# Need for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Sri Lankan Universities[1]

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January 2007

## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief description of the Quality Assurance framework introduced into the Sri Lankan higher education system recently. At present, the Sri Lankan Quality Assurance framework composed of four main components, namely Codes of Practice, Subject Benchmarking, Credit and Qualification Framework and External Quality Assessments. The paper discusses some of the lessons learnt and experience gained at the initial phase of the External Quality Assessment Process. Finally, it provides some suggestions for the future development of the Quality Assurance programme in Sri Lanka.

## INTRODUCTION

University education in Sri Lanka is offered by 15 conventional public universities with an enrolment of 40,000 students and an Open University having an enrolment of 20,000 students. This represents a participation rate in university education of less than 3 percent of the age cohort and stands in sharp contrast to the higher rates in other South and South East Asian countries. Furthermore, the quality and relevance of many courses has led to high graduate unemployment with up to 40 percent of recent graduates being unemployed.

The Ministry of Education has given priority to address the above issues and concerns of the present higher education system. The priority areas identified include legislative and administrative reforms, a revised university funding formula, establishment of an autonomous board of quality assurance and accreditation, inclusion of social harmony within curricula, developing learning materials to teach competencies and skills needed in the labour market, improvement of the teaching skills of the teachers, upgrading equipment and facilities including IT, strengthening labour market linkages and increasing university intake in priority disciplines in high demand in the labour market.

Development of a comprehensive Quality Assurance (QA) framework for Sri Lankan higher education system was initiated in 2001, as a collaborative work between the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Directors (CVCD). As an outcome of this collaborative work, *Quality Assurance*

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[1] **Citation**:
Peiris, Colin N. (2006). Need for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Seminar on "Knowledge for Development: Assessing the Capacity, Quality and Relevance of Universities in Asia" Colombo, Sri Lanka, 25th of January.

*Handbook for Sri Lankan Universities* was published in 2002 (CVCD/UGC, 2002), which provided detailed guidelines for the external quality assessments. Then six *Codes of Practice* covering key aspects in higher education were developed in 2003 (CVCD/UGC, 2003). Further, the work in connection with the development of *Subject Benchmark Statements* was begun in August 2003. Finally, the *Sri Lankan Credit and Qualification Framework* was developed in 2004 (CVCD/UGC, 2004).

Subsequently, in September 2005, a Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) Council was established under the UGC. The proposed functions of QAA Council are as follows:

- Evaluation of new curricular and courses, new degree programmes including distant learning programmes;
- Establishment of new departments, faculties, institutes including postgraduate institutes, centers of study and schools;
- Evaluation of degree awarding status of institutes and upgrading into postgraduate status;
- Development of criteria and procedures for the recognition of new universities;
- Quality assurance of self-accrediting universities, their curricular and courses of degrees, staff and infrastructure;
- Accreditation of courses offered by non-self-accrediting institutes;
- Assessment of the quality of foreign degrees and delivery arrangements, and mutual recognition of awards accredited by foreign QA agencies;
- Making recommendations regarding national QAA arrangements;
- Conducting external quality assessments in public and private higher educational institutes;
- Establishing benchmark statements for subject disciplines;
- Training of reviewers, auditors and accreditation inspectors;
- Establishing and developing internal QA units in public universities and private higher educational institutes.

At present, the Sri Lankan QA framework composed of four main components, namely Codes of Practice, Subject Benchmarking, Credit and Qualification Framework and External Quality Assessments (viz. Institutional Review and Subject Review).

**CODES OF PRACTICE**

Six codes of practice covering key aspects were developed as one of the components of the overall comprehensive QA framework for Sri Lankan higher education system (CVCD/UGC, 2003). They are Code of Practice on Assessment of Students; Career Guidance; External Assessors; Postgraduate Research Programmes; Programme Approval, Monitoring & Review and Student Support & Guidance. These six codes reflect consensus amongst universities and other groups on the key elements of good practices which support the student learning experience and provide a reference point for all higher educational institutes, covering the main aspects of academic standards and the quality of education. The codes are intended to be used to guide and inform institutional activity, to promote and disseminate good practices and to encourage a commitment to continuous improvement.

It is expected that the existence of these codes of practice providing guidance on good practices at national level would facilitate the implementation of QA mechanisms and the continuous improvement of quality in the higher educational institutes. Individual institutions will be expected to use these codes to guide their own developing practices and to supplement it with local handbooks that reflect particular context and requirements of individual institutions.

The codes are intended to be dynamic documents which continue to develop over time. This will enable them to take account of national developments and to capture changing university practices. Feedback is therefore invited on any aspect of the codes.

## SUBJECT BENCHMARKING

The work in connection with the development of Subject Benchmark Statements (SBSs) as another component of the comprehensive QA framework for Sri Lankan higher education system was begun in August 2003. Up to date, SBSs have already been prepared in respect to 11 subject disciplines, namely Accountancy, Botany, Civil Engineering, Economics, Geography, Mathematics & Statistics, Mechanical Engineering, Medicine, Physics, Veterinary Medicine & Animal Science and Zoology.

Further, the preparation of SBSs in respect of another 10 subject disciplines, namely Agriculture, Chemistry, Dental Sciences, Electrical Engineering, English, History, Philosophy, Sinhala, Sociology and Tamil, is currently in progress. It is intended to finalize the SBSs in respect of the remaining major disciplines taught in the Sri Lankan Universities by the end of 2007. SBSs provide the institutions and academic staff with a framework for articulating the intended learning outcomes of programmes and with a minimum standard for the award of a degree in a particular subject area. They provide peer reviewers with a reference point for making judgements about the appropriateness of programme outcomes and their achievement. Further, SBSs provide students, employers, professional bodies and others with the information about the range of provision in particular subject/discipline areas, the qualities developed in graduates and the standards that would be of graduates.

## CREDIT AND QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK

The Credit and Qualification Framework (CQF) is another main component of the overall QA framework that supports academic standards and the development and dissemination of good practices in Sri Lankan higher educational institutions (CVCD/UGC, 2004). CQF shows how a particular institute's award/qualification and the level and volume of credits relate to a national qualification and credit 'standard', whilst the coverage and content of a particular programme of study leading to that qualification can be matched with the relevant SBS.

One of the objectives of the Sri Lankan QA programme is to enable universities to respond more quickly to the demand of higher education and to the changing needs of the employment market. This has necessitated the focusing of attention on the consistency and comparability of university level qualifications and on promoting student mobility by creating more flexible arrangements for student learning and by enabling students to combine employment with study. The CQF has been designed to support and facilitate:

- student mobility through lateral entry and exit for students between courses within universities, and student mobility between universities;
- recognition of pre-university learning, including work-based learning and work experience, for entry to higher education or to count towards an academic qualification;
- enabling students to complete a four-year Bachelor degree by transferring to another institution, where the relevant subject expertise and resources are available;
- enabling students to leave or interrupt university study with recognition of successful learning.

The CQF combines descriptors of qualifications at each level with credit measures that indicate the levels and volume of learning that a student is expected to achieve for each type of qualification.

The CQF is capable of accommodating diversity and innovation in programme development and has sufficient flexibility to enable institutions to develop programmes that are responsive to changing needs of students and graduates, universities and employers. It provides paths for progression to facilitate lifelong learning, and maximizes opportunities for credit transfer, thereby minimizing duplication of learning. Individual universities will be expected to take cognizance of the guidelines contained in the CQF when revising existing programmes of study and also in designing new programmes.

## EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSESSMENTS

The main objectives of the external quality assessments presently adapted by the QAA Council are as follows:

- To safeguard the standards of awards and the quality of delivery of academic programmes;
- To encourage good management of academic institutions;
- To identify and share good practices in the provision of education;
- To implement procedures that is based on academic peer review combined with strong administrative support at national and institutional level;
- To enable funding judgements to be taken on the basis of the outcomes of external assessments;
- To implement the system in such a way as to make use of existing structures, documents and other materials wherever possible, rather than to introduce additional bureaucracy.

At present, the QAA Council conducts two types of external assessments, namely institutional review and subject review.

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW

Institutional Review (IR) focuses on the powers and responsibilities, which universities hold for quality and standards. It is concerned with how a university assures itself and the wider public that the quality and standards it sets for itself are being achieved. IR is concerned with university-wide processes, which support sound quality management and

university planning to maintain an appropriate environment for teaching, learning, research and other activities (CVCD/UGC, 2002).

The overall purpose of IR is to achieve accountability for quality and standards and by using a peer review process to promote sharing of good practices and facilitate continuous improvement. This overall purpose could be divided into four specific parts:

- To instill confidence in an institution's capacity to safeguard standards, both internally and externally, through a transparent process which involves and is owned by staff throughout the institution and is accessible to students and other external groups with an interest in an institution's teaching, learning and research activities;
- To achieve accountability through external review and public report of an institution's evidence of its own attentiveness to quality and standards, and of actions taken to improve and be responsive to feedback from students and others engaging with the institution as a provider of academic activities;
- To provide systematic, clear and accessible information on the standards and quality claimed by an institution so as to inform the choices and decisions of potential students, employers, funding bodies and other 'users' of an institution's intellectual resources and qualifications;
- To promote improvement by identifying and sharing through peer review, good practice and encouraging innovation and active use of national and international standards and benchmarks.

There are eight aspects of evaluation under IR, namely 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/Other Extension Activities.

IR analyses and tests the effectiveness of an institution's processes for managing and assuring the quality of academic activities undertaken by the institution. It evaluates the extent to which internal QA schemes can be relied on to maintain the quality of provision over time. The main features of the IR are the production of an analytical self-evaluation by the institution, peer review (review visit of 5 days) and a published report with an overall judgement.

Hence, the outcome of IR is a published report. Its purpose is to inform the institution and external parties of the findings of the review and to provide a reference point to support and guide staff in their QA activities. In particular, the report will give an overall judgement on the reviewers' level of confidence in the institute's QA arrangements, supported by commentary on the robustness of the institute's mechanisms for discharging its responsibility for the standard of its awards, the quality of the education it provides, the effectiveness of its planning, quality and resource management, the efficiency of its administration. The commentary will include areas of commendation and areas where improvements or actions need to be taken. There will be three options open to the review team in making the overall judgement, i.e. *confidence*, *limited confidence* or *no confidence*. In all cases, the judgement has to be supported by the evidence contained in the report.

The first cycle of IR assessments of public universities was commenced in 2003, and up to date three assessments were conducted at the University of Peradeniya, Open University of Sri Lanka and the University of Moratuwa. It is intended to complete the first cycle of IR assessments of 15 public universities by the end of 2009.

**SUBJECT REVIEW**

Subject Review (SR) evaluates the quality of education within specific subject(s) or programme(s). It is focused on the quality of the student learning experience and on student achievements. SR is designed to evaluate the quality of both undergraduate and taught postgraduate programs (CVCD/UGC, 2002).

The main features of the SR are the production of an analytical self-evaluation by the academic staff delivering the programme(s), peer review (a review visit of 3 to 4 days and review against the aims and intended learning outcomes contained in the self evaluation) and a published report with judgements. The aims and learning outcomes contained in the self-evaluation provide an important reference point for SR. Reviewers evaluate the quality of education in the subject(s) or program(s) under review according to the aims and learning outcomes aspired to them by the Department. Reviewers do not use any externally set standards against which the programs are judged.

There are eight aspects of evaluation under SR, namely Curriculum Design, Content & Review, Teaching, Learning & Assessment Methods, Quality of Students, including Student Progress & Achievement, Extent & Use of Student Feedback, Postgraduate Studies, Peer Observation, Skills Development and Academic Guidance & Counseling.

In addition to the overall judgement, review team will provide a separate judgement of each SR aspect. The review team is expected to summarize its findings in each aspect, noting strengths, good practices and weaknesses. At the end of each aspect, review team will use one of three judgements, namely *good*, *satisfactory* or *unsatisfactory*. The collective statements on each of the eight aspects will lead the team to their overall judgement of *confidence*, *limited confidence* or *no confidence*.

The first cycle of SR assessments of public universities was commenced in 2004, and up to date 50 assessments were conducted. The QAA Council intends to complete the first cycle of SR assessments in public universities by the end of 2008.

**LESSONS LEARNT**

*Progress during the Initial Phase*

The concept of QA in higher education is a new phenomenon to the Sri Lankan university system, and as such the need for an active awareness campaign at the initial stage was strongly felt. Awareness programmes for academic staff were launched in the year 2005, and up to now 90% of faculties/departments of all public universities were

visited. A detailed account on the activities of the QAA Council as well as the external assessment process is provided through these awareness programs. After the completion of the awareness programs for academic staff, QAA Council intends to launch similar awareness programs for administrative & non-academic staff and students.

Considerable progress has been achieved so far with regard to the SR process. During the period from November 2004 to August 2006, the QAA Council was able to conduct 50 SR assessments in different public universities. It is important to note that for almost all the faculties/departments/programmes within the Sri Lankan university system except for few professional programmes such as medicine, engineering etc., this is the first time that their own performance has been assessed by professional colleagues in a systematic way. It is welcoming to note that many have accepted the benefits from an external assessment.

However, still there are some academic members within the system who consider the entire QA programme as an additional burden. They feel that more emphasis on documenting evidence is a time consuming distraction from the real business of teaching and research. As it was the case in India (Stella, 2004), there is a general inertia and the fear of getting assessed by others and also doubts in the minds of some about relevance and usefulness of external assessments.

### *Transparency and Flexibility of the Assessment Process*

Maintaining the transparency of the external assessment process is vital to build up the confidence in and acceptance of the external quality assessments by the university community, especially during the introductory phase. Accordingly, it was agreed that the review panels appointed by the QAA Council have to be accepted by the institute or the department which is being reviewed. This has further helped to avoid any conflict of interests. However, objections from the institution in respect to any member of the review panel have to be justified adequately.

Further, following either an IR or SR assessment, university may ask the QAA Council for a discussion with the review panel about the contents of the review report, prior to publication. The university should notify the QAA Council of its wish to take up this opportunity within one month of receipt of the first draft of the report, highlighting the particular areas it wishes to discuss. The review report is published only after the consensus is reached between the both parties, i.e. review panel and the institute/department.

It is also felt that the acceptance of the external assessment process could be enhanced by making the process as flexible as possible, at least during the first review cycle. There are 433 departments of study in all public universities and almost all the departments offer more than one programme for undergraduate students. Hence, it was decided that all the programmes offered by a particular department will be evaluated under one SR assessment during the first review cycle. In other words, the present SR assessments are to be more appropriately called as either "*departmental review*" or "*programme review*". This has not only improved the acceptance of the external quality assessments by the university community, but also would expedite the completion of the first review cycle.

*Sharing of Good Practices*

As mentioned earlier, one of the objectives of the external quality assessments is to identify and share good practices in the provision of education. Further, the first review cycle is not expected to result in ranking of universities and programmes, and is also not linked with any form accreditation. In other words, the first review cycle has to be considered not as an "*external quality audit*" but as an "*academic review*". The main expected outcome of the first review cycle is the introduction of good practices and procedures that will facilitate the continuous quality improvement.

For example, preliminary analysis of the already conducted SR assessments have revealed that most of the departments in public universities are weak in two aspects, namely peer observation and student feedback. Accordingly, the QAA Council has initiated a serious of workshops on the use of peer observation and student feedback with the aim of introducing these two good practices.

*Internal QA along with the External Assessments – Quality Culture*

It is felt that the internal QA procedures have to be strengthened along with the external assessments, especially with the first review cycle. Accordingly, internal QA units have been established in all public universities in 2005 and a broad framework has been prepared with the involvement of all the stakeholders. However, it has to be noted that there should not be any strict directives or instructions as how to develop internal QA mechanisms within the context of each institution. The idea is for each and every institution to develop their own system which is most appropriate to the institutional environment and uniqueness.

It is expected that the internal QA mechanisms would bring the staff members in the same institution together to share and learn from each other, publicize the good practices and to appreciate the achievements and contributions of one another. Further, the implementation of internal QA mechanisms would create a sense of responsibility and a new awareness of process approach throughout the institution.

The ultimate goal of the internal QA mechanisms is to create (or inculcate) the *'quality culture'* within the institution, that would be based around an internal system of continuous quality which seeks to provide quality education though a holistic approach on a day to day basis.

**CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT**

Considering the fact that the concept of QA is a new phenomenon in Sri Lankan higher education system, even at this relatively early stage, it could be concluded that a considerable progress has been achieved in respect of overall QA activities, especially with regard to the external quality assessments. Even-though, the external quality assessments are still voluntary for universities/departments, it is welcoming to note that the QAA Council was able conduct 50 SR assessments in different departments of public universities during a period of 18 months. However, the need for a multi-pronged strategy to gain a wider acceptance of the external quality assessments by the majority of the university community has to be emphasized. Even in countries where "quality work now has become well established as a valuable innovation and some institutions even have

reached the stage of early adoption", as Massy states (1999), it has not yet "reached the critical mass for self-sustained growth".

It is desirable to evaluate the impact of the external assessments conducted on the quality of programmes, courses and other related activities before the commencement of the second review cycle. In this regard, a follow-up review cycle in a more simplified form after one to two years of the first review is recommended. For this follow-up assessment, the report of the first assessment could be used as the reference point and the continuity could be assured by obtaining services of at least one member from the original three member panel of reviewers. In our opinion, a model similar to the '*process review*' conducted in Hong Kong (Massy & French, 2001) could be adopted. "While not wishing to suggest that documentation is the end of quality assurance", Massy & French emphasize that "there was often a close correlation between the clarity and consciences of the documentation provided (during the review) and a department's or faculty's understanding of and engagement in the formal and informal processes of teaching and learning quality assurance". According to Massy & French (2001), the Hong Kong model provides several important lessons. "First, one can evaluate an institution's teaching and learning quality processes without getting bogged down in paper trials and bureaucracy. Second, such evaluations provide useful insight on an institution's commitment to assuring and improving quality. Third, it is easier for a third party to gauge quality processes and commitment than to assess quality itself."

Accordingly, in the proposed follow-up review assessments it is expected that the reviewers would pay special attention to whether and how the QA processes and procedures are in place, in addition to assessing whether the recommendations made during the first assessment are being addressed adequately. Conducting such follow-up assessments in between two proper review cycles, on the one hand, facilitate the continuous quality improvement. On the other hand, it would enhance the preparedness of the university or department for the second review cycle, which could result in ranking of universities/programmes and accreditation.

The fact that one of the main functions of International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) is to "promote good practices in the maintenance and improvement of quality in higher education" (INQAAHE, 2003) implies the importance of identifying and sharing of good practices in the provision of education for continuous quality improvement. Hence, it is imperative for the universities/faculties/departments to be ready to share and learn from each other's experience. More workshops and seminars would be needed to facilitate discussions on the lessons learnt and the feedback from the reviewers as well as from the academic community should be communicated to all the stakeholders. In the light of the lessons learnt, it would be necessary to make amendments/revisions to the existing guidelines for the external quality assessments, may be after the completion of the first review cycle.

Overall responsibility for maintenance and continuous improvement of quality and standards can only lie effectively where the powers to control or change practices exist, that is with the institution itself and not with an external agency. As Gosling and D'andrea (2001), argue "quality assurance with its emphasis on measurement, external accountability and regulatory control can identify issues and possibly shame departments into taking some actions to comply with the regulatory framework, but it cannot in itself bring improvements and does not necessarily engender an attitude among staff which is

focused on improvement". Therefore, it is the university authorities who should make every effort to induce the desire for quality as a main principle in every operation in their institutions to create a quality culture. In this regard, the institutional strategies have to be linked with internal QA processes.

Finally, there is a need to assess and analyze whether and how the QA mechanisms have resulted in the improvement in the quality of programmes, courses and other related activities, and eventually the quality output. Obviously, a formal evaluation of the impact of external quality assessments could be done only after the completion of the first review cycle.

While arguing that the progress achieved in overall QA activities and especially with regard to the external quality assessments, in its initial stages is quite satisfactory, it has to be accepted that the quality assurance is a never ending process. When planning for the future, it is imperative that the wealth and knowledge already available internationally has to be taken into consideration along with the lessons learnt from the external quality assessments in Sri Lankan conditions.

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