



Peer Review Report of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC), Sri Lanka

Onsite visit: 25th – 27th June 2012

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Review Panel

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Preface

The Quality Assurance Council of Sri Lanka funded by the World Bank (IRQUE Project) has its origins in the preparatory work jointly conducted by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Directors (CVCD) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 2001. Initially, the committee was responsible for training the reviewers for institution and subject/programme reviews. This mechanism later evolved into a Standing Committee on Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) and the establishment of Department of QAA under the UGC by the end of 2004. In 2005, the Department of QAA was renamed as QAA Council.

The QAA Council with more than a decade of experience in conducting Institutional and Subject Reviews, conducting and supervising QA programs, publishing reports and documents offered itself for an External Review by the APQN. A Peer Review Committee comprising of three experts visited QAAC during 25th – 27th June 2012 and had interactions with the various functionaries and authorities of the Council. Detailed interactions were also held with stakeholders such as the UGC, reviewers, authorities of University of Colombo, representatives of the World Bank, Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka and SAIM, a non state Higher Education Institution. (Annexure1) The Committee also had the benefit of interactions with senior academics such as former Vice Chancellors who were instrumental in developing the Protocols of QAAC and also continues serving as Consultants.

The Peer Review Committee examined the functioning of the QAAC in the context of globally accepted frameworks such as INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice in Quality Assurance, the CHIBA Principles and Membership Criteria (APQN). The committee viewed the entire exercise as a developmental process for a young accreditation agency faced with the challenges of frequent changes in the government policy of QA and the internal political strifes which have taken its toll on the higher education system in the country.

The following report is organised around the APQN criteria for membership.

CRITERIA 1 - NATURE OF THE OPERATIONS OF THE AGENCY

The agency is responsible for reviews at institutional or programme level of post-secondary education institutions or post-secondary quality assurance agencies.

The QAAC has a legal status which ensures that the Ministry of Higher Education and the UGC abide by the decisions taken and recommendations made by QAAC on the findings of reviews and observations. As envisaged in the Sri Lankan Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council for Higher Education Act of 2007, the QAAC is managed by a Governing Board comprising of seven members appointed by Minister in-charge of the subject of higher education. The Board has representatives from the Ministry, UGC, professional bodies and private higher education institutions. The QAAC conducts Institutional Review, Subject/ Department Review and Library reviews. These are conducted in consonance with the philosophy that quality assurance precedes accreditation and it is important to create a climate conducive to external evaluation in order to ensure the success of the process

Peer committee observations are based on the important pointers, viz., (i) the legislative status of the QAAC and (ii) the policy / strategy of QAAC.

The evolution of the QAAC structure from the initial unit under the CVCD and the UGC, to the grant of recognition as a Department under the UGC and finally to the official creation of the QAAC under the Sri Lankan QAAC for Higher Education Act 2007 is a commendable step.

However, it will further enhance the image of the QAAC as a very competent institution if the organizational structure is realigned to reflect its latest development trends as an organisation. As a consequence of the very fast pace of development, in the organizational structure, in the self evaluation for Peer review of QA agencies, it does not fully reflect the bodies, such as the Governing Board and the Committees that may be appointed by the Board or provided in the QAAC Higher

Education Act of 2007. It is recommended that this be thoroughly considered in the future plans for the QAAC.

The efforts of EQAA management to follow the step in aligning the functions of its organization to the pursuit of its defined institution are a very wise management stroke. Furthermore, the QAAC still covers functions it has been performing as defined in 2007 which are mandated also in Section 25 Act of the Universities. It will redound to further improvement of already good performance of the QAAC if the following will be considered in defining the functions of the Council.

- review the function as defined under the two statutes mentioned above and adopt only one consolidated set of functions and
- re-evaluate the functions and promoting only those that are relevant to, and done by the QAAC as an agency promoting quality assurance

CRITERIA 2 - MISSION STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES

The agency has formulated a mission statement and objectives which are consistent with the nature of the agency.

The QAAC has a clearly articulated vision and mission statement which aims to ensure continuous development of the quality of Sri Lankan higher education institutions. The statement explicitly mentions the ambition of “achieving excellence in higher education through quality assurance.

Peer committee observations are based on the important pointers, viz., (i) Written mission statement and set of objectives, (ii) Vision statement and (iii) Management or long term strategic plan.

The QAAC has derived its Vision and Mission statements from the Cabinet paper which detailed the Act to provide for the establishment of the Council in 2007. The Council has hitherto endeavoured to translate these into action. There is evidence that the QAAC is adopting a systematic approach towards the achievement of its mission and vision. A major initiative undertaken in this direction is the successful implementation of a national QA policy for public universities. The QAAC takes great efforts in developing awareness, sharing experience and good practice particularly in regional forums such as the Asia Pacific Region. The contributions of QAAC in the establishment of Internal Quality unit and the constant interaction

with them has created an academic vibrance, as reported and evidenced during the site visits

CRITERIA 3 - AGENCY STAFF (NUMBERS, PROFILE, ROLES)

The profile of the staff is consistent with the Mission Statement.

Even while noting a very competent and highly dedicated staff, headed by an Acting Director, the staff structure is very lean. The other group of very qualified Consultants and Reviewers whose expert services are engaged on adhoc on project basis in a World Bank funded project run .by the QAAC.

Peer committee observations are based on important pointer, i.e., Human resources profile (e.g. numbers and qualifications of decision-making body, and staff). The QAAC may undertake staffing needs assessments to ascertain future requirements commensurate with the work load

CRITERIA 4 - PROFILE OF REVIEWERS

The profile of the reviewers is consistent with the Mission Statement.

The QAAC recognizes that the success of its operations is dependent on a coherent resource pool of reviewers. The Council has with great care identified external reviewers who have outstanding academic credentials and undoubted integrity. Reviewers are drawn from various disciplines through nominations invited from Vice Chancellors and the QAAC ensures that they receive training. The profiles of the reviewers are available on the website of QAAC and care is also taken to ensure that they have to ensure that they have no conflict of interest with the reviews being undertaken. The Committee appreciates the efforts of the QAAC, in identifying and training more than 600 reviewers encompassing a wide range of subjects.

Peer committee observations are based on the following important pointers, viz., (i) Qualification of reviewers, (ii) External reviewers have no conflicts of interest and (iii) External reviewers receive necessary training QAAC organizes a series of training workshops and seminars for reviewers to ensure the effective and efficient assessment and monitoring of education quality. However, the recruitment process may be more clearly defined and viable strategies on capacity building for reviewers be articulated in the strategic plan. The present arrangements seem to be working well with the proactive and well networked relationship of the academic community

which the present Director enjoys, but systemic arrangements for the future regarding qualifications of Reviewers, Selection process and their continuous Capacity building needs to be integrated into the overall framework. The QAAC may also consider involving representatives from the professional bodies and industries on the Review Committees, in order to ascertain if employability attributes are taken cognizance of.

CRITERIA 5 - INDEPENDENCE

The judgments and recommendations of the agency's reports cannot be changed by third parties.

A critical characteristic of an independent accrediting agency is the freedom for evaluators to make an objective report and ensure its transmission to the institution concerned. The QAAC is hitherto reportedly free from any external interference and interactions both with the QAAC and stakeholders such as Vice Chancellors of Universities and reviewers corroborated this finding. The Organizational structure and functions of the Council which are detailed in the Act provides for adequate scope of independence of the QAAC. All reports and decisions are approved by the Governing Board which has all vice chancellors as members. Interaction with the stake holders revealed a general sense of satisfaction with the QAAC reports.

Peer committee observations are based on the important pointer of 1) freedom in reporting. It must be mentioned that while the QAAC seeks the institutions comments on the Review report, there is no well defined Appeals Mechanism in place. The Council could now consider detailing the Appeals Process to be made available to institutions after the on site visit is over and results are declared. As the activities of the Council graduate from Review to Accreditation this will be an essential feature.

CRITERIA 6 - RESOURCES

The agency has sufficient resources to run its operations in accordance with its mission statement and objectives.

Classical management principles identify the '3 Ms' of Management, men, money and materials and the QAAC has appropriately complied with this requirement as defined under the heading of financial resources, , learning and teaching resources and human resources.

If the question is asked: Does the QAAC possess adequate resources to enable it to perform its functions efficiently and effectively, the answer is a resounding 'yes' with the caveat "under present conditions."

The present status of the resources may be reviewed.

a) Financial Resources

The QAAC claims that financial resources have been "sufficient and readily available" under World Bank funding. With the renewal of the World Bank project, funding is guaranteed till the next five years. Further strengthening the funding of QAAC projects is the share contributed by reviewed institutions in the cost of some activities during reviews.

b) Learning as a Teaching Resource. (Particularly, these resources should refer to those belonging to the QAAC required in the performance of its functions as rightfully identified in Annex V of the Self Evaluation Report of the QAAC and not the resources of its clientele). The QAAC holds the necessary and technologically advanced resources for carrying its functions.

The resources are adequate, as analysed above to take care of the current requirements. However, in order to make the gains of quality assurance, this must be sustained after the World Bank project terminates.

Peer committee observations are based on the important pointers, viz., (i) Budget, (ii) Financial statements, (iii) Activities, tasks, workloads and (iv) Fee structure. The Peer Committee thus makes the following recommendations for consideration,

- a. Calculate the annual budget of the QAAC, and identify sources of funding such as government appropriations, contribution of institutions in the cost of Reviews and training of reviewers etc. The government has to gradually provide appropriations for the QAAC until it fully takes over the responsibility of funding the service function of quality assurance.
- b. Adopt an institution - building program for the QAAC and include it as one of the major projects in the long range strategic plan. This will include perusal of the technical and administrative support requirements of the very lean administrative staff and to perform some of its functions presently assumed by consultants.

CRITERIA 7 - EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE CRITERIA AND PROCESSES

The description of the processes and criteria applied should be transparent and publicly available and normally include: self evaluation, site visit, public report and follow-up measure.

Quality assurance is seen as a key factor in promoting and safeguarding the public confidence in higher education, and further improving the health, wealth, and wellbeing of the country and the national economy.

Quality assurance process in Sri Lanka is found to be participatory and friendly, and the process actively engages relevant stakeholders, especially HEIs. The quality and quality assurance in Sri Lanka are also found to be primarily the responsibility of the higher education institutions, and the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) of Sri Lanka functions as the External Quality Assurance Agency.

QAAC initiates and facilitates the development of all quality standards, indicators and benchmarks, mobilizes the participation and ensures the active engagement of all stakeholders in the quality assurance process, including development of quality standards, capacity building of reviewers, and site visits for review purposes. QAAC undertakes its mandated functions as stipulated in Cabinet Paper 2007 of Sri Lanka are as follows:

- a. To determine the minimum standards of higher education including standards relating to courses of study, examinations, equipment and other facilities and nature of training in higher educational institutions, which conduct courses of study for the purpose of granting degrees, diplomas and other academic distinctions.
- b. To prescribe by rules the minimum standard of courses of study and degree programs.
- c. To assess and monitor the educational quality and standards of all the higher educational institutions;
- d. To evaluate the quality and or grade of all the higher educational institutions from time to time;
- e. To recommend to the Ministry of Higher Education and the University Grants Commission (UGC) the institutions which have reached the standard for accreditation;
- f. To make such recommendations on institutions reaching the required standard available to all relevant authorities and the public;

- g. To evaluate foreign degrees, diplomas and other academic distinctions for the purpose of recognition by the Ministry of Higher Education and;
- h. To exercise all such other powers and perform all such other duties and functions as the Ministry of Higher Education and the UGC may prescribe by rules from time to time.

Standards

Stipulated in the abovementioned function (a), QAAC is “to determine the minimum standards of higher education including standards relating to courses of study, examinations, equipment and other facilities and nature of training in higher education institutions.....” In response to this, a series of policy manuals on standards and benchmarks for the purposes of quality reviews have been developed, in close consultation with and active engagement of all stakeholders, especially reviewers, representatives of HEIs and of government agencies concerned. With this participatory process, the ownership of the standards and benchmarks is sensed by HEIs and reviewers. The standards for the review purposes can be classified into three different folds namely: 1) Institutional Review (IR); 2) Subject Review (SR); and 3) Library Review (LR).

In order to have the standards for the quality reviews, concerted efforts have been made by all stakeholders under clear guidance and facilitation of QAAC. The process in developing the standards has involved various groups of experts including Vice-Chandlers, academic staff and quality reviewers from Sri Lanka universities through a series of national consultative and training workshops, awareness and orientation seminars and finalization meetings at both national and institutional levels.

Institutional Review (IR)

IR aims to achieve the accountability for quality and standards by using peer review process, sharing good practices and facilitating continuous improvement. The recommendations of the IR can be used by HEIs as a roadmap to maintain and enhance the academic quality of education over time. Its focus is placed on the powers and responsibilities held by HEIs for achieving the aim.

The process of IR is concerned with how HEIs assure themselves and the wider public, that the quality and standards it sets for its quality enhancement are being

achieved. The IR is also used to determine a threshold measurement for an institution's capacity to set standards and maintain quality in a diverse system and this will contribute to the promotion of, within the HEIs, but not limited to promoting public confidence, accountability and systematic and transparent information. The IR focuses on key aspects as below:

- University Goals and Corporate Planning
- Financial Resources and Management
- Research
- Quality Management and Administration
- Quality Assurance
- Learning Resources and Student Support
- External Degree Programs
- University/Industry/Community/Other Extension Activities

It is observed and valued by HEIs that this process is quite new to Sri Lanka context, but has built a culture of quality improvement and engagement of academics in quality assurance process.

Subject Review

Subject Review (SR) evaluates the quality of education within a department of study and this exercise focuses on the quality of the student learning experience and on student achievement. SR is designed to evaluate the quality of both undergraduate and taught postgraduate programs.

- Curriculum Design, Contents, and Review
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment Methods
- Quality of Students including student progression and achievements
- Extent and Use of Student Feedback
- Postgraduate Studies
- Peer Observation
- Skills Development
- Academic Guidance and Counseling

Library Review

Library plays a crucial role in enabling individual learners or researchers or other users to obtain spiritual, inspirational, and recreational activity through reading. Library can be seen as an extension of knowledge, skills and competence of its users.

The QAA Council of Sri Lanka introduced the Library Review in 2007, which aims to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of its services and identifies the areas of strengths and concerns for improvement.

- Vision, Mission & Objectives
- Management
- Resources
- Services
- Integration
- Contribution to Academic Outputs
- Networking
- Evaluation

Peer committee observations on the above criteria are that the review process in its initial stages is institution friendly and has initiated universities in to looking at Standards and Benchmarks. Subject/programme Reviews and Composite reports have created a positive impact with universities focusing on incremental changes in curriculum reform, examinations and research.

CRITERIA 8 - QUALITY ASSURANCE

The agency has quality assurance measures in place and is subject to occasional review

A mature Quality Assurance Agency, over a period of time recognizes that it is essential to lay down a policy for its own review as a part of the growth process. Since the QAAC has so far been focusing on bringing about an attitudinal change among the higher education institutions and creating a culture of acceptance, this aspect may not have been formally addressed.

Peer committee observations are based on the important pointers, viz., (i) Self reviews, (ii) Internal feedback (e.g. by staff supervisors or decision-making body) and (iii) Quality assurance policy/system/activities/plan. The QAAC publishes a quarterly Newsletter and an Annual Report which is a reflection of its activities and also a roadmap of its future plans. The QAAC is yet to clearly define an internal review policy of its processes as all its operations are in the introductory phase and very soon the organisation is expected to undergo a transformation with the introduction of a new Bill by the Ministry of Education. However, the Committee

commends the QAAC for volunteering to undergo an external review by the APQN and putting in all efforts to bring different stakeholders of the process together for obtaining a realistic status of its functioning.

COMMENDATIONS

- The advocacy for quality awareness taken up by the Council, almost single handedly is an invaluable contribution to the QA movement in Sri Lanka.
- Training of a large number of Assessors from the University system, more than 600 and involving the in the QAAC activities for Development of Benchmarks and Preparation of Publications has created a strong sense of ownership of the process.
- The Review process has triggered initiatives such as collecting Student feedback and introducing Peer Review in Universities thus leading to an academic revival in Higher education institutions.
- The effort at collaborating with the National Science Foundation to prepare an Action paper on Research is an acknowledgement of the external recognition of the Agency.
- The efforts at introducing a Web based monitoring mechanism is appreciable as the portal would be interactive.
- The interaction of QAAC with officials concerned with the Development of the Sri Lankan Qualification Framework and assisting in its implementation is a positive attempt at synergising the efforts of education reforms at the national level.
- The introduction and measures towards institutionalisation of the Internal Quality Assurance Units is noteworthy as it emphasises the principle that QA is a continuous process and best when driven internally by institutions.
- The research and publications of QAAC are highly appreciated as a number of Consultants, Reviews and postgraduate students have help in producing very useful literature on quality.
- Staff Development programs introduced by IQA's have mobilized the teaching faculty to be aware of latest academic trends.
- The active role played by QAAC in the APQN and INQAAHE networks is testimony to its keenness in learning and sharing quality practices and putting its higher education institutions on the global scene.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The QAAC in its proposed new structure may be accorded both functional and financial autonomy, true to the spirit of the process, while retaining its umbilical relationship with UGC and Ministry of Higher Education.
- The staffing of QAAC may be strengthened considerably with a full- time Director and some permanent staff in order to handle its various operations on a cyclical basis.
- Feedback on Reviewers may be systematically collected from the institutions and fellow peers in order to have a database which is credible and strong
- Good practices of IQUA may be made available on the QAAC website to be shared with other universities and networks.
- QAAC may consider having an international expert from the region to bring a varied perspective to review the exercise.
- Strengthening the Reviewer selection and training process will add to the rigour of the process.
- The Reviews may provide for more involvement of Administrative and non teaching staff in the process as their contributions is critical to the success of creating a quality culture.
- QAAC while moving into the second cycle of Reviews may also consider launching the Accreditation process on a voluntary basis.
- Sustaining the activities of QAAC, through a budget provision by the Ministry of Education/ UGC is imminent from a long term perspective. The annual budget of the QAAC may be calculated and sources of funding such as government appropriations, contribution of institutions in the cost of Reviews and training of reviewers identified. The government has to gradually provide appropriations for the QAAC until it fully takes over the responsibility of funding the service function of quality assurance.
- Expansion of the Council's activities to cover External Degrees, Post Graduate programs and Non State Higher education Institutions will require more academic inputs comparison of practices within the Region

To summarize the Peer Committee is convinced that the QAAC over the past few years has been an agent of change in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. In addition to overcoming resistance and creating a receptive quality culture it has also motivated the academics into a healthy competition to improve academic standards.

The QAAC in its Review phase (QA stage) is largely in consonance with the APQN Membership Framework.

The Committee would like to place on record its deep appreciation for the efforts put in by the QAAC particularly the Acting Director and the Management Assistant. In producing a comprehensive Self Evaluation Report, arranging the site visits, making available the documents and the warm hospitality accorded to the Committee during its visit. The Committee also thanks the President APQN for entrusting this new activity to the team.

I agree with the observations of the Peer Review Committee as mentioned in this report.

Signature of the Head of the QAAC

Place

Date

Seal of the Institution

Signatures of the Peer Review Committee

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2. Dr. Manuel Corpus (Member)
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