



A FRAMEWORK FOR EMBEDDING INTERNAL QUALITY CULTURE IN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTES OF PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Purpose:

Quality assurance standards and procedures defined by the accreditation bodies are adequate tools for quality assessment but unfortunately these measures have not been able to develop a quality culture in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). The purpose of this research work is to develop a framework for embedding quality culture in HEIs of Pakistan.

Design/Methodology/Approach:

This research paper is based upon relevant research on quality in higher education and personal experiences. It identifies major impediments to quality education in HEIs of Pakistan and based upon these findings a framework for embedding Internal Quality Culture (IQC) is designed. The main feature of framework is a balanced combination of both top-down and bottom-up support.

Findings:

The outcome of this research is identification of main impediments to up growth of quality culture in HEIs of Pakistan. A conceptual framework is proposed to overcome these impediments. For implementation of the framework a four-phase process improvement cycle is recommended. This framework will support both institutional level and program level quality assurance as specified by Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan.

Originality/Value:

The research establishes that non-existent IQC is the major cause behind most quality issues in HEIs of Pakistan. Hence, implementation of IQC framework will strongly support Quality Management (QM) in HEIs.

Keywords:

Quality, Quality Management, Quality Assurance, Quality Culture, Internal Quality Culture, Quality in Higher Education.

Paper Type: Conceptual Paper

INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a very important role in the social and economic development of a country. In order to measure effectiveness of higher education sector, quality assurance and assessment has become an integral part of higher education through out the world. In Pakistan, during the last decade, federal government, provincial governments and private sector have invested significantly in higher education. Over the last two decades, there has been an impressive growth of HEIs in Pakistan but it has also resulted in more challenging quality issues like inadequate infrastructure, insufficient human resources, lack of effective control and accountability mechanism and declining education standard.

Thus we find the existence and evolution of multiple types of quality control/quality assurance and accreditation bodies for HEIs in Pakistan e.g. Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC), National Computing Education Accreditation Council (NCEAC), Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC). These organizations set rules, procedures and provide frameworks for improving quality of HEIs. These bodies also periodically monitor HEI performance. This practice has made HEIs quality aware or quality conscious and raised quality awareness. However, in spite of all these strict measures *quality education* is still in obscurity. In fact, with this quality awareness the level of satisfaction and trust is declining within all stakeholders of higher education.

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan has also recognized that quality of higher education in Pakistan needs to be improved extensively in order to compete with highly competitive international standards (Batool and Qureshi, 2009). HEC is thus making serious efforts to improve the quality of higher education in Pakistan. It has been observed that the measures taken by HEC and other quality control/quality assurance and accreditation bodies have been contributing towards quality education in Pakistan but somehow, they have not been fully successful to create a quality culture in HEIs.

In this research paper the issue of quality culture in HEIs has been addressed. A conceptual framework for quality education has been proposed. Implementation of this framework will embed IQC in HEIs.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Quality is a relative, multidimensional and context driven concept. It can be viewed as excellence, fitness for purpose, value for money, customer satisfaction, effectiveness, transformation or an enhancement process (EUA, 2006). These different definitions basically represent two different approaches of quality:

- Product/output quality
- Process/service quality

When quality is considered in context of product/output, then it may mean excellence, fitness for purpose, value for money or customer satisfaction. Quality of a process/service can be related with principles and values that improve or even transform it to enhance effectiveness. The first approach gives quantitative measures while second approach is useful for qualitative measures.

Another common meaning of quality is “compliance to requirements” (Ng, 2008). The more the compliance the better the quality is and vice versa. This definition suggests a two way process to accomplish compliance: to determine the requirements and to assess level of compliance. This is basically the domain of quality assurance and quality control.

It should also be stressed that quality is not a static but a dynamic phenomenon. It is a goal that needs to be pursued continuously and requires commitment and dedicated efforts of all the stakeholders.

Quality Culture: The word ‘culture’ has many different definitions; however in the current context, it can be defined as “*the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group*” (Wikipedia, 2010). From this definition, it can be deduced that culture is part of the people who make up the culture, in fact it is their way of life.

According to Woods (1996), ‘*cultural values are important in implementing quality because human behavior depends on one’s basic beliefs or values*’.

Harvey (2009) has also discussed quality culture in detail. According to him, ‘*quality culture is an ideological construct; it is a frame of mind. It is an organizing principle that empowers all stakeholders in higher education*’.

Ehlers (2009) has stressed that “*quality development requires an organizational culture based on shared values and new professionalism*”.

Every organization has a unique culture which is influenced by lots of internal and external factors. When an organization requires improvement and enhancement of its existing status and develops a system to evolve and sustain quality of all its processes/services, when quality becomes the main driving force behind all the activities, processes, decisions and rules of an organization then its culture transforms into a quality culture. The most important feature of quality culture is dedication to continuous improvement of processes which results in a better work environment.

Quality culture is not just a buzzword but has meaningful roots. From the above definitions following three important features of quality culture emerge:

- it consists of quality improvement artifacts and constructs
- it intends to enhance quality consistently and permanently
- it requires strong commitment and devotion from all the stakeholders to quality maintenance and enhancement

Quality culture is not a set of processes and rules to follow but a set of shared values and attitudes with quality as the main objective/goal/focus. It is, in fact, a learned way of performing day-to-day activities with quality as the driving force.

According to EUA (2006), two main ingredients of quality culture are quality management and quality commitment.

Quality management is '*technocratic*' part of quality culture and consists of tools and procedures required to measure, evaluate, control and enhance quality. Quality commitment is the '*cultural*' part of quality culture. Commitment at both individual level and at organizational level is essential for creating a quality culture.

Harvey (2007) has identified some of the distinguishing features of a quality culture: academic ownership of quality, student-centered teaching/learning, sharing of experiences, team working, self-reflection, improvement initiatives and a '*non-bureaucratic*' quality assessment system. The main benefit of quality culture is that it provides an institution a solid front in a competitive higher education world.

Building an Internal Quality Culture (IQC) within an organization is a shared responsibility of all the stakeholders. Factors that help to build up an internal quality culture are total commitment and devotion to quality, mutual respect, trust, cooperation and assistance.

It is important to understand that IQC is not same as internal quality control and assurance mechanism. As quality culture is a context driven concept, hence it can not be generalized across the wide and diverse spectrum of HEIs. It has been observed (EUA, 2006), that the institutions having high degree of autonomy are the ones with mature and successful quality culture. The prefix '*internal*' in the term IQC basically preserves autonomy of each HEI. Another reason for the use of '*internal*' is that quality culture within a HEI should be independent of '*external*' quality assurance and accountability procedures.

It must be stressed here that main focus of external quality assurance is auditing, benchmarking and accreditation while objective of IQC is to transform the learning environment to produce quality education experience. Once such a culture is established and sustained within a HEI, external quality assurance, if required, can also be obtained easily.

Quality in Higher Education: Higher education sector has always been conscious of academic excellence and high standards. However, in recent years, quality of higher education has become increasingly important for all the stakeholders. There are many reasons for this, such as mass higher education, globalization, increasing competition, growing pressure for accountability by accreditation and funding bodies and most importantly a need to transform the teaching and learning practices.

Ehlers (2009) has defined quality from educational point of view as “*a relationship among all the stakeholders and resources of an educational set-up*”. Main objective of this relationship is to develop more effective teaching and learning environment.

In a research reported by Kim Watty (Watty, K., 2006), fundamental differences in academics' views about how quality is 'currently' being promoted versus how it 'should be' were identified. Participants were asked about four different views of quality: fitness for purpose, value for money, excellence and transformation. Participants were to indicate their level of agreement according to their beliefs (what is) and attitudes (what should be). About 70% of the respondents agreed that quality at their school/ department is being promoted as fitness for purpose; value for money was ranked second, excellence ranked third and transformation ranked fourth. However, when respondents were asked how quality should actually be promoted; transformation ranked first (77%), fitness for purpose second, value for money third and excellence ranked fourth.

Quality Models for Higher Education: Lots of different models have been proposed to improve quality of higher education. The main focus of all these models is improved student learning and a dynamic collaboration of all the stakeholders to achieve it.

ISO 9000 is a series of guidelines that represent the international consensus on quality management. These guidelines can be applied to any institution, be it manufacturing or service based (Hickey, 2002). It has been successfully adapted in many countries. ISO 9000 supplies guidelines about an effective management system that basically provide a roadmap for continuous improvement and increased efficiency. Since its publication in 1987, ISO 9000 series has been continuously revised and updated to cater the changing practices and consumer requirements.

There are many benefits of implementing of ISO 9000, e.g., continuous improvement, enhanced process efficiency, greater quality awareness, competitive advantage, increased customer satisfaction and increased market shares.

A generic model for quality management in higher education has been proposed by Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002). Main features of this model are as below:

- Transformation of learners, enhancing their capabilities and 'empowering' them
- An effective collaboration (enhanced participation) between all the stakeholders
- Encouragement from senior management to ensure 'collegial' culture (shared decision making and upholding of integrity and commitment to knowledge)

Ehlers (2009) presents a model of quality culture which is composed of four important elements:

- A Structural Element which represent the quality system of the organization, and tools and mechanisms which are used to assure and enhance the quality in a suitable way.

- The enabling factors of an organization comprises of those elements which enable individuals and groups to take up the new processes, rule, and mechanisms which are present in the quality system and incorporate those in their own roles.
- The quality culture element which signify artifacts, symbols, and rituals of an organization.
- Transversal elements link different components to each other through participation, trust and communication

In the report '*Quality Culture in European Universities - A bottom-up approach*' (EUA, 2006), a project for quality in higher education is discussed. This report can be used for developing a framework for internal quality culture in HEI. It emphasizes on the following points:

- Strategy, policy and planning
- Commitment of senior leadership
- Ownership of quality by academic and administrative staff
- Internal evaluation process and feedback loops
- Cooperation with external stakeholders
- Qualitative and quantitative measurement of quality

In Pakistan, HEC has also designed a Quality Assurance (QA) framework for the guidance of QA of HEIs of Pakistan (Batoool and Qureshi, 2009). The framework is divided in the following three stages:

Stage I: To set up national level QA standards and criteria by consultation of all the stakeholders.

Stage II: To establish an Internal QA system (IQA) at the HEIs to incorporate quality in all the academic activities.

Stage III: To develop an External QA system (EQA) for accreditation/auditing of the HEIs. HEC has also distinguished between two levels of QA, Program level and Institutional level.

Program level QA is important because different academic programs may have different standards even within the same institution. It is the responsibility of Accreditation Councils/ Professional Bodies to ensure Program level QA.

Institutional level QA is required to establish a quality culture in the HEI. It is an organizational culture in which quality becomes the central part of all management and academic practices. It is mainly the responsibility of a HEI to ensure quality at all levels and in all processes to create a quality learning environment for students.

In this research work the issue of institutional level QA is addressed by proposing a framework for embedding quality culture in HEIs of Pakistan. Once such a culture is established, it will also facilitate program level QA and external QA.

THE PROPOSED IQC FRAMEWORK

As mentioned in the previous section, to ensure institutional level QA, an HEI needs to develop and sustain a quality culture. Development of such a culture is a long and complex process. The proposed IQC framework will establish quality culture in a HEI not as goal but as an on going phenomenon. It emphasizes quality as a continuous improvement exercise that results in sustainable quality culture in a systematic and organized way. Another important feature of this framework is that it protects quality culture from 'over-bureaucratization' by empowering all the stakeholders.

The proposed IQC framework consists of five main components:

- Internal Quality Culture (IQC)
- Quality Input
- Top-down support
- Bottom-up support
- Quality Output

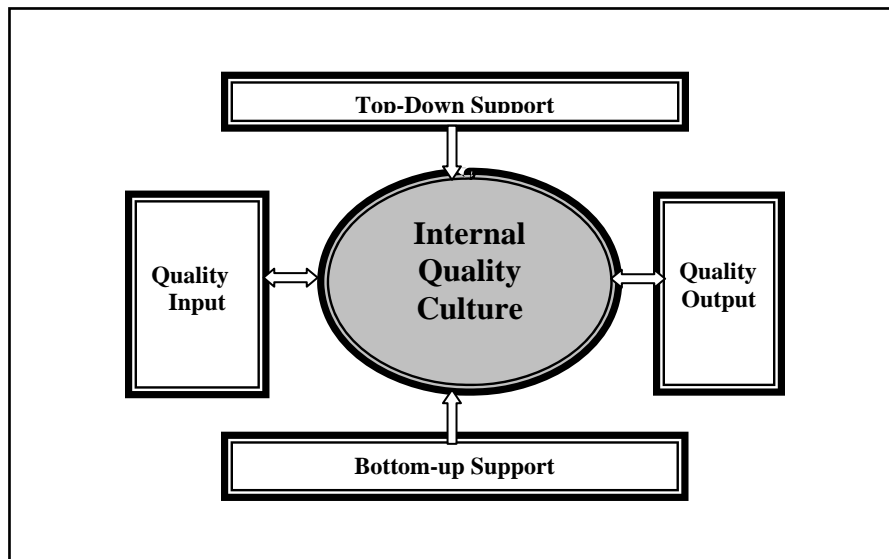


Figure 1: Abstract View of IQC Framework

The detail of each of the framework components is described below:

Internal Quality Culture (IQC): IQC is at the core of this framework, it links together all the components. In order to establish IQC, the framework requires quality input, which consists of mission/vision, quality policy, processes, procedures, rules and roles. The framework produces quality output in the form of service (quality education) and product (quality curriculum, quality graduates, quality faculty, quality research etc.). In order to establish and sustain IQC, different supporting factors are required which are divided into two main categories: Top-Down support and Bottom-up support.

It should be stressed that IQC is specific to each HEI because *quality* and *culture* are perceived differently according to an institute's background, mission, vision and objectives. The essence of IQC is dedication, ownership and commitment of all the stakeholders.

Quality Input: Quality input is one of the main components of IQC. It requires strong alliance of all the stakeholders and continuous support of the top management.

The most important factor that forms the basis of IQC is the specific mission and quality policy of the institute. The mission evolves and changes as stakeholder expectations are included in defining the direction of the institution. Planning for change is important ingredient of quality input for developing IQC.

Once the mission is defined clearly, devising the procedures and processes will not be difficult because process is only a formal way of proceeding in order to accomplish some objective. The quality input should come from all the stakeholders. For better input it is important to define roles of all the stakeholders along with well defined rules and regulations. The benefit of this whole exercise will be that all the stakeholders will be aware of their domain. They will also know which tasks and how these tasks shall be accomplished. This will improve the participation level of stakeholders and will result in better execution of quality plan.

Another very important input of this framework is the review, feedback and result of assessments. This is believed to be a spirit of continuous quality improvement.

Top-Down Support: Like other business institutions, higher education institutions also have assets, infrastructure, resources and staff, which need efficient management. Management of educational institutions is a challenging task. Top management plays an essential and crucial role in creating a quality culture. They can ensure necessary resources to support quality initiatives. The top down support has various aspects and is dependant upon many factors such as institutional vision and mission, policies, organizational arrangements, building and maintenance of the infrastructure, strategy development, curriculum development, facilitation of the environment, trust development among the stakeholders and introducing of motivational incentives.

The financial, operational, and moral support provided by top and middle management along with careful planning and commitment can significantly contribute towards the successful implementation of quality policy.

Bottom-up Support: Developing an IQC in an organization is a difficult task and requires a balanced combination of both top-down and bottom-up support. Commitment at individual level ensures bottom-up support and at organizational level ensures top-down support. In fact, top-down support facilitates bottom-up support. A culture for academic excellence can only be established by strong collaboration of both top-down and bottom-up support.

Academic ownership of quality is an important indicator of quality culture. Top management's role is important in introducing and promoting quality culture, however, successful implementation of quality policy and processes requires grass-roots ownership of the processes.

Empowerment and active participation of all the stakeholders is also a critical factor for establishment of a quality culture. Involvement of faculty, staff and students in decision making of relevant processes promotes the ownership and commitment. Freed et al. (1997) has correctly pointed out that "*committees in academe are common, but actually collaborating and working as teams is not*".

Effective communication among all the stakeholders is vital to successfully establish and sustain quality culture within an organization. People in organizations spend most of their time in some sort of communication (internal or external). It has been found that poor communication is source of a large number of organizational problems. Top management should also effectively communicate policies and decisions to all the internal and external stakeholders.

Quality Output: When the internal quality culture will evolve in a HEI, then its output will transform into a quality output. The output of a HEI is composed of quality education, quality curriculum, quality human resource, quality graduates, quality research and quality infrastructure.

An effective liaison of HEI with the industry and corporate sector should be established for curriculum enhancements. This exercise can significantly improve the output quality. Infrastructure improvement is also essential to enhance quality environment. Quality programs cannot execute without quality human resource. Quality research comes into existence when all the factors just discussed are present in the HEI. The end result of all this will be quality graduates. A quality graduate will have sufficient knowledge according to the market demand and will be able to implement it in the industry/corporate sector in an effective way.

ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS IN IQC FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of this research stakeholders were divided into two main categories, internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. This categorization is with reference to the organization.

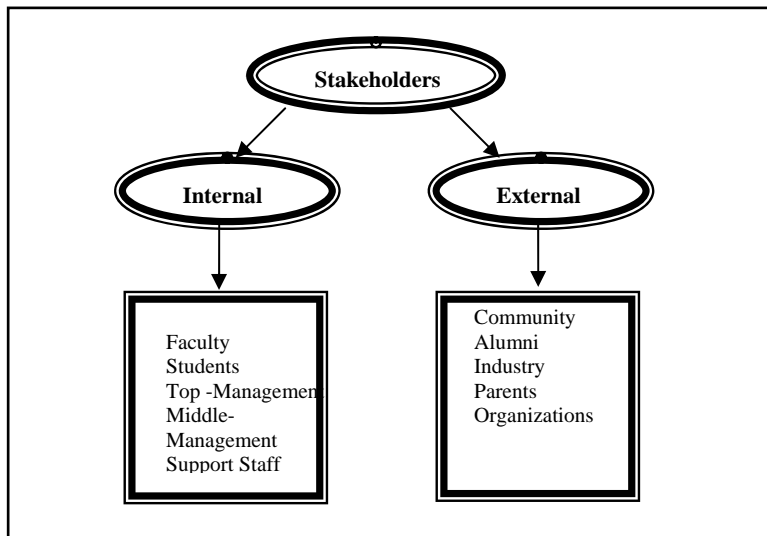


Figure 2: Stakeholders Categorization

Following is a brief description of all the stakeholders and their contribution towards establishing a quality culture.

1.1) Internal Stakeholders

Faculty: Faculty provides a link between institution’s management and students. They implement institutional quality policy through quality teaching and research, effective student-teacher interaction and better assessment of students’ learning. They also play an important role in the design and revision of curricula. Faculty commitment and ownership of quality policy, their collaboration in implementation of all quality enhancement practices and their active involvement in institutional decision making are essential to provide bottom-up support to IQC. To achieve this objective, it is emphasized that conducive environment and job satisfaction must prevail in HEIs.

Students: The contribution of students to quality of HEI is usually neglected. IQC framework ensures that students play central role in the development of quality culture within HEIs. Students can contribute in IQC in various ways. Student assessment and feedback can improve institutional infrastructure, teaching and learning environment and curriculum. Moreover, student associations and groups can bring new ideas to enhance quality of teaching and research. According to Brus et al., (2007), “concept of quality assurance and quality culture require students to be accepted as full and equal partners”.

Top Management: Main responsibility of top management is to provide effective and explicit top down support to create and sustain IQC. They should ensure adequate time, people, funding and facilities for planning and implementation of quality culture. Role of top management in quality culture should be inspirational.

Top Management plays a key role in making policies and vision documents and approving plans to create an effective learning/teaching environment in HEI. As the overseers of the institution and the guide, Vice-Chancellors/President/Rectors/Directors design plans, set clear goals, set up organizational values and demand performances. They also introduce accountability system. More like the leadership to an institution, they perform tasks to develop a full scale road map for the running of HEI. They deploy values and goals through several layers of management for successful accomplishment and achievement of efficiency. Top management is considered one of the most important stakeholders to facilitate the academic team for creating a quality learning, and non-bureaucratic environment.

Middle Management: The middle management acts as a bridge between top management and faculty. They are responsible for making recommendations to top management on a wide range of human resource decisions like team development, discipline, tenure, promotions, planning and control of finances and budget administration and estimation. Their tasks are strategic planning for the faculty, in the context of the university's overall plan, and implementation of university policies. Activities related to establishment, monitoring, maintenance of services, modification of programs and curricula, issues handling related to student affairs, are also key responsibilities of the middle management. The main purpose of the middle management is to take the plans off the table and put it on the floor for execution.

Role of middle management in quality culture should be motivational and supportive. They should engage faculty, students and staff in continuous improvement. They should also combine and balance top-down and bottom-up support.

Support Staff: Support staff act as facilitators in the HEIs. They are very helpful in support activities which provide assistance to management, faculty and students. Their feedback is extremely crucial to the evaluation of plans/roadmap and processes. They are considered to be important stakeholders in creating quality culture in the HEIs. They contribute significantly in the context of providing assistance and strong feedback at the time of assessment. They also have the role in teaching and learning activities specifically their deployment in the library and laboratories and security areas of the campus. It must be emphasized here that support staff's respect level should be increased to improve their ownership and team spirit.

1.2) External Stakeholders

Community: Higher education plays an important role in community development. HEIs generate knowledge and produce skilled workforce for the community. A

strong partnership with community through faculty and students should be developed by HEIs. Community should be benefited by research projects of HEIs. In fact, community service should be an important part of academic culture of HEIs. In return this exercise will influence teaching, curriculum and research standards of HEIs positively.

Alumni: Alumni are an important factor in the feedback loop as they play an effective role in making future policies, paving the way of better employment for future graduates, elevating institute's reputation and improving processes and procedures. Hence HEIs must give them a boost in feeling honored in representing them as a goodwill ambassador of the institute.

Industry/Corporate sector: Industrial partnership is beneficial for HEIs in many ways. Quality of graduating students directly affects the employment rate of fresh graduates. Low employment rate of graduates is an indicator of poor quality of graduating students and can be alarming for an institute. Industry employers can be a valuable source of information to get an external view and to incorporate industry requirements and update the academic curriculum. Therefore, a strong liaison of HEIs with the industry is emphasized.

Parents: All parents are interested in their children education. In Pakistan, most of the students are financed by their parents who naturally want their children to get quality education. This makes them an important stakeholder in our framework. Parents want their children to complete the degree, become respectable members of the society and independent members of the family as early as possible. This feeling of the parents is valued highly in this framework.

Organizations: Regulatory bodies, accreditation bodies/authorities and sister HEIs are also an important stakeholder. In Pakistan, HEIs have to make their policies within the given guidelines of these bodies. Our framework suggests that developing IQC while remaining in the given course of action is not impossible. The academic and administrative processes and standards of an institute are also influenced by other HEIs.

EMBEDDING AN INTERNAL QUALITY CULTURE

Embedding a quality culture in an organization might require transforming the existing organizational culture. Hence, to successfully embed quality culture in an organization, full dedication and active participation of all the major stakeholders is vital. This is a sensitive and complex task and needs to be handled carefully.

To address the issue of embedding IQC, we propose a four-phase cyclic process for continuous quality improvement (based on Deming's cycle) as shown in Figure 3.

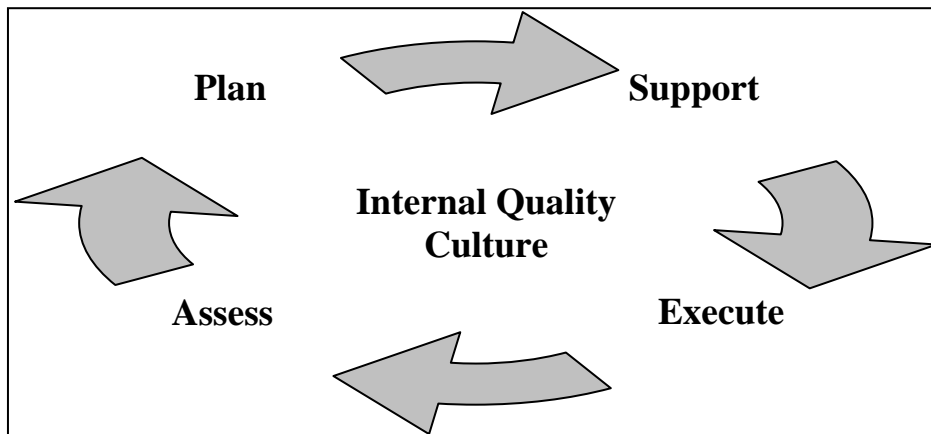


Figure 3: Embedding Internal Quality Culture

The successful implementation of the Plan, Support, executes and Assess phases will gradually transform the existing organizational culture into quality culture.

- **Plan:** Consistent and long term strategic planning for quality
- **Support:** Management, financial, operational and moral support for academic and administrative operations.
- **Execute:** Implementation of quality policy. Uniform and systematic execution of all academic and administrative processes across all departments/units of HEI.
- **Assess:** Assessment and evaluation of all the major activities against defined quality standards. Developing a set of quality indicators, their transparent measuring and providing a constructive feedback for review of quality policy.

This process improvement cycle ensures that plans prepared will be supported for execution and every action taken will be assessed and evaluated. The result of this assessment will go as an input for the new plans. The cycle will go on continuously, creating and sustaining internal quality culture.

FINDINGS

There are lots of factors that inhibit growth of quality culture. Using literature survey and personal experience, following major barriers to development of quality culture in HEIs of Pakistan are identified:

- Quality attainment is a long and continuous process. It requires continuity of policies, plans, strategies and procedures. Unfortunately, due to various socio-economic and political reasons, higher education in Pakistan has suffered because of inconsistent policies, actions and efforts.

- Successful implementation of quality policy depends on the organizational culture. Implementation of quality policy will be more effective if the organizational culture is 'non-bureaucratic'.
- In most of the HEIs of Pakistan (with a few exceptions), quality is mainly intended for accreditation bodies and it is introduced and implemented using a 'technocratic top-down approach'. In such a situation, quality is usually limited to exercises required to achieve accreditation.
- Misuse of academic and managing authority is a common practice in most of HEIs of Pakistan. Such practices adversely affect the development of quality culture.
- Lack of self-reflection and sense of responsibility of internal stakeholders is also a major problem affecting quality implementation in HEIs.
- In most of HEIs, lack of involvement of all the stakeholders in planning and decision making creates an environment of distrust. This distrust has negative impact on quality culture.
- External environment of HEIs also influences its quality culture. Cooperation of external stakeholders is very important to update HEIs according to the rapidly changing expectations of industry/corporate sector. Unfortunately, most of the HEIs in Pakistan do not have a systematic way of involving external stakeholders in academic and administrative decision making.

CONCLUSION

Provision of high quality education has become essential for the survival of HEIs in the highly competitive higher education world. The complexity of this difficult task can be handled by following a systematic approach to quality. Lots of different models and frameworks have been implemented for quality assurance/control of higher education throughout the world. These systems have facilitated quality management, but have not been fully successful in establishing a quality culture in HEIs.

In this paper a conceptual framework has been proposed to embed quality culture in HEIs of Pakistan. Implementation of this framework will not only preserve autonomy of a HEI but will also support both institutional level QA and program level QA as proposed by HEC.

Development of quality culture is a long and complex process that requires resources, competencies and continuous efforts of all the stakeholders. The focal point of our proposed IQC framework is that *management for quality* requires establishment of a *democratic* organizational culture. This culture will *empower* all the stakeholders by involving them in important decision making. As a consequence of this practice the ownership of quality processes and commitment to quality policy will be developed. The main emphasis of IQC framework is on commitment rather than *compliance* to quality. The ownership and commitment to quality will not only reduce the trust deficit among all the stakeholders but will also provide a solid foundation for embedding a sustainable quality culture in HEIs of Pakistan.

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