QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

APPROACHES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCREDITATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN AND THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT: Quality Assurance (QA) is generally defined as part of the overall management function that determines and implements the quality policy (intentions and directions of the organization). This paper discusses the different definitions of quality, quality terminologies, accreditation, and comparison between the different approaches to quality assurance as applied in the Sultanate of Oman and in the Philippines according to their specific purposes.

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Introduction

The concept of quality assurance started in the manufacturing sector (OED, 2006), where principles like Total Quality Management (TQM), 5S of Good Housekeeping, and Poka-Yoke for mistake-proofing were applied to achieve conformance of products or services to set specifications in order to guarantee customer satisfaction.

In higher education institutions (HEIs) quality assurance is applied in order to achieve “quality education”. The concept of quality in HEIs, however, varies depending on whose opinion is in perspective. Students may define quality in terms of their classroom experience - the facilities and the faculty; for parents it may mean the employability of their children upon completion of their degrees; for the faculty it may mean the staff development programs provided by the HEIs; for the employers - the competence of the graduates joining the workforce; and for the institutions it may mean the quality and quantity of research outputs. Quality assurance in HEIs, therefore, must be able to manage experiences of all the stake holders - students, faculty and staff, community and industry, and the institution itself.

Defining quality assurance and quality terminologies

Quality assurance is part of the general management that sets the quality policy of the organization (OED, 2006). It ensures that the policies and procedures are designed...
in such a way that processes and practices are geared towards achieving the expected output.

The quality assurance in HEIs starts with the vision, mission and objectives (VMO) and setting the strategies to achieve them. A SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) is usually an important tool towards developing a good strategic plan. A strategic plan clearly lays out the HEIs’ goals and sub-goals, key performance indicators, targets and measures, and responsibilities; and is converted into operational and action plans that guide the different departments and units. The strategies and implementation steps in the strategic and operational plans integrate the systems, policies, and practices that the HEIs have set in place in order to implement, monitor and improve their educational mission and objectives. This is internal quality assurance (IQA).

However, although HEIs may be able to gauge their level of excellence according to whether they achieved their set mission and objectives, and on the basis of accomplishing the targets they have set in their strategic plan, it is still difficult to be both the provider and the judge of their own services (IIEP-UNESCO, 2011), hence an external party is required to carry out this task. This is the external quality assurance (EQA).

The level of excellence is evaluated through quality assessment - which can be done in a form of Quality Audit or Accreditation. A quality audit is a type of quality assessment that evaluates the HEIs’ quality assurance measures in order to form basis for understanding where the HEIs’ quality practices stands, as well as for decision-making purposes as to what else needs to be done.

Accreditation is a form of quality assessment carried out by an accrediting body which may be locally or internationally licensed to grant accreditation. Accreditation is a status granted to HEIs that attest to the degree of quality which is above the minimum requirements set by the government for academic institutions.

There are two approaches to accreditation - 1) the fit-for-purpose and 2) standards-based (IIEP-UNESCO, 2011). The fit-for-purpose approach is a form of accreditation where the HEIs must meet set of criteria based on the purpose they serve. For example, vocational school would have to meet teaching and learning standards but may not have to comply with the research standards set for a university. The fit-for-purpose approach is based on the HEIs’ own set criteria - which may or may not be internationally or locally benchmarked. Hence, fit-for-purpose does not necessarily relate to good quality, it simply means that the HEI achieves the purpose which it sets for itself. Although fit-for-purpose does not necessarily mean “quality” at par with the local or international standard, it is a good starting point towards accreditation, because this exercise allows the HEIs to understand their missions and objectives, and where they stand in terms of their quality assurance practices.

The standard-based approach to accreditation is based on locally or internationally benchmarked criteria. In this approach, the standards dictate the specifics in order to get the accreditation. For example, the standard will clearly specify that 80% of the teaching staff should have doctorate degree, or that the library should have 4,000 books for a certain number of students. Standard-based approach to accreditation signifies that the HEIs are generally of good quality (but not in any way perfect).

There are two kinds of accreditation - institutional or programmatic. The institutional accreditation gauges the institutional capabilities to operate according to the type of institution it seeks to be accredited for - that is, whether the HEIs as a university has met the requirements that a university should have. A programmatic accreditation gauges the specific program offered, and whether or not the “standards” for offering the degree was met. For example, a programmatic accreditation will have to evaluate whether the HEI is indeed capable to meeting the requirements needed to offer B.Ed.
in Biology, B.Sc. in Computer Science, Computer Engineering, and other programs for which accreditation is sought.

Since the concept of quality and quality assurance differs from one person to another; and from one institution to another, defining what quality is for the institution will help in setting the HEIs’ quality goals and objectives, as well as directions. Also, understanding the basic terminologies will clarify the purpose for which the HEIs are designing the quality assurance - whether the purpose is to set internal quality assurance in preparation for quality audit or accreditation; for institutional or programmatic; or fit-for-purpose or standards-based approach.

Review of related literature

In a study entitled, “Implementing quality audits in Oman: Lessons learnt”, (Goodliffe and Razvi, 2011), some of the challenges faced in the Oman accreditation process included the following:

1. Although peer review is the common practice, it is relatively new for Oman, the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA, previously OAC) established the register of external reviewers were 40% of the panel are international reviewers and 60% of reviewers are Omanis. Since the local reviewers are working within a small academic community, there is the temptation to use their preconceived ideas of quality;

2. Most of the portfolios submitted (as part of the quality audit process) were descriptive in nature and were not really honest reflective self-reviews; which could be due to the unwillingness to divulge all information or simply that the professionals working in the sector still has to learn the ability to self-reflect;

3. There is a general resistance regarding making the reports public due to cultural reasons that the public is used to reading articles and reports that only praises performances of HEIs.

In a study entitled, “Accreditation of undergraduate medical training programs: Practices in nine developing countries as compared with the United States”, (Cueto et al., 2006), the Philippines was one of the nine developing countries whose accreditation system was compared with the U.S.A., and findings of the study showed that: “accreditation in Malaysia, Mongolia and the Philippines is voluntary. In these countries powerful incentives to undergo accreditation exist... In the Philippines, medical institutions that do not meet the required standards cannot avail themselves of certain accreditation benefits and privileges including special administrative and financial autonomy, additional curricular flexibility, priority in funding assistance for scholarships, library materials and laboratory equipment, government subsidies for faculty development and even grant of charter or full autonomy (Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities, 2001).

The Oman and the Philippines accreditation system

The Oman accreditation system

The government colleges in the Sultanate of Oman were established in the 1970s & 1980s. These colleges offered certificates and diploma programs in the national priorities of health, teaching and technical skills. The Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), a public institution in Oman, was established in 1986, and the first private institution was established in the mid 1990’s. As of 2011, there were over sixty public and private institutions in Oman (Goodliffe and Razvi, 2011).
In Oman, the sponsoring ministries (i.e. Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Manpower) are responsible for the licensing of new institutions and programs. The supervision is along the lines of compliance model, policy decisions, approval of all academic staff appointments, and regular visits (Goodliffe and Razvi, 2011). The Oman Academic Council (OAC) was established in 2001 as an external quality assurance agency, and the national quality assurance system was developed and implemented in 2003/2004. The OAC is responsible for accreditation in Oman. It was established through Royal Decree No.74/2001, then in 2010 another Royal Decree was issued to change its status and its name was changed to the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation (OAAA). The decrees set out a number of responsibilities, including “Lay (ing) down the procedures for the assessment and review of higher education institutions”.

The EQA system known as the Requirements for Oman’s System of Quality Assurance (ROSQA) was implemented by the OAC in 2003/2004. However, by 2006 it was clear from external reviews and the feedback from the academic sectors that the desired impact did not take place as the ROSQA was not considered comprehensive and was insufficiently tailored to the HEIs’ stage of development during that time. A Quality Audit Manual was written, trainings were conducted and a new standard was drafted known as the OAAA Institutional Standards - which as of this writing is on its second draft.

The OAAA process has two stages.

**Stage 1: Quality Audit, and Stage 2: Standards Assessment.** Quality Audit starts with a self-assessment (quality assessment) and HEIs submit a quality audit portfolio, followed by external visit, and results of the review are forwarded to the HEI for further actions. The summary of the results are categorized into three: 1) Commendations - a formal commendation recognizes an instance of particularly good practice; 2) Affirmations - a formal affirmation recognizes an instance in which the HEI has accurately identified a significant opportunity for improvement and has demonstrated appropriate commitment to addressing the matter; and 3) Recommendations - a recommendation draws attention to a significant opportunity for improvement that the HEI has either not yet accurately identified or to which it is not yet adequately attending.

There are 9 standards, each with different criterion. The review is conducted by register of reviewer comprised of 60% Omani and 40% expatriates (Goodliffe and Razvi, 2011).

| TABLE 1. THE OMAN AUTHORITY FOR ACADEMIC ACCREDITATION (OAAA) INSTITUTIONAL STANDARDS |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| OAAA STANDARD                      | 1 Governance and Management     |
|                                   | 2 Student Learning by Coursework Programs |
|                                   | 3 Student Learning by Research Programs |
|                                   | 4 Staff Research and Consultancy |
|                                   | 5 Industry and Community Engagement |
|                                   | 6 Academic Support Services      |
|                                   | 7 Student and Student Support Services |
|                                   | 8 Staff and Staff Support Services |
|                                   | 9 General Support Services and Facilities |

The Stage 2: Standards Assessment involves a summative assessment of the institution against national standards. Like quality audit, this involves an internal process followed by an external review carried out by an independent panel. The primary differences between ‘standards assessment’ and ‘quality audit’ are: (a) that the judgments are made against specific external standards rather than an institution’s own strategic and operational intentions, and (b) the result is summative, i.e. the HEI will be judged to either have met or haven’t met the standards. If the standards are met, then the institution will become fully accredited, and the cycle is continuous every 4 years.

From 2008 to date, at least 90% of the public and private institutions in the Sultanate of Oman have already completed Stage 1, but only one college is provisionally accredited in Stage 2.

The OAAA recommends the use of Approach-Deployment-Review-Improvement (ADRI) as an internal quality assurance system and the fit-for-purpose approach to accreditation which is a very good step towards understanding where the HEI stands in terms of its quality assessment. However, due to the fact that the extent of the sponsoring agencies’ supervision does not include support for developing internal quality assurance systems, migrating to external quality assurance poses a challenge.

As of AY 2011/2012, there are 47,465 students enrolled in 54 public and private institutions in Oman (Al Sarmi, 2014).

The Philippines accreditation system

The first accrediting body in the Philippines was established in 1957. This is known as the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (PAASCU). The Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities - Commission on Accreditation (PACU-COA) was established in 1973; and the Association of Christian Schools, Colleges and Universities - Accrediting Agency, Inc. (ASCU-AAI) was established in 1976. These 3 bodies provide accreditation to private institutions.

In 1983, the Accrediting Agency of Chartered Colleges and Universities of the Philippines, Inc. (AACUP) was established; and in 2003, the Association of Local Colleges and Universities Commission on Accreditation (ALCUCOA) was formed. These 2 bodies provide accreditation to public colleges and universities.

There are four levels of accreditation in the Philippines (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATUS</th>
<th>TERM</th>
<th>BENEFITS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEVEL I</td>
<td>Initial accreditation for 3 years</td>
<td>Full administrative and financial deregulations; grants and funding assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEVEL II</td>
<td>Formal Accreditation for 5 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEVEL III</td>
<td>Re-accreditation for 5 years</td>
<td>All benefits of I/II; curricular deregulation; privilege to offer distance education and extension classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEVEL IV</td>
<td>Re-accreditation for five years</td>
<td>All benefits of I/II/III; Full autonomy of the program.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Standards in the Philippines are shown in the Table 3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASCU-AAI</th>
<th>PAASCU</th>
<th>PACU-COA</th>
<th>AACUP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Purpose and objectives</td>
<td>Purpose and objectives</td>
<td>Purpose and objectives</td>
<td>Mission, goals and objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Faculty</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Instruction</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Curriculum and program studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Library</td>
<td>Library</td>
<td>Library</td>
<td>Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Laboratories</td>
<td>Laboratories</td>
<td>Laboratories</td>
<td>Physical facilities and laboratories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Physical plant and facilities</td>
<td>Physical plant and facilities</td>
<td>Physical plant and facilities</td>
<td>Physical plant and facilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 Student personnel services</td>
<td>Student services</td>
<td>Student personnel services</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Social orientation and community involvement</td>
<td>Social orientation and community involvement</td>
<td>Social orientation and community involvement</td>
<td>Extension and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Organization and research administration</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Organization and administration</td>
<td>Administration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. The Standards in the Philippines of the Four Accrediting Organizations

The Philippines accreditation is voluntary in nature and adopts a peer-review approach where a representative from other HEIs comprises the accreditation members. The process is a cycle that starts from a self-evaluation, self-survey or self-assessment done by the HEI; followed by an on-site evaluation conducted by trained peers; then the decision of the governing board of the accrediting body (PAASCU, AACUP, etc); and the periodic external review.

The Philippines accreditation serves the following purposes (Reyes, 2014):

1. To identify center of excellence and center of developments for financial support from the Commission on Higher Education for their flagship projects and programs
2. For autonomy and deregulation status
3. Prestige or peer recognition.

In addition, HEIs which are granted accreditation attract more students (and parents) since accreditation is considered an affirmation of quality of education. In addition, degrees awarded from accredited HEIs are recognized nationally and internationally.

The Philippines uses the Planning-Implementation-Review-Improvement as internal quality assurance system and standard-based, programmatic approach to accreditation. Since the governing bodies are also members and/or peer reviewers in the accreditation agencies, they become the source of support for developing internal quality assurance in their respective HEIs making the move towards external quality assurance easier.

As of 2010, there are 2,282 private and public institutions in the Philippines and 8,291,282 College Graduates, and an enrollment of 2,689,808 in AY 2013-2014 (NSO, 2014) so that even though accreditation is voluntary in nature, HEIs will opt to undergo the process due to the many advantages that the status provides - an edge over competing HEIs in order to attract more students, prestige, autonomy, funding, and even the permit to offer distance learning/on-line degrees.

Summary, conclusion and recommendations
Summary

The Oman accreditation process started in 2003/2004 with the EQA system known as ROSQA, which was later abolished and changed to OAAA Institutional Standards. There are two stages to the Oman accreditation which is mandatory in nature. The Oman accreditation is fit-for-purpose, institutional, and adopts Approach-Deployment-Review-Improvement approach to internal quality assurance, and a register of reviewers to carry out the assessment.

The first accreditation body in the Philippines, was established in 1957 (PAASCU), and several other accrediting bodies followed in 1973, 1976, 1983 and 2003. Accreditation is voluntary in nature, conducted by peers, and there are 4 levels for purposes of identifying the center of excellence/center of developments for financial grants from the government, curricular deregulation and autonomy, and prestige. The Philippines accreditation is standard-based, programmatic, and adopts the Planning-Implementation-Review-Improvement (PIRI) approach to internal quality assurance, and a peer review to carry out the assessment.

Conclusion

The systems for internal quality assurance in the Sultanate of Oman and in the Philippines are similar, the 9 standards pretty much cover the same areas (using different terminologies), except in the Oman, there are Standard 2: Student by Coursework Program, and Standard 3: Student by Research Program, and the Philippines has only Standard 3: Instruction (for AACUP - Curriculum and Program Studies).

The fit-for-purpose, institutional accreditation is definitely the appropriate approach for Oman since it is still in its early stage of accreditation, whereas the Philippines, with an accreditation process that dates more than 50 years, must adopt the more stringent standard-based approach. The Oman is also still in the process of finalizing its institutional standards so that programmatic standards will still have to wait although some HEIs have already successfully acquired international accreditation like ABET. In the Philippines, evaluation instruments with clear rating scale, for at least 39 different academic programs have already been set by the accreditation body which makes decisions to grant accreditation status easier.

Quality assurance in Higher Education is a systematic, integrative process that addresses not only students and curriculum, in most cases (as seen in the standards), it covers at least 9 areas - and each area has its own criteria. Quality assurance is managing all aspects of the HEIs’ operation thereby also managing the experiences of all the stakeholders because “quality” depends on their perspective.

As long as the HEIs are sufficiently guided with developing their own internal quality assurance system, whether the HEIs use PIRI or ADRI approach will provide good results because a sound internal quality assurance system will definitely provide a good level of quality assessment.

Recommendations

1. Understanding the basic quality assurance terminologies and meanings can help HEIs have clearer understanding of their purpose or objective for setting up internal quality assurance; it also helps them decide whether the quality assessment will be designed for quality audit or accreditation.

2. Top-level management is a good source of support for developing internal quality assurance systems that will pave the way for smooth transition towards preparing
for external quality assurance (i.e. accreditation) - hence, involvement and training of the governing bodies is a significant step towards laying down a good foundation for achieving quality assurance initiatives.

3. Internal quality assurance is an important step towards achieving accreditation or external quality assurance therefore efforts towards setting up HEIs IQA should be prioritized.

4. Every person has a pre-conceived notion of quality therefore it is important to make sure that the people involved in setting the internal quality assurance are clear regarding the HEIs’ definitions of quality.

5. Self-assessment must be perceived as an honest, self-reflective process in order to achieve the needed improvement.

6. PIRI or ADRI is a helpful mechanisms but only if the HEIs are sufficiently provided with the needed support to develop their internal quality assurance.

7. There are different approaches to accreditation that an institution can apply for but it requires an understanding of their own purpose and the readiness of the HEIs to adopt the standards.

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