



## **PROBLEMS AND ISSUES REGARDING QUALITY ENHANCEMENT CELLS (QEC): VIEWS OF QEC'S HEADS**

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## PROBLEMS AND ISSUES REGARDING QUALITY ENHANCEMENT CELLS (QEC): VIEWS OF QEC'S HEADS

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### ABSTRACT

#### Objective

The purpose of the study was to identify the problems and issues of Quality Assurance Cells in implementing the Higher Education Commission (HEC) policies.

#### Design

It was a qualitative study in nature.

#### Method

The study was conducted on a sample of 16 QEC's heads from public sector universities by using convenient sampling technique in Punjab, Pakistan. Semi-structured interview was designed to collect data to inquire the heads' problems regarding implementation of HEC policies. The data was analyzed using the Descriptive Coding Technique.

#### Results

The study revealed that QEC Heads face diversified problems such as lack of uniform criteria for appointment/selection of QEC personnel, lack of working staff in order to handle data, lack of will and cooperation from heads of departments of the respected universities, lack of commitment and cooperation by faculty members, late response of faculty staff, lack of strong authority, lack of resources such as financial. The study also revealed that heads of QEC's were facing complex issues such as; lack of awareness of the plan and objective for which the cells constituted, faith of people on discretions and not on systems, lack of authority of QEC's personnel, stickiness to status quo, and undefined quality standards.

#### Suggestions

The study suggests that there should be some monetary benefits/honors for the assessment and program team. There should be more funds from HEC, for removing weaknesses of the

department identified in the implementation plan. There should be maximum time given to QECs to design and implement. Development of courses should be based purely on learning outcomes rather than course topics. Heads of various departments should monthly review the courses taught by their faculty, number of assignments, quizzes taken, and achievement of outcomes. There should be increase in physical resources such as; building, IT resources, infrastructure facilities etc. There should be clear guidelines for faculty to cooperate. There should be strong authority given to the QEC's heads for implementation of HEC policies.

**Key words:** Quality Assurance Cell (QEC), Higher Education Commission (HEC)

## INTRODUCTION

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century quality is an important issue in institutions of higher education all over the world. It gained importance because of the fact that key role of human resources have been increasing very rapidly in the present competitive era. Frazer (1994) discussed that quality in higher education is important because universities must be accountable to the society, to employers, and to students who are stakeholders in the process. Mok (2007) by referring different research literature has the opinion that quality in education is multifaceted, multidimensional, complex and a dynamic positive concept.

History of quality assurance in higher education is that there are a number of examples of national quality review systems moving to this type of approach. According to Westerheijden, Sternsaker and Rosa (2007) in the United Kingdom, for example, Scotland emphasis Quality Enhancement (QE) and has done so for several years. The current position of the Scotland Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) is that "Quality Education strategies should be developed and challenged in view of the goals which they set for institutions" (P. 211-212)

Australian Universities were structured on the British Model, funded by government and independent in teaching, learning and research. At its initial stages, quality assurance systems in Australia were compared with the benchmarks of UK standards, but after the expansion of university sector in 1970s, and 1980s, the first official higher education quality policy was introduced in 1991 (Anderson, 2006; Lim, 2001). In 1999, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was established. Coats (2005) and Anderson (2006) have discussed that quality assurance system in Australian higher education sector is multidimensional in nature comprising of different factors including internal processes, self assessment, performance, students' feedback, peer review, and external accreditation through professional bodies.

Hong Kong was the first country in East Asia to apply quality assurance measures to monitor the higher education sector in 1993. This policy was the impact of globalization around the world. The quality assurance mechanism in Hong Kong was comprised of institutional and academic reviews, formal and informal visits, and discussion at various levels organized by the University Grants Commission (UGC). The UGC adopted a clear

mission to provide higher education to people who can master high-level skills to respond to change and challenge in the future (Mok, 2007).

In Malaysia the quality assurance division for public sector universities was established in order to set up quality audit system. The major aim of this system was to promote public confidence about higher education in public sector universities regarding their degrees and academic program (Fahmi, 2006).

Defining quality in higher education is a challenging task and, therefore, this is no universal consensus on how to manage quality within the higher education (Becket & Brookes, 2006). Quality can be viewed in terms of perfection, excellence, and value for money, fitness to purpose, or transformation (Harvey and Green, 1993). Perfection implies faultlessness for zero errors (Ashcroft and Forman - Peck, 1995) and is most relevant to the industry. Excellence implies the notion of reputation (Ashcroft and Forman-Peck, 1995) and refers to the traditional (often implicit) academic view which aims to demonstrate high academic standards (McKimm, 2003). Quality as value for money is about accountability (Biggs, 2003).

A core component of higher education reforms all over the world is systematic quality assurance and improvement of higher education institutions (Bornmann, Mittag, and Daniel, 2006). Anderson (2006) has the opinion that the quality revolution in higher education has underscored the expectation that universities must demonstrate that they are providing quality education and producing quality research and constantly strive to improve both. Higher education at university level is facing extraordinary challenges of quality assurance around the world (Strydom, Zulu, Murray, 2004). The current focus on quality assurance procedures emphasizes compliance, accountability, reliability, credibility, development and efficiency (Hodson and Thomas, 2003). Kontio (2008) by defining quality assurance stated that quality assurance means all the procedures, processes and systems that support and develop the education and other activities of the higher education institutions. Quality assurance is the systematic and continuous attention to quality maintenance and quality improvement (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). Lim (2001) stated that quality assurance refers to all policies and processes directed to ensuring the maintenance and enhancement of quality. Quality assurance has been defined by Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) (1994) as all those planned and systematic activities to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirement for quality.

During the past decade, many countries including the British, Australia and New Zealand have taken various measures in order to define standards for teaching professional standards from key features of their education system. The purpose of their introduction is to develop and maintain high quality teaching and leadership in ensuring that employer and management expectations are clear and consistent across each institution (Ministry of New Zealand, 1999).

The knowledge needed to improve our education system already exists within the education community. Quality management is a vehicle that education professionals can

use to cope with the forces of change. Unfortunately, the attitude in many universities is that the quality of education will improve only when society provides education with more money. Money is not the key to improve the quality of education. The quality of education will improve when administration, teaching staff universities and board members develop new attitude that focus on leadership, teamwork, co-operation, accountability and recognition (Arcaro, 2006).

In the past decade universities in developing countries have followed the international quality assurance systems to improve the quality of their activities (Lim, 2001; Idrusus, 2003). Though there is a huge difference in the economic and financial status between developed and developing countries, still it will be useful to apply quality assurance system in the higher education institutions in developing countries. However, for successful implementation of the system, attention must be given to the conditions prevailing in the developing countries.

Quality assurance committee was constituted by the HEC on October 23, 2003 comprising of Vice Chancellors of different universities of Pakistan. The significant contribution of this committee was in terms of developing a framework for accreditation and ranking of universities in Pakistan (Batool and Qureshi, 2006) and issuance of guidelines for Ph.D. programs.

Higher Education Commission (HEC) has constituted Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) with a mission to arrange the capacity building training/seminars and workshops in order to enable the higher education institutions of Pakistan to meet the challenges of quality assurance in higher learning. Under the auspicious of Quality Assurance Agency, in its first phase, HEC established Quality Enhancement Cells (QEC) in 10 public sector universities of Pakistan. In Phase 2 for the year 2007, HEC has planned quality enhancement cells in 20 others universities of Pakistan in order to monitor and improve the quality of higher education. These quality assurance cells have been given a mandate to introduce quality assurance procedures in the respective universities. By analyzing the progress, work and difficulties faced by quality enhancement cells in different universities, Azam (2007) suggested that the mechanism of quality assurance should be introduced slowly and gradually in Public and Private Universities of Pakistan in order to get full benefits of this program.

Many of the Quality Assurance Agencies have standardized functioning across the world in the recent decades. A few of the strong network for quality assurance such as Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) and International Network of Quality Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) are also active in establishing harmony and uniformity across borders. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) acquired earned membership for these Quality Assurance (QA) networks for knowledge and resource sharing on the subject and to promote quality culture in the country compatibility to international practices in the field of higher education (Batool & Qureshi, 2006).

Awais, 2008 explained in his research paper 'Quality of Ph.D. programs - issues and problems in 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Assessment Quality in Higher Education, 2008 reported inadequate facilities at university level causing inconvenience to the students. The paper mentioned the lack of libraries with latest books and journals, well equipped laboratory, computer facility, office room, phone, internet, audio/visual aids and research support as major barriers in the way of quality improvement in Pakistan. Similarly, Professor Aurangzeb, 2008 narrated in his research paper; "Quality Assurance Model for Assessment of work Integrated Learning at Higher Education Institution of Pakistan that there is need to work on parameters including; assessment materials, teaching methodology, library, laboratory and tutorship. Nagabrahman, 2008 also reported several indicators that are important to bring quality in higher education such as; clear objectives, strengthening of faculty resources, faculty development, curriculum design, style of management and recruitment of faculty. (2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Assessment Quality in Higher Education, 2008, Lahore, Pakistan).

Problems of higher education in Pakistan are complicated to some extent. There are two main factors that are to be first documented and to be dealt with. The first is the increasing demand for higher education and proportionately fewer facilities available in public universities. The second factor relates to the low standard of the faculty especially in public universities. The remedies are yet to be discovered (Abdullah, 1992).

Alan, et. al. (2005) found that the quality of postgraduate study is not purely a question of supervision, methodology and motivation, it also includes institutional admission procedures and policies, faculty/school administration policies as well as assistance and infrastructure that is provided by the faculty/school to supervisors and students. These facilities include: financial assistance, access to child care, pastoral care, computing, library, office space, phone access, access to secretarial support, provision of research seminars and presentations, funding for library searches, conferences, travel, fieldwork, photocopying, and opportunities for casual work within the school etc.

### **Needs and Scope of Higher Education in Pakistan**

In Pakistan, like many other countries, higher education plays a vital role in the socio-economic development and political awareness of the country. Its importance lies not only in providing degrees and thus producing quality human resources for various sectors of the economy, but also in making the youth an agent of socio-economic change in the country. However university education in Pakistan needs to be revamped for making it accessible and more relevant to the changing circumstances.

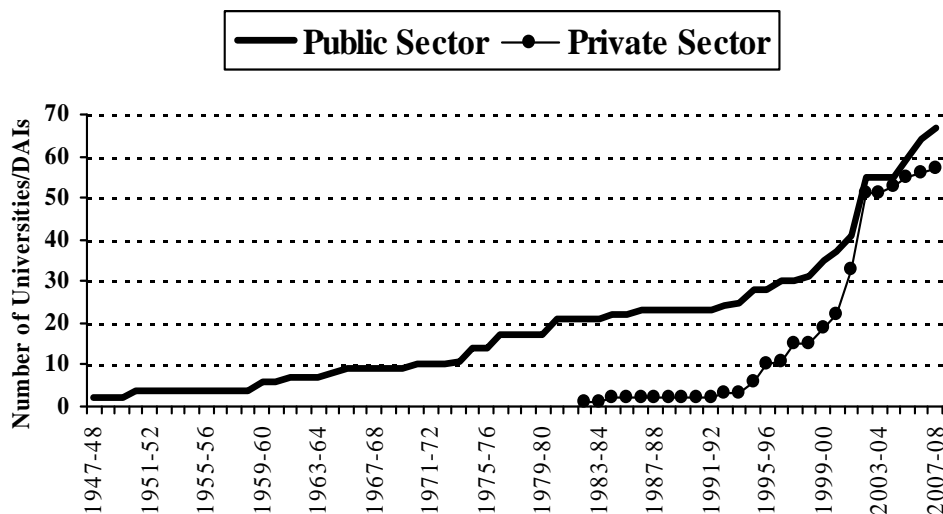
There are 70 universities in the public sector and 58 universities in the private sector in Pakistan. In Punjab province alone there are 21 universities in the public sector and 17 universities in the private sector.

(<http://app.hec.gov.pk/UniversityFinal2/RegionUniversity.aspx> accessed on 24-12-2009).

Figure 1 shows the students enrollment in the universities/degree awarding institutions. It depicts that there is a gradual increase in the enrollment of students in these public sector

institutions of higher learning; it increased from 276274 in 2001-2 to 741092 in 2007-8. The increase rate has been 168%. It also exhibits that there is a rapid increase in the students' enrollment in private sector universities in 2001-2002, which kept increasing afterward.

**Figure 1 Students' enrollment in public and private sector at Universities/Degree Awarding Institution (excluding affiliated colleges)**

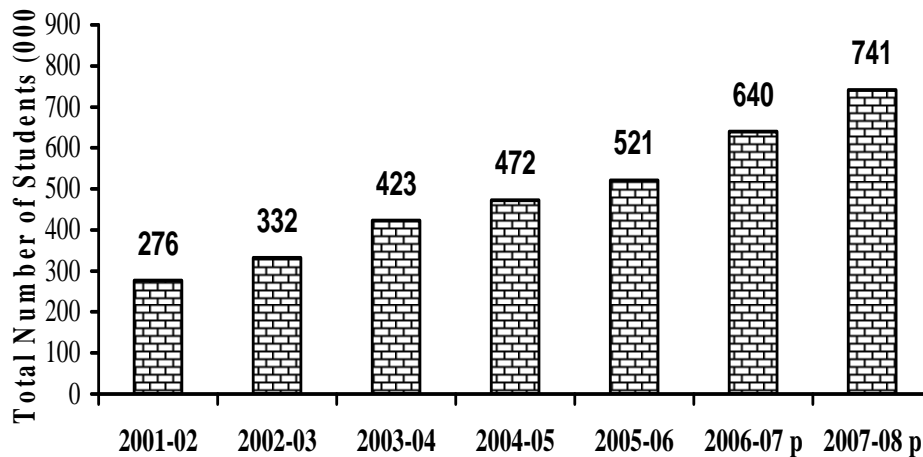


Source: (<http://www.hec.gov.pk/Stats/Pages/Default.aspx>, accessed on 24-12-2009)

Figure 2 shows that university education in Pakistan was not accessible to a large section of the population, which is evident from the fact that in 2007-2008 only 741092 students enrolled in the universities which is less than 5% of the total population. Figure 3 shows that there was gradual increase in the university male students but in 2003 and 2006 there is a rapid increase in university female students. There are 342000 female students that enrolled in the universities. Figure 4 further highlight that male and female enrollment proportion. In 2001-2, it shows that in 2001-02, 63.04 % male students were enrolled and this proportion decreased to 53.7% in 2007-8. The enrollment of female students, on the other hand, increased from 36.96% to 46.3% during this period.

(<http://www.hec.gov.pk/Stats/Pages/Default.aspx>, accessed on 24-12-2009)

**Figure 2: Student Enrollment at University (Campus + Constituent Colleges) during Period 2001-08**



Source: (<http://www.hec.gov.pk/Stats/Pages/Default.aspx>, accessed on 24-12-2009)

In pursuit of institutional excellence in teaching and research, HEC has made massive investments to upgrade the physical infrastructure of universities, particularly to cater to the requirements of increased enrollment in higher education and to accommodate the students admitted through various human resource development programs. Cognizant of the fact that traditional brick-and-mortar solution to improve access will only have an impact to limited degree, HEC has developed a comprehensive ICT strategy to utilize ICTs and distance education to provide education to the masses.

Strategies for increasing enrollment in higher education, improving research capacity and improving quality of education programs succeed only when the necessary infrastructure for these intervention strategies is in place. In this regard, HEC is complementing these activities through a host of physical and technological infrastructure programs to provide high-quality education services to the sector. The development expenditure of the universities is allocated on the basis of performance and need, where the need is defined both in terms of the particular requirements of that institution as well as the need for improvement in the higher education sector at a macro level. Universities are encouraged to submit development projects that are relevant to their institutional needs. These projects are submitted for review by the appropriate authority (DDWP, CDWP or ECNEC- dependent on project expenditure) and funds are released accordingly. Examples of the types of projects funded in this manner are: Development of new universities and degree awarding institutions, Introduction of new disciplines and cutting edge technologies, Improvement of existing infrastructure, Upgrading/ strengthening/ establishing of Laboratories ([http://publisher.hec.gov.pk/FPD/Development Projects.html](http://publisher.hec.gov.pk/FPD/Development%20Projects.html) , accessed on 25-12-2009).

At present, there is no single Pakistani university in the top 500 universities of the world. (<http://www.topuniversities.com/world-university-rankings>, accessed on 27-12-2009) Why is this so? We are lacking in many things that may lead our universities in the top ranking universities of the world especially in terms of quality of higher education.

In view of the significance of quality at higher education level, the study attempts to address the following:

- 1) To identify the problems of the Head of Quality Assurance Cells in implementing Higher Education Commission (HEC) policies.
- 2) To identify the issues/challenges being faced by Quality Assurance Cells heads in implementing higher education commission (HEC) policies
- 3) To suggest viable measures to overcome various problems and issues faced by the QECs heads.

In order to achieve the above outlined objectives, following research questions were designed;

- 1) What are the major problems faced by the Quality Assurance Cells' heads in implementing Higher Education Commission (HEC) policies?
- 2) What are the issues being faced by Quality Assurance Cells' heads in implementing higher education commission (HEC) policies?
- 3) What measures should be taken to overcome these problems and issues towards improving quality of Quality Assurance Cells?

### **Methodology**

It was a qualitative study in nature. The study was conducted on a sample of 16 QEC's heads from public sector universities by using convenient sampling technique in Punjab, Pakistan. The data was analyzed using a descriptive coding technique.

### **Instrument**

For data collection, semi-structured interview was developed as a research instrument. Semi-structured interview was designed to inquire QECs heads' problems regarding the implementation of HEC policies. The interview protocol was validated through an expert opinion. The interview protocol was based on three key questions.

- 1) What are the major problems you are facing in terms of implementing the HEC policies?
- 2) What are the issues regarding quality assurance you are facing while implementing HEC policies?
- 3) What suggestions you would offer to overcome the identified problems?

**Findings of the study:**

*Initial Codes and Broad Categories of the Data Collected by Interviews*

Broad Categories	Initial codes	Frequencies	%
	Lack of resources such as financial.	14	87.5
	Lack of strong authority to QEC heads	12	75
	Lack of will and cooperation from heads of departments of the respected universities	8	50
Problems faced by QEC heads	Lack of commitment and cooperation by faculty members	15	
	Lack of working staff in order to handled huge amount of data	13	81.2
	Lack of uniform criteria for appointment/selection of QEC's personnel	6	38
	Late response of faculty staff	5	31.2
Issues regarding quality assurance	Undefined quality standards	13	81.2
	Faith of people on discretions and not on systems	6	37.5
	Lack of authority of QEC's personnel	10	62.5
	The lack of awareness of the plan and objective for which the cells constituted	15	93.75
	Stickiness to status quo	4	25

The above findings of the study revealed that problem and issues faced by QEC's heads include: the lack of uniform criteria for appointment/selection of QEC personnel, lack of working staff in order to handle data, lack of will and cooperation from heads of the various departments of the universities, lack of commitment and cooperation by faculty members, late response of faculty staff, lack of strong authority, lack of resources such as financial and infrastructure. They asserted their problems mainly to the financial problem, 87.5% heads said that they have lack of resources for financial support. One of the heads said that "some time they do not have enough money for purchasing stationary". 81.2% of the heads reported that they were facing problem of lack of working staff in order to handle huge amount of data and undefined quality standards. 75% of the heads attributed their problem to lack of strong authority given to QEC heads. One of the heads of QA Cells said that "Heads of the Departments do not cooperate with us due to weak authority". 31.2 % heads were of the opinion that faculty give late response to the work assign to them.

It also shows that the heads of QEC's were facing complex issues such as the lack of awareness of the plan and objective for which the cells were constituted, faith of people on discretions and not on systems, lack of authority of QEC's personnel, stickiness to status quo, and undefined quality standards. The major issue faced by QEC's heads was the lack of awareness of the plan and objective for which the cells constituted; 93.75% heads said that they think that the lack of awareness of the plan and objective for which the cells

constituted is major issue. 81.2% were of the opinion that undefined quality standards are serious issue.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In view of the aforesaid findings, the following recommendations have been made to improve the working of QEC's heads for effective implementation of HEC policies:

- There should be some monetary benefits / honors for the assessment and program team.
- There should be more funds from HEC, for removing weaknesses of the department identified in implementation plan.
- There should be maximum time given to QEC's to design and implement.
- Development of the courses should be based purely on learning outcomes rather than course topics.
- The Heads of various departments should monthly review the courses taught by their faculty, number of assignments, quizzes taken, and achievement of outcomes.
- There should be an increase in physical resources such as buildings, IT resources and infrastructure facilities.
- There should be clear guidelines for faculty to cooperate. There should also be strong authority given to the QEC's heads.

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