
AN EXPLORATION INTO THE QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICES OF UNIVERSITIES IN PUNJAB

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Original Article

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Abstract

This research study explored the “Quality Assurance practices of universities in Punjab”. The Phenomenology method of Qualitative research approach was used by the researcher to explore the phenomenon under study. The sample for the study including 3 x Directors QEC (2 x from each public and 1x from private university) and similarly 3 x HODs (2 x from each public and 1x from private university) has been selected with Purposive sampling. A self-developed semi-structured interview protocol has been used by the inquirer for the qualitative data collection. The collected data have been analyzed while using the thematic analysis. The qualitative results concluded the participants’ responded that there was transparency regarding the quality assurance practices of universities. Furthermore, they have been following the requirements and standards formulated and communicated by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan.

Keywords: Quality Assurance; Universities, Punjab, Practices, Thematic Analysis

Introduction

The concept of Quality is generally linked with the development sector. For the last few decades, it has changed its structure and is used in different ways. Initially, the concept of quality was introduced by American scholars in the United States whereas the Japanese were the pioneers who utilized this concept in their manufacturing field (Adina-Petruta, 2014). The Japanese strongly accepted the ideas of W. Edwards Deming and Joseph M. Juran, on quality management along with numerical quality control while engaging in the industrial sector as a developed nation (Bunce, 2017). In recent times, organizations around the world have begun to embrace quality ideas and processes, and quality programs in the public sector are being actively implemented by different public entities/ governments (Carter & Yeo, 2016).

The introduction of QA procedures in higher education embedded a clear indulgence of ‘quality’. If one definition of ‘quality’, however, is not found in past studies. There are different debates that show the intricacy of dividing the definition of quality, answering an easy response to a complex inquiry (Renée, et al., 2022). The quality, we know about it but indeed we do not. It is right, some things are better than others, that is, they are considered as of quality (Fierro, 2022). If someone attempts to define the term quality, apart from the things it has, everything goes well. If everyone is unfamiliar with it then it is not existing and at the same, it is existing for all practical resolutions (Bates, 2017).

Quality means the fitness of the predetermined purpose. Harvey & Green (1993) classify the concept of quality as follows:

- Unique quality (something which has been distinct and connected to good performance);
- Quality as a whole (constant or perfect result);
- Quality as objective fit (satisfying customer requirements);
- Quality as value for money (return for the paid value); and
- Quality as conversion (student development).

It is reflected in the above-mentioned categories that quality has been defined with different aspects ranging from the general concept of 'quality' to 'the latest' zero defect '(perfection), the principle of consumer correction and direction (fitness for purpose), and, eventually, the concept of quality change, focusing the concept of quality for higher education (Chen, 2017). Governments often prioritize public opinion on how much money is needed in the civic sector for efficient and effective operations (Borsellino, Carta, & Varia, 2022). From the center of the concept of quality, financing is the accountability theory. There were a few additions to the existing idea of quality. This includes quality as an 'initial point or baseline' and as an 'improvement'. So quality is considered as subjective and also multi-dimensional (Clark, 2017).

The systems and processes of Higher education are operationalized with the help of different stakeholders, including policymakers, administrators, teachers, researchers, students, support staff, government institutions, employers, parents, and educational and technical organizations (Pechmann & Haase, 2022). They have varied kinds of interests with different values and their attention may be very dissimilar. Employers need to focus on knowledge, skills and attitude when the government offers to prepare graduates with subsidized finances and as per international standards (Zhu & Sharp, 2022).

The preparation of graduates at a higher level of education is linked to their personal interests, development, and specific position in society (ENQA, 2015). In addition, educational personnel may emphasize good academic training based on the transfer of good knowledge and a good learning environment and a good relationship between teaching and research. Nothing prevents these players from choosing their definition of quality (Barbato, et al., 2022). Moreover, they recognize that those who achieve high ranks in higher education programs, reliant on their strengths, co-operatives, and guidelines, contribute to existing characterizations of quality (Gunn, 2018).

If specifically it is compared to developing countries, the quality is a concern for a well-functioning, continuous classroom system and states that it occurs in the classroom, in the marketplace, and, in the wider community (Huisman & Stensaker, 2022). The comments on the quality of education in less developed regions are linked to the higher level.

The discussion above in an effort to define quality raises numerous prospects. First, although the discussion on the concept of quality in higher education is extensive, however, a single definition of this is not enough. There is no single quality definition that should be excluded from all others (Fleming, 2017).

Second, the generally used definition among the above appears to be 'fit for purpose, which is a useful measure of quality. As per that definition, if education achieves its defined objectives, it is assumed that education is of quality (Zavale, 2021). The mission statement of every institute reflects the purpose which demonstrates the quality of that advantage. However, participants may explain the objectives differently (Hanssen & Solvoll, 2013).

Third, quality perceptions change and transpire as the conditions change in the entity under which the higher education institute operates. In higher education, different stakeholders are involved and each of them perceives the quality through a lens of the goal they set to be achieved (Weenink et al., 2021). The definition of a concept of quality depends on the person who sets the goals. The defined goals may be mutually exclusive, however, there may be a contradiction (Keykha, Ezati, & Khodayari, 2021). Therefore, at best, we should clearly define as far as possible

the methods used by each participant when judging quality and that those competing ideas be considered in quality assessment (Dhaqane & Afrah, 2016).

Fourthly, the core of the discussion on the quality of higher education is a matter of appropriateness of the concepts derivative in the development division and this applies to higher education, which is the civic/public sector (Dottin, 2021). Manufacturing sectors focus on the customers' contentment. In higher education systems, many groups can be defined as 'clients' of higher education and ... their needs are sometimes in conflict (Legemaate et al., 2021). These may consist of students, employers, the general public, or government paying for higher education, or peers of education. Additionally, many interactive variables within the higher education system propose to view it as an intricate system of input, transformation procedures and outputs (Grebennikov & Shah, 2013).

The term 'quality' seems to have many implications, and the concept of quality assurance is also tough to define. It seems to have entered into the discussion of a new higher education policy through the development and commercial sector in Western (industrialized) realms (Ahmed et al., 2021). Quality assurance is the mechanism that ensures that the product or service met specific standards. Thus, starting in the 1980s, economic domination, which delimited the policy context of Western governments, established the basis for quality-building ideas, both in higher education and in other sectors of society (Zafar & Ahmad, 2018).

The word 'quality assurance' appears to be difficult to understand since the idea of 'quality' is so broad. The industry and commercial sectors of Western (industrialized) nations appear to have influenced the new policy discourse on higher education (Pitman, 2014). The goal of quality assurance was to make sure that criteria for a product or service were set and constantly met. As a result, in the 1980s, Western governments' policy environment was dominated by economics, which supplied the conceptual underpinnings for building quality in higher education and other public sector institutions (Abou-El-Sood & Ghoniem, 2021). New ideas from the corporate sector have found their way into higher education as a result of the neoliberal or "New Right" administrations that arose in certain industrialized nations in the 1980s (Jungblut et al., 2015).

As the discussion and demand for quality in higher education intensified, new definitions and meanings of QA were developed. QA was said to be an ongoing process of continuous improvement in which everyone engaged participates and strives for the best possible outcome (Pitman et al., 2015). Here, he emphasizes the significance of comprehending the system in place, using it effectively and having a sense of ownership over it. Word QA is easy to understand in terms of national QA practices (Zavale, 2021). National studies on quality and QA offer a variety of approaches to QA. Most nations' early attempts at quality assurance (QA) were dominated by concerns about "control" and "compliance" (Leiber et al., 2015).

As far as the research is concerned related to quality assurance practices, there is a lack of relevant research within the Pakistani context, therefore, this study was conducted to add updated knowledge to the already existing body of knowledge.

Methodology

This research study explored the "Quality Assurance practices of universities of Punjab". The Phenomenology method of Qualitative research approach was used by the researcher to explore the phenomenon under study. The sample for the study including 3 x Directors QEC (2 x from each public and 1x from private university) and similarly 3 x HODs (2 x from each public and 1x from private university) has been selected with Purposive sampling. These universities were based in Lahore. A self-developed semi-structured interview protocol has been used by the inquirer for the qualitative data collection. The research instrument has been validated by taking the experts' opinions. The data have been collected by the inquirer(s) by visiting the participants.

Results

This part of the research thesis summaries the results of the qualitative data which were collected to augment the quantitative data for in-depth analysis and to achieve defined objectives. This process was methodically followed by six respondents who have extensive experience in the higher education sector more specifically in the quality enhancement department/cell. An interview protocol was developed focusing on research questions to collect their responses of them regarding the "Quality Assurance practices in Universities and their role in students' satisfaction". The conversations were commenced with the introduction of the interviewees and the researcher and followed by opening questions transitioning to key questions. The following table denotes the symbolic representation of interviewees which is used throughout this report:

Table 1 Participants' detail

Sr.#	Respondents	No. of Respondents	Symbols
1.	Director	03	D1 – D3
2.	Head of the Department	03	HoD1 – HoD3

All the interviews were transcribed and after analyzing the data, the following themes were extracted:

Table 2 Themes

Sr.#	Emerged Themes	Sub Themes
1.	QA – continuous improvement	
2.	Mechanism and framework for QA – a manual	
3.	QA of institutional facilities – QEC practices	<i>Program mission, objectives, and outcomes</i> <i>Curriculum</i> <i>Laboratories and computing facilities</i>
4.	Capacity development of institutes	
5.	Measurement of students' satisfaction	

RQ 1: What are the current Quality Assurance Practices in the Universities of Punjab? (Qualitative)

QA – Continuous Improvement

Generally, all the participants explicitly shared their perceptions regarding the QA and defined it as the holistic systematic approach to ensure the quality of goods/services to maintain high standards while avoiding errors and mistakes for continuous improvement. One of the participants broke the ice and shared:

Seems to me, QA is a cyclic procedure initiated by planning (focusing on the objective to be achieved at the end), executing what was planned, evaluating all the activities to track progress and quality, and then taking necessary steps accordingly for the sake of improvement (D1).

The participants were of the view that to provide quality services, QA works as a twofold process that continues during the program/intervention to maintain the standards and after the program to measure those quality standards were delivered to serve the students as per expected quality standards. It was elaborated by the participant that:

If we talk about QA, it is a systematic process that is used to determine the quality of services if meet the defined standards. It provides confidence in two ways; internally to the management for future actions to improve continuously while revising the programs and externally to customers/students to record satisfaction (HoD2).

It is the prime responsibility of higher education institutes to provide quality education to students who are the leaders of the future because they are required to play their role in the progress of the nation and country as well. To inculcate desired skills and knowledge in students, it is crucial to design courses and programs accordingly focusing on certain quality standards. One of the participants proclaimed:

As far as, I have experience, at higher levels (Universities) QA is the responsibility of the Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs). HEC initiated a drive for QA at a higher level while launching Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and under the auspicious of QAA, QECs were established in all the Universities to ensure the quality of the criteria/standards defined by QAA (D2).

Mechanism and Framework for QA – A Manual

All the participants were in agreement that Universities/higher-level institutes follow a robust mechanism in the form of a 'QA manual' including frameworks and standards to ensure quality. One of the participants elaborated that:

"QAA has defined all the criteria and standards through the QA manual of HEC comprising all the necessities, standards, and mechanisms to be followed by Universities" (HoD1).

It was informed by all the participants that QA manual of HEC is a comprehensive document that serves as a mechanism and policy framework delineating all the details required to maintain quality standards of education available to all the Universities and online. One of the participants highlighted that:

HEC has facilitated all the HEIs by providing them with a manual that includes a comprehensive set of policy instruments to guide them in developing procedures of QA. Moreover, different kinds of QA tools along with principles and evidence for the practitioners and other key stakeholders to ensure academic quality (D3).

Similarly to this, another participant added:

The HEC manual is developed with an aim to promote a 'Quality culture' and in the pursuance of this, the manual through its guidelines and procedures facilitates HEIs as operational units of QECs to improve the overall quality of teaching-learning processes and educational research (HoD3).

The responses of the participants reflected that the manual is not only a document to be showcased but a framework for all the stakeholders i.e. Universities, HEIs, management, faculty teaching/non-teaching, researchers, students, funding organizations, employers and society, etc. which covers all the aspects including teaching-learning, research, and development, capacity development of all those who are involved at a higher level. One of the participants uttered:

The manual paved way to increase efficiency and effectiveness while improving quality. The ultimate product of HEIs is students and it is apparently described in the manual that students being a customer of the universities are in limelight regarding the delivery of quality services and the prime focus must be on their educational needs of them (D2).

The quality assurance framework is described in detail in the manual which consists of three stages. It was asserted by the participant that:

The QA stages are defined as a framework to guide management, faculty, students, and all other stakeholders. In the first stage, QA defines QA standards, the second stage includes the development of the Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS), and in the third stage, the External Quality Assurance System (EQAS) is developed (D1).

It was informed by the participants that the manual is easily accessible to all the HEIs and stakeholders. One of the participants said:

"The HEC manual of QA is available online and can be attained easily so, stakeholders can learn about their roles and responsibilities while effectively implementing tasks and activities" (HoD3).

QA of Institutional Facilities – QEC Practices

The ultimate objective of the quality assurance processes at the institutional level is to develop a culture of quality to provide quality education. At the institutional level, quality assurance is the responsibility of the HEIs while creating the learning environment to achieve the goals planned for a specific program or by the institute. One of the participants said:

“The institutional facilities and support are evaluated by the University to ascertain that students are facilitated in all aspects of their academics and career choices” (D2).

Another participant sounds: *“Quality is the central focus of all the HEIs at all levels which is exhibited through all the academic practices. It covers academic research and scholarships including stakeholders, management, facilities, etc.” (HoD2).*

It was evident from the responses of the participants that institutional facilities include the quality assurance of the following as well:

- *Quality of program mission, objectives, and outcomes*
- *Quality of the curriculum*
- *Quality of laboratories and computing facilities*

Almost all the participants were of the view that the quality assurance of the overall program vision and mission is clearly defined with linked objectives and outcomes to be achieved. One of the participants voiced:

There is an alignment with the program mission, objective and outcomes at the HEIs. It is ensured that the objective is consistent with the program mission and accordingly the outcomes are accomplished by implementing suitable teaching techniques. The programs are evaluated to measure that the defined objectives are achieved within a predetermined timeframe (HoD1).

It was informed by one of the participants that:

The implementation and improvement of an institute must launch certain programs while aligning the internal stakeholders' skills with external stakeholders' requirements. Unfortunately, our higher educational institutes introduce and launch programs ignoring the fact that whether it is the requirement of the market or not (D1).

To implement any educational program, a curriculum is an essential element that serves as a roadmap from the mission to the outcome. It was reflected from the participants' responses that for each program curriculum is prepared while focusing on different standards, benchmarks, and SLOs One of the participants said:

It is ensured that the curriculum is developed to achieve program objectives that support the mission and vision of the institute. It is also evaluated that the curriculum fulfills the needs of the students. Moreover, curriculum alignment with HEC requirements is ensured (D2).

Another participant highlighted:

“Although, the curriculum is developed aligning with the program mission however prior to implementation the needs analysis of the existing needs and situations is missing which must be conducted” (HoD1).

The educational facilities including the availability of libraries and updated computer labs are compulsory to ensure that quality education is provided. In general, all the participants agreed that HEIs are equipped with the required facilities and equipment. One of the participants shared:

“It is the responsibility of the HEI to ensure that libraries are furnished with wide-range of books and laboratories are equipped with the latest material and equipment to utilize them for academic purposes” (D2).

Another participant said:

To provide quality education, the provision of learning material is necessary and to ensure the quality, HEIs in consultation QECs regularly evaluate that all the books are available in

the library to serve students. Moreover, it is ensured that through digital devices students have access to online educational resources (HoD3).

Capacity Development of Institutes

Institutional capacity development enables organizations, individuals, and groups to enhance their abilities to meet global challenges and to understand their needs in an expanded context for sustainable development. QAA and QEC arrange training for institutes and faculties to take over their responsibilities of teaching and research to bring the institutes pinnacle to its success. One of the respondents commented that:

“QEC holds conferences and workshops across Pakistan and collaborates with other institutes focusing on building the capacity of the institutes to be up to date to maintain the quality at higher education level” (D2). Another participant added to this:

At the initial level, QAA prepares trainers to deliver the professional development activities through the external agency, and then professional development activities are organized for QEC by the HEC to transfer this to concerned departments (HoD1).

One of the participants shared that:

Although, the prime responsibility of the QEC is to review the affiliation of academic institutes with others about effective management and quality standards, however, capacity development of institutes also falls under the responsibility of the QEC (D3).

Conclusion & Discussion

The qualitative results concluded the participants' responded that there was transparency regarding the quality assurance practices of universities. Furthermore, they have been following the requirements and standards formulated and communicated by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan.

The results of this study supported the findings of Andleeb & Jusoh (2020) who sampled 136 faculty members of the universities and collected data from them regarding the quality assurance assessment of the universities and the students' satisfaction. Similarly, DOAN (2021) included 278 university students and took their perspectives regarding quality assurance and the students' satisfaction followed by the students' loyalty. For this purpose, a survey has been conducted by the researcher. The results showed that the students' satisfaction as well as the loyalty is positively influenced by the quality assurance practices of the university. Therefore, the researcher has recommended the desirable quality assurance practices in the universities so that the students' satisfaction as well as the loyalty may be positively influenced. This researcher is also supported by the current results.

Hasan & Hosen (2020) also conducted the study while sampling 390 graduates and undergraduates for taking their perspectives regarding quality assurance and their satisfaction along with their loyalty to the university. The conclusion is made by the researchers that the quality assurance of the university has a positive effect on the students' satisfaction regarding the university facilities and their loyalty. The students feel more satisfied due to the desirable quality of the facilities and they showed their loyalty towards the university too. Similar results have been taken from the current study which also has supported Mulyono & Arief Hadian (2020) who included 312 students of higher education and took their perspectives regarding quality assurance and the students' satisfaction. The students' loyalty was also investigated during this research. The results showed that the students' satisfaction as well as the loyalty is positively influenced by the quality assurance practices of the university. Therefore, as per the researcher's recommendation, the desirable quality assurance practices in the universities are asked to be focused on so that the students' satisfaction as well as the loyalty could be attained.

Recommendations

Based on the results, it is recommended that the universities should keep on practicing transparency in Quality Assurance practices internally so that the quality of the instructions and services as well.

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