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Quality-Driven Initiatives in Higher Education: A Case Study

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Introduction

Quality assurance in higher educational institutions has become an issue of major concern among universities. In the postmodernism era, quality-driven initiatives continue to remain high on the agenda of many educational institutions. This is associated with the rise in public accountability and demand for transparency in the way in which higher educational institutions are managed. A number of universities have implemented several quality initiatives to address these concerns.

The traditional academic approach to control and maintain quality in higher educational institution appears to be less effective in the present era. The public demand for greater accountability in the utilization of public funds would require a more explicit assurance on quality in the delivery and management of higher education. The focus remains on quality assurance and quality enhancement. These issues have become a major cause of concern for most nations. They have been accorded priority as strategies have been planned and the agenda for higher education has been re-examined during the past decades (Elaine, 1998).

The development of a powerful quality ethos seems to be among the main objectives of many higher educational institutions. New approaches and strategies are designed to re-orientate and transform the way in which universities are managed as well as the delivery of educational services. In the pursuit of academic excellence and quality, there may be a tendency to adopt a private sector model of performance measurement to address important quality initiatives at the university. This is significant as quality assurance is a continuous and dynamic process. Higher educational institutions may adopt such a model as they strive to promote and further enhance quality initiatives in the quest for knowledge. This was succinctly observed by Srikanthan & Dalrymple (2004) who reported that “the idea of quality improvement is the cornerstone of what a university is about when it talks of advancing knowledge.” This also becomes critical in the knowledge-based economy characterized by an information-centered society.

Quality assurance involves the structure, system and approaches related to teaching, research and administration as to enable the stated aims and objectives of the institution to be fulfilled (Stephenson, 1996). The increase in focus on quality assurance is also closely related to the increase in funds invested in higher education in Malaysia. Investment in higher education has been perceived as contributing significantly towards further economic growth and development. A formal evaluation of public universities helps to ensure that there is a minimum quality standard. It reduces what has been described by Tierney (1998) as the “crisis of confidence in the ability of colleges and universities to respond appropriately to public needs and concerns as those who control the funding of higher education do not believe that institutions are responsive to the needs of students at large”. (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2004) Research has also shown that there is strong public scepticism and belief that the standard of higher education has deteriorated rapidly. (Haworth & Conrad, 1997; Bowden & Marton, 1998)

The changing nature of future work also requires a workforce that is flexible and able to adapt to change. Higher education institutions have to rethink and revamp its function. With the projected decline in public funding and overall limited resources, financial constraints may be resolved by taking measures to increase student Intake to generate more revenue. This may lead to a lowering of standards and quality. With an increased workload due to the higher ratio of teaching staff to number of students, lack of laboratory facilities and equipment, it is possible that there would be a decline in the quality. This problem was evident during the 1980s when higher education in many countries experienced a general growth in enrolment and accessibility. (Gaither, 1995) On the other hand, there may be some limitations if there is overly emphasis on adherence to setting and achieving standards by compliance. Hodson (2003) argued that the emphasis of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the United Kingdom has been on compliance and this approach may not be conducive to quality enhancement. Nevertheless, quality assurance is now on the core agenda of many institutions of higher learning. This is inevitable in the
globalised environment. The focus on quality assurance has been indicated by Elaine & Holm-Nielsen (1998:6), who expressed that:

“The shift to formal systems of quality assurance, evident across many countries and regions, is among the most significant trends affecting higher education over the last two decades. Today, many countries have organizations or agencies responsible for conducting quality assurance reviews of academic institutions. Indicators of this shift are the emergence of international networks, journals, conferences and newsletters that address issues related to quality assurance”.

Also in Malaysia, quality assurance in higher education has now been placed on the main agenda of many universities. This is the consequence of the demand for greater stakeholder engagement, and calls for greater transparency, accountability and responsibility in the way in which higher education institutions are managed and are expected to deliver. Towards this end, a quality management system has been established in a public university – the University of Malaya. Together with an enhanced legislative framework, this strategy has succeeded in strengthening the delivery of services and management at the university. This paper discusses how the adoption of a private sector model of performance measurement has help to address important quality initiatives in the university.

**The Implementation of a quality management system**

Public universities in Malaysia so far have received full financial support from the Government. Even though plans have been proposed to ‘corporatise’ the universities whereby the government would reduce its funding gradually over a period of time, it is highly unlikely to succeed given the role of the public university to provide tertiary education and, at the same time, to fulfill its social obligation. Consequently, the governance and management of public universities in Malaysia is highly regulated and, to a certain extent, influenced by governmental bureaucracy. In the past, quality assurance was largely internal in nature. The Constitution of the respective universities represents the main legislative framework that governs and regulates university management and functions. At public universities, most of the constitutional provisions are almost similar in nature, in particular, those which govern the management of the university and the quality of the various academic programmes.

In 1995, the Government decided to adopt and implement the International Organization for Standardization Standards (ISO 9000) for the public sector in Malaysia. A set of guidelines for the implementation of Malaysian Standard International Organization for Standardization (MS ISO 9000:94) was issued by the Manpower and Planning Unit (MAMPU) and the Prime Minister’s Department in 1996. Subsequently, in 2002 MAMPU issued guidelines for the implementation of ISO 2000 in all public sectors. (Kiran Kaur & Pauziaah Mohamed, 2005) The discussion of this paper focuses on the initiatives taken by the University of Malaya.

The initial plan to implement the ISO at the University of Malaya was first formulated in June 2001. A series of meetings, workshops and seminars were organised from management to faculty level to plan, prepare and produce the documents required for the programme. A number of documents related to quality were produced as a result of these meetings. On 8 July 2002, a Documentation Audit was conducted. This was followed up with the Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM) Compliance Audit in November 2002. Subsequently, in March 2003, the university obtained the ISO certification of MS ISO 9001:2000. Consequently, a well-defined mission statement in terms of processes, procedures and expected outcomes for each academic faculty and administrative unit is now established at the university. In addition, the MS ISO 9001:200 also specifies the requirements for a quality management system.

The management of quality assurance at the University of Malaya represents a completely new approach to enhancing various aspects of quality at the institution. It is essentially a strategy that adopts an
industrial quality system. It comprises a set of unified practices incorporated into the institution. The policy, which is explicitly expressed, has been designed to focus on quality objectives. Thus, there appears to be a complete paradigm shift to quality assurance as the traditional processes and structures in university management seem to have been re-designed. The University is driven by external forces, particularly the massification and marketisation of higher education, where public funding is expected to be reduced in the long term. The university now strives to cater for the public demand for greater transparency and accountability in both its governance and management. A number of strategies have been planned and this includes the establishment of a formal, externally validated method of quality control. Generally, initiative established by the university has been driven by concerns that are similar to other universities such as limited financial resources, increased demand of accountability by stakeholders, increase in student population, and pressure from a changing global economy. The negative influence that affects the universities can be minimised as efforts are taken to strengthen its quality assurance agenda. (Talbort, 2005; Doherty, 1993; Jonathan, 2000)

Quality Assurance Management at the University Malaya

The process of monitoring, evaluating and improving quality assurance at the university is a systematic and continuous process. The university has established the University of Malaya Quality Assurance Management Unit (QAMU). As at January 2005, the quality management system managed by QAMU involved about 1,415 academic staff, 2,701 support staff, 19,900 under graduates, 7,900 postgraduate students, 17 academic centers, and 13 residential colleges. (Kiran, K. & Pauziaah, M., 2004)

The Quality Assurance Management is responsible for ensuring that there is a continual improvement in the quality management system. The management is also responsible for a few critical areas. These include resource management, product realization, measurement, analysis and improvement that focus on the customers’ requirement and satisfaction. The overall strategy of the system is based on a mission and vision that has been clearly stated. It consists of a set of actions that are taken to further strengthen the quality assurance mechanism that have been implemented. The QAMU is entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out a periodic review of the various programmes, where the process of assessment and quality assessment is set out. With a clear focus on its role and functions, QAMU assists the university in conducting its own internal evaluation and internal quality assurance audit on a regular basis. The purpose of internal audit is to monitor and ensure that the quality assurance objectives are being achieved and that there is evidence that measures have been taken to improve any weaknesses that exist. An external organisation, SIRIM, also conducts regular audits and monitors the quality assurance system. Periodic internal audits by QAMU facilitate the task of keeping records through normal processes. QAMU monitors and prepares a quality audit report to maintain continuous quality improvement. It is significant to note that one of the functions of QAMU is to document the management’s and faculty’s commitment towards quality assurance.

The primary emphasis of the audit exercise is on teaching, learning; research, and research training; and support services for students. The implementation of the quality approach comprises the setting up of quality control mechanism at the following levels:

a. the organizational level – the vision of the university is manifested in the educational delivery and organisational structures with its committee systems, reporting systems, and monitoring systems. The adoption of the private sector model of performance measurement has helped the university to establish a clear and specific mission and vision of the university. There is a specific delineation of the role, duty and responsibilities of individuals who are involved in the management of the organization. The mission of the university to become a premier university appears to be stated in a clear manner.
b. administrative level - where structures are established to monitor and provide feedback on staff performance, development and support. The quality initiatives that are set up have provided a more conducive and professional work environment since continuous feedback are utilized to further improve the administrative structure of the university.

c. academic level – in terms of teaching: the delivery of teaching, assessment procedures, management, relationship with students, and in terms of research: publications and grants. Overall, the effect of the quality initiatives undertaken has resulted in greater accountability and responsibility in the teaching and learning process. There is a systematic planning of objectives and strategies implemented to attain the projected outcome. An example is that of the course objectives and course format which set out the teaching topics, expected outcomes, types of evaluation, and expected completion dates.

d. support services level – such as the quality of services, namely computer services, audio and visual aids, and provision of library facilities. Generally, there has been a marked improvement in the support services at all the different levels.

e. community or national level – the achievements of the university and how it supports the local community, the economy and how it fulfills the needs of national and economic policy. The system has led to a closer rapport and collaboration between the university and the community.

f. student level - how the university supports the educational, social, spiritual and moral development of the student. Overall, there is greater focus on the development of students and more consideration of how best to cover the needs and interests of the students.

The major components of the MS ISO 9001:2000 (Figure 1) that has been established at the University of Malaya consists of the following areas:–

a. a quality management system in the institution that outlines its general requirements and documentation requirements;

b. management responsibility and commitment with a customer focus policy, quality policy, planning, responsibility, authority and communication, and management reviews; planning quality objectives and planning the quality management system are two vital functions. Responsibility, authority and communication consider the role of the management representative and internal communication. The management review may be general in nature and there is a continuous review of input and output.

c. resource management with the provision of resources, human resources, infrastructure, and a conducive work environment. Human resource management involved aspects related to general human resources, competence, awareness and training.

d. product realization, namely planning, customer related processes, design and development, purchasing, production and service provision, control of monitoring and measuring devices; and,

e. measurement, analysis and improvement. This aspect could be general in nature. There is continual monitoring and measurement.
In total, there are eleven processes involved in the system, namely: (a) the teaching and learning process; (b) research process; (c) support services; (d) human resource; (e) infrastructure and assets; (f) finance; (g) commercialization; (h) student affairs; (i) library development; (j) residential colleges; and, (k) sports and culture services.

There are thirty quality procedures that covers the compulsory Quality Assurance Management Unit; teaching and learning; management of research; human resource management; infrastructure and asset management; financial management; management of commercialisation; management of students’ affairs; library management; management of residential colleges; and management of sports and cultural services. The work instructions, guidelines and quality specifications also encompass the above areas. The audit process consists of monitoring whether there has been compliance with regards to the core processes and quality documents. The audit process also examines whether the quality objectives has been achieved and measures taken to ensure continual improvement. Customers’ satisfaction remains the main focus.

An illustration of the system of maintaining quality record is in the teaching and learning process. An audit on the process would consists of examining the curriculum - the course format, course file; students’ registration – the list of students and academic advisor, the list of students who registered for the course; course registration – the course schedule; the lecture hall – aspects related to safety, cleanliness, schedule
for use; teaching equipments – inventory lists and maintenance; academic and support staff – qualifications, competence, list of responsibilities; part time lecturers – official appointment, performance evaluation; students feedback – course evaluation, follow-up, complaints and suggestions; evaluation of performance - schedule, evaluation, preparation, and record.

Generally, the audit process has been carried out systematically and consistently since the programme was initiated. The process of auditing has been conducted as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audit Type</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document audit</td>
<td>8 July 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliance audit</td>
<td>11-14 November 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring audit</td>
<td>12-13 January 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring audit</td>
<td>26-27 January 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-certification audit</td>
<td>September 2005</td>
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The audit was conducted by an external organization, SIRIM. The MS ISO 9001:2000 Certification Audit is under the responsibility of SIRIM QAS Limited Company. A series of internal audits were carried out on a regular basis. The internal audits seek to further strengthen the various existing mechanisms and remedy any weaknesses. The regular internal audits that have been conducted are as follows:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Audit Type</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal audit 1/2002</td>
<td>23-25 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up audit</td>
<td>28 Aug. – 11 Oct. 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal audit 2</td>
<td>17-21 March 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal audit 3</td>
<td>15-19 Sept. 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal audit 4</td>
<td>24-28 May 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal audit 5</td>
<td>25 Nov.–2 Dec. 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal audit 6</td>
<td>31 May-8 June 2005</td>
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The process of continual monitoring and assessment has succeeded in maintaining a high level of quality assurance at the university. These processes are established at all the different levels in the institution. Systematic and regular monitoring has facilitated the creation of a quality culture. These mechanisms have promoted an enhanced quality control. The enhanced quality control system has contributed significantly towards the improvement of quality at the university. Quality control with respect to the stated aims and objectives, setting of standards, monitoring of the assessment procedures and its supporting structures, and a regular review of quality issues has been effective in improving quality. (Figure 2. Source: Kiran, K. & Pauziah. M., 2004)
The process of regular auditing and monitoring has succeeded in promoting quality at the university. Systematic internal institutional auditing has resulted in a higher level of awareness among the staff of the need to strengthen quality at the university. An audit by an external organisation has also ensure an enhanced level of quality assurance.

Towards greater enhancement of quality assurance

We have seen that initial concern over ways to further strengthen quality at the university has led to the implementation of the systems of quality assurance. Further impetus towards the improvement of quality among public institutions of higher learning has been given by the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia. The Ministry has established a division known as the Quality Assurance Division for Public Universities in Malaysia. Its objective is to develop a quality assurance system that conforms to international quality standards. The concept paper concerning the Malaysian Qualifications Framework was presented to the National Higher Education Council in November 2002. The University of Malaya’s quality driven initiative to adopt the ISO approach to institutional administration and quality assurance is, thus, complemented with another system that was introduced by the Ministry.

The main purpose of the Ministry of Higher Education Quality Assurance Division is to promote public confidence and ensure that the quality of the provision and standards of awards in higher education are enhanced. These objectives are achieved via continual quality audit, management audit and institutional assessment. A formal accreditation process may be conducted after an evaluation of academic programmes. The interest of the public remains a priority in the system of quality assurance whereby
standards are determined. The Ministry of Higher Education has also further reinforced quality assurance among public institutions of higher learning through the implementation of The Malaysian Qualifications Framework. (Sharifah, H., 2004)

This Framework defines quality assurance in higher education as “all the planned and systematic actions – policies, strategies, actions, procedures, attitudes and culture that is necessary to provide public confidence that the quality of the provisions and safeguards of awards are being maintained, safeguarded and enhanced and that the products and services meet the specified quality standards.” In this instance, the term products and services refer to the teaching, students’ learning experience and outcomes as well as scholarship and research.

Plans are also formulated to promote public confidence among public institutions of higher learning. The strategy encompasses academic reviews via institutional collection and use of data for compliance study of academic programmes to standards of quality; scrutiny and transparency of process through the use of a qualifications framework, the development of a code of practice; and independent reporting that is objective in nature in order to identify strengths and weaknesses.

The objectives of the Malaysian Qualifications Framework are as follows: - to secure the standards of qualifications; support flexible education learning pathways, credit accumulation and transfer; facilitate mutual recognition of qualifications. The Framework identifies nine areas of quality assurance, namely: (a) vision, mission, goals and learning outcomes; (b) design of programme and management of delivery; (c) student assessment system; (d) student support; (e) academic faculty; (f) educational resources; (g) programme evaluation; (h) leadership and governance; and (i) continuous quality improvement. The quality assurance process consists of internal and external processes. The internal quality assurance process includes data collection to set up a database, self-analysis, self-study report, evaluation of achievement standards and actions being taken to overcome problems. On the other hand, the external process comprises the establishment of a team to survey and study the report and database, conduct on-site visits, validate findings in database, and conduct a self-study report.

Measures are also taken to promote the positive features and practices of the system. These includes: the whole-hearted participation of all the major stakeholders: being transparent to external public scrutiny; conducted in a conducive consultative; and, consensus-building based on collegiality with compliance being evaluated based on standards agreed beforehand. The accreditation report serves a vital function in obtaining accreditation, benchmarking, and quality enhancement.

Generally, the model of quality assurance for public institutions of higher learning that has been proposed by the Ministry of Higher Education share similar characteristics with the MS ISO 9001:2000 Model that has been implemented at the University of Malaya (Table 1).
Table 1: A Comparison of Quality Assurance in Public Institutions of Higher Learning as formulated by the Ministry of Higher Education and the MS ISO 9001:2000 Model

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vision, mission and purpose</td>
<td>Quality management system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design and delivery of educational programmes</td>
<td>Product realization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ assessment and evaluation</td>
<td>Product realization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Focus on customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic staff</td>
<td>Resource management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational programme resources</td>
<td>Resource management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme evaluation</td>
<td>Measurement, analysis and improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance and leadership</td>
<td>Management responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>Measurement, analysis and improvement</td>
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</table>


However, the university faced some limitations in the implementation of these quality assurance programmes. There are limited resources and qualified personnel available. The academic staff at the university has played a pivotal role in contributing time and resources by being involved as auditors in the internal audit process. However, there is considerable time and cost involved even though the audit process is usually conducted during the semester break. Although the audit process is time-consuming and can be costly, the close cooperation and commitment shown by various parties is significant.

On the other hand, there is a risk of fostering managerialism at the university. This becomes evident when there is little attention given to this aspect. Srikanthan & Dalrymple (2004) expressed the fear that the practice of quality management in higher education may lead to management deteriorating into managerialism in Higher Education Institutions. This may happen where there is a lack of a shared vision and a mismatch between quality management techniques and the educational processes. In addition, the quality assurance model is deemed appropriate to the services industry. The usefulness of the model to the education sector has yet to be proved. This was indicated by Sandra (2004) who expressed that the term
‘quality’ has now become a central term in the lexicon of contemporary higher education and there are certain assumptions about the term that may not be accurate.

Conclusion

Change in university is inevitable as it respond to change in society. Quality driven initiatives at the university illustrates the response to challenges due to change. As universities transform themselves, it is noteworthy to be aware of the fact the agenda for quality improvement can never be attained in an absolute sense. Quality is a dynamic process and is constantly being sought. Nevertheless, there is a greater shared awareness of the need for change at the university. This has been facilitated by the synergy and alignment of the common mission and vision, which is now shared by the faculties and management. The set of well-established quality mechanism has succeeded at promoting the transformative process towards quality assurance.

References


