty of Agriculture. According to the first objective of the study, the perception of academic staff towards quality in higher education was assessed. The results indicated that 58.2% respondents were little aware and needed to enhance their knowledge on quality assurance in higher education. According to them, the means of good quality in higher education are; quality of teaching and learning perspective (63%), knowledgeable staff (63%), education that enhances students' creative thinking (64%). It was reported that lack of infrastructure facilities (76.1%) , lack of financial resources (70.1%), lack of critical and innovative thinking skills (71.6%) are respectively institutional barriers, resource barriers and student related barriers in delivering a high quality education.

Academics' perception on the development of an effective and efficient Quality Assurance (QA) system in higher education was analyzed by five statements. The majority, 59.7% of respondents strongly agreed to the statement on "An effective quality assurance system is a must in the higher education sector". A significant number, 50.7%, strongly agreed that "An effective quality assurance system increases the awareness of quality teaching standards." However, only a smaller number (38.8%) of respondents strongly agreed that "Quality Assurance greatly focuses on innovation and experimentation in teaching and learning". Half of them (50.7%) stated that "Efficient quality assurance process improves the quality of teaching and learning." Also, 52.2% of respondents strongly agreed that "There is a Global demand for maintaining a good quality assurance system in higher education."

Table 1 shows the results of the Wilcoxon Sign Rank test obtained from the responses with respect to each statement on impact of quality assurance on teaching and learning process given by the respondents. All statements were valid and significant ($p<0.05$). According to the results, the impact of quality assurance on academics to develop their professional performance, enabling their continuous learning, motivating them to be involved in university activities, improving teaching strategies and methods, helping to develop curriculum and course content were significant.

Table 1: Perception of academics on quality assurance

Statement	Mean	Test value	P value
Helps academics to develop their professional and academic performances	1	6.376	.000
Enables continuous learning for academic staff	1	6.278	.000
Motivates academic staff to be actively involved in the University activities	1	5.857	.000
Helps to improve the teaching strategies and methods	1	6.250	.000
Helps to develop curriculum and course content	2	6.860	.000
Produces marketable graduates	1	4.964	.000
It helps to fairly distribute the workload of the academic staff	0	2.847	.004
Enhances the quality of scientific publications of students and staff	1	4.431	.000
Increases the efficiency of the learning process in university system	1	6.267	.000
Helps to improve the learning outcome	1	6.014	.000
Efficient quality assurance process improves the ranking of the university	1	6.313	.000

According to the results, the most important criteria that should be included in internal quality assurance framework were; teaching, learning and assessment procedure (91%), assessment method of student progress and achievement (91%), research and extension (91%), curriculum content, design & review based on graduate profile (92%).

When taking account of the responsibilities of internal quality assurance, the majority of respondents (85.1%) stated that identifying strengths and weaknesses in the quality assurance system in Sri Lanka. From the sample, 83.5% of respondents highly expected to provide a national QA framework for respective higher educational institutes as a task of the Quality Assurance Council of the University Grants Commission (UGC). Among the challenges faced by the Quality Assurance Council, 73.1% of respondents identified the lack of continuous monitoring and tracking system as a major challenge.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the majority of respondents were little aware and needed to enhance their knowledge on QA in higher education. The QA system must be further improved with removing the institutional,

student and resource barriers in delivering a high quality education. It can be further stated that identifying strengths and weaknesses in quality assurance practice is the major responsibility of the internal QA system. The study also suggests improving the internal QA system by adding the criteria of teaching, learning and assessment procedure, assessment method of student progress and achievement, research and extension, curriculum content, design and review based on graduate profile.

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