Quality Assurance and Accreditation Issues in Nepalese Higher Education

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Abstract

The issue of quality assurance has become the focus of many institutions to enhance quality of Higher Education (HE). There are six universities to provide higher education in Nepal. Tribhuvan University (TU) is the oldest and largest university which covers major stake near about 93 percent in Nepalese higher education system. With the aim of examining the practices of quality assurance (QA) in TU, this study has been conducted by selecting the faculty members and other staffs of the faculties of management, education and humanities & social sciences as its respondents. The internal and ordinal scale data were analysed by using descriptive statistics and chi-square test with the help of SPSS 13.0 and Microsoft Excel. Additionally, reliability of the responses on interval-scaled questions was test by calculating Cronbach's Alpha and an analysis was also made for subjective or open-ended questions.

It is found that faculties play prominent role in assuring the academic quality has the highest average value and strict affiliation criteria set by the university influence positively in the quality performance of an institution has the lowest average value. Average value of the responses regarding factor determining is the highest on well trained and experienced resource persons. Therefore, well trained and experienced resource person is the main factor to determine quality assurance in higher education. It is found that improvement on curriculum, faculty development, establishing reward system, discouraging political pressure and providing strict rules and regulations assure the quality in higher education of TU.

Key Words: Quality, Quality Issue of Higher Education, Quality Management, Higher Education and Benchmarking Criteria

Introduction

In Nepal, studentsare getting admission in higher education after completing 12 years of schooling. During these 12 years, the first national-level school-leaving certificate (SLC) examination is conducted at the end of 10th grade, qualifying a student for entry into the higher secondary stage, consisting of 11th and 12th grades. The Higher Secondary Education Board (HSEB) supervises all the higher secondary schools, which are mostly under private management (Nepal, 2006). Previously, the higher secondary stage was overseen by the university system, which awarded a proficiency certificate on the basis of an examination conducted at the end of 12th grade. Some universities still offer these programs. However, the policy now is to integrate 11th and 12th grades into the school system. Higher education consists of bachelor, master and doctoral levels. The language of instruction in most universities is English.

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The higher education system in Nepal is less than 90 years old. Tri-Chandra College, the first higher education institution, was established in 1918. Before establishment of this college, higher education in Nepal was non-existent. In the beginning, only some privileged families and members of the higher castes and wealthier economic strata had access to college education. Some parents of high-caste elite families sent their children to universities in India, such as Patna University and Banaras Hindu University, for a higher academic or technical education. Before the 1950-1951 revolution, Nepal had only two colleges, one school for teacher education and one special technical school. At the higher education level, there was only one doctoral degree-granting institution, Tribhuvan University at Kathmandu, which was chartered in 1959(Wagle, M.P. and Lamichhane, S., 2006). In the early 1960s, TU registered a fewstudents. While most students were at proficiency certificate level, a small number undertook bachelor level studies in a few disciplines of social and natural sciences. However, TU was not able to offer bachelor level programs in technical subjects, excluding agriculture, until 1975. TU has now grown into a complex school of higher education institutions and offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in many professional and technical areas, the social sciences, and business management (Lohani, 2001). This university enrols more than 90 percent of the students who go on to higher learning in the country.

In the early 1980s, the government developed the concept of a multi-university system for the country. The most important characteristic behind this concept was that each new university should have a distinctive nature, content, and function of its own. The first new university established under the multi-university system was Mahendra Sanskrit (Presently Nepal Sanskrit) University. Soon it was followed by Kathmandu University, which is in the semi-private sector. At present, Nepal has six universities: Tribhuvan University, Nepal Sanskrit University, Pokhara University, Purbanchal University, Kathmandu University and LumbiniBouddha University.

In recent years the numbers of colleges near about 750, has grown significantly. Most of them occupy private as well as community. Present policies are aimed at facilitating private-sector participation in higher education to help meet the increasing demand and relieve pressure on the government exchequer for financing public education. There is, however, a public discontent about commercialization and the higher cost of private education. Allaying this discontent will require a strong and well-designed mechanism for monitoring private colleges and overseeing their fees.

Quality and quality assurance clearly have become key issues for higher education in the 1990s throughout the world (Kells, H.R. and Van Vught, F.A., 1988). They may even prove to be the key issues for higher education systems and institutions are concerned about quality and how to put in place appropriate quality assurance mechanisms. Governments are concerned about the huge costs of providing credible academic and professionals' awards, while rapid increases in enrolments and often falling support per student unit raise doubts about whether quality is being maintained.

Quality issues dominate the higher education debate in many countries, as ministers, bureaucrats, employers and business interests become increasingly concerned about the outputs of higher education institutions and the suitability of graduates to meet the needs of employers. Many people question whether their societies are getting real value for their massive investment in higher education and urge the adoption by governments of mechanisms to achieve more control over the work that higher education institutions do. Quality and accountability thus have become key elements in the efforts of many countries to become and remain internationally competitive in a world where interdependence in trade is rapidly growing. Apart from this, there is more emphasis on quality associated with increased mobility of professional and skilled labour and the greater needs for recognition of qualifications obtained by workers from institutions in different countries. As Craft (1994) points out: 'globalization' and international migration mean that academic and professional qualifications need to be 'portable' across national borders, and so both institutions and nation states are keen to learn more about each other's procedures tertiary education provision(Craft, 1994).

The term quality has different meanings and has been variously defined as excellence (Peters, T.J. and Waterman, R.H., 1982), value (Feigenbaum, 1951), fitness for use (Juran, 1988), conformance to specifications (Gilmore, 1974), conformance to requirement (Crosby, 1979), defect avoidance (Crosby, 1979), meeting and/or exceeding customers' expectations (Parasuraman, 1985). Education quality is a multi-dimensional concept and cannot be easily accessed by only one indicator. Furthermore, the expectations of different constituencies on education may be very different, if not contradictory. It is often difficult for an education institution to meet all the expectations or needs at the same time. So, it is not rare that the education quality in an education institution is high to the perceptions of some constituencies but not others, or that some aspects of an education institution may be of high quality but other aspects may be of low quality (Hughes, 1988).

Every educational institution may have its own criteria of education quality and may try to achieve all of them. Because of the limited time boundary and environmental constraints, it is often difficult to achieve all these quality criteria with limited resources. The Indonesian government has kept abreast of development around the world in the quality debate. It has therefore announced that the crossroads to achieve the forecasting target with better performance is quality. At least two tertiary institutions in the country have also gained ISO 9000 series (Idrus, 1999).

In the preamble to the Higher Education Act (Act no.101 of 1997) as enacted in South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) points out the desirability of pursuing excellence and realising the full potential of every student and functionary involved in higher education. Consequently, since 1997 quality assurance in higher education has been the main function of the Higher Education Quality Committee of the CHE.Act it is also incumbent on institutions of higher education in South Africa to ensure that internal and external quality assurance mechanisms are in place in such institutions (Bornman, 2004).

Borrowing the concept from total quality management (Tenner, 1992) and system, Cheng (1995) defined education quality as follows:

> Education quality is the character of the set of elements in the input, process, and output of the education system that provides services that completely satisfy both internal and external strategic constituencies by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations (Cheng, 1995).

Objectives

The main issues in the quality debate about for assuring the quality of higher education in many countries are the maintenance and improvement of levels of teaching, learning, research and scholarship, improvements in the quality and adaptability of graduates, how to define and measure quality, management approaches likely to improve outcomes from universities and colleges, the use of benchmarking and performance indicators, and how to convince stakeholders that institutions and systems are doing a competent job in ensuring quality outputs.

Therefore, this study specially focuses on examining the practices and implementation of quality assurance system in Nepalese Higher Education system. The specific objectives of the study are: to examine the roles of different propositions in quality assurance process in Nepalese higher education and to identify major factors influencing on quality assurance system in Nepalese higher education institutions.

Hypothesis of the case study

This study mainly aims to examine the practices of quality assurance system in Nepalese higher education, therefore, to test following propositions by using null hypotheses based on the practices and the views of different administrators and faculty members of TU.

1. Ho: all propositions of quality assurance in higher education are equally likely.
2. Ho: all the factors of determining quality assurance are equally likely with respect to quality assurance in higher education.

Limitations of the study

The major limitation of the study lies in its relatively small sample size and only TU. This was mainly attributed to the limited time and resources available for the study. Therefore, the findings of this case study should not be generalized across the entire Nepalese higher education system. This study is a cross-sectional study and thus fails to assess the changes in attitudes of respondents towards quality assurance over time.

Brief Discussion Analysis of the Study

Teaching faculties are considered as the key factor to assure quality in any education system. Likewise administrators have also high value in the quality assurance process. In order to evaluate the responses and attitudes of faculty members and administrators, these employees, about 100 questionnaires forms were distributed to the respondents, however, only 72 respondents successfully filled and returned the distributed questionnaire forms. The responses were ranked on the basis of five points Likert Scale. The categories and no. Of respondents are as follows:

Table 1 : Categories of Respondents

Categories	Total
Professors	3
Readers	11
Lecturers	51
Dean/Principal	4
Department Head	3
Total	72

The responses of teaching faculties and administrators of higher education representing different faculties under Tribhuvan University to the 9 propositions regarding the attitudes towards quality assurance in higher education.

Table 2: Propositions of Quality Assurance (QA)

S.N.	Propositions	Rank					
		1	2	3	4	5	Total Scores
ieiqas	Institution's efforts in implementing quality assurance system will have a positive influence on quality education in the long term.	1	4	24	124	150	303
aqepd	To assure quality education is a prime duty of educational managers.	1	6	60	32	200	299
eaab	Efficient administration can achieve better quality performance.	2	16	24	136	100	278
qico	Quality is influenced by the curricular objectives.	3	4	36	160	75	278
fppra	Faculties play prominent role in assuring the academic quality.	3	8	12	104	185	312
ssmb	Student selection on merit basis will have a positive influence on educational quality in the long term.	4	16	24	144	80	268
sacsu	Strict affiliation criteria set by the university influence positively in the quality performance of an institution.	2	16	90	112	20	240
sphaq	Stakeholders' participation helps to assure quality.	1	6	60	128	80	275
isdcns	Institution should develop certain norms and standards to assure the quality in education.	3	8	12	120	155	298
	Total						2551

Table 3 Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	
.953	9

The table 3 shows the value of responses on 9 propositions; reliability of responses was tested by calculating Cronbach's Alpha in the SPSS 13.0 program. It revealed the reliability statistics as 0.953 for which is fairly good. Generally, value of Cronbach's

Alpha is considered to be good if it is 0.7 or higher and the value of Alpha is higher than the lower limit of prescribed value the data are reliable for the further test.

Table 4: Calculation of Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents' View on Propositions of Quality Assurance

	ieiqas	aqepd	Eaab	qico	fppra	ssmb	sacsu	sphaq	isdcns
N Valid	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	60.60	59.80	55.60	55.60	62.40	53.60	48.00	55.00	59.60
Std. Deviation	70.899	81.824	58.896	65.362	80.295	58.350	49.457	53.141	72.251
Sum	303	299	278	278	312	268	240	275	298

From table 4, it is inferred that out of nine propositions, the maximum average figure is 62.4 of fppra and the minimum average value is 48 of sacsu. The average value of all variables is 43.2. Similarly, in the case of standard deviation, the highest value and the lowest value are 81.82 and 49.45 of aqepd and sacsu respectively.

Under 5% level of significance at 8 degree of freedom the tabulated value of Chi-Square is 15.507 but the calculated value is only 13.81 which is less than tabulated value. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted. The result indicates that all propositions are equally likely with respect to quality assurance in higher education.

Table 5: Analysis of Respondents' Responses regarding Various Factors determining QA in HE

SN	Factors influencing QA	Rank					
		1	2	3	4	5	Points Secured
1.	Well equipped classroom	20	24	12	2	10	68
2.	Well trained and experience resource persons	95	28	12	8	7	150
3.	Laboratories	20	8	12	2	4	46
4.	Library	10	4	12	10	5	41
5.	Hostel facilities	20	4		4	4	32
6.	Well fascinated modern building	15	4	3	6	4	32
7.	Admission of the students on merit basis	20	40	12	8	4	84
8.	Discipline of the students	10	40	12	8	8	78
9.	Job security of the teachers	20	12	6	20	4	62
10.	Sufficient budget	5	16	6	8	4	39
11.	Incentives to the teachers	5	12	12	8	8	45
12.	Attractive scholarship program	5	8	12	8	3	36
13.	Regular assessment	5	16	12	22	4	59
14.	Assignment, project work and other research activities	10	40	48	8	12	118
15.	Outstanding result of the students	20	8	12	8	3	51
16.	Changed behaviour of the students	35	8	24	6		73

| 17. | Market performance of the students | 5 | 16 | | 2 | 4 | 27 |
| | | | | | | | 1021 |

Table 6: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.75	17

Table 6 shows the values of responses on quality assurance factors; reliability of responses was tested by calculating Cronbach's Alpha in the SPSS 13.0 program. It revealed the reliability statistics as 0.75 for which is fairly good. Generally, value of Cronbach's Alpha is considered to be good if it is 0.7 or higher and the value of Alpha is higher than the lower limit of prescribed value the data are reliable for the further test.

While calculating mean value and Std. Deviation, it is referred that out of 17 factors, the maximum average figure is 30 of well trained and experienced resource person and the minimum average value is 5.4 of market performance of the students. The average value of all variables is 12.25. Similarly, in the case of standard deviation; the highest value and the lowest value are 37.3 and 6.23 of well trained and experienced resource person and market performance of the students respectively.

Finally, it is found that the following listed five factors are the first five prime factors to determine quality assurance out of 17 factors.

Table 7 : Prime Factors Determining Quality Assurance

SN	Prime Factors	Sum	Average	Standard Deviation
1	Well trained and experienced resource person	150.0	30.0	37.30281
2	Assignment, project work and other research activities	118.0	23.6	18.88915
3	Admission of the students on merit basis	84.0	16.8	14.25482
4	Discipline of the students	78.0	15.6	13.74045
5	Changed behaviour of the students	73.0	14.6	14.44991

Table 8 : Test Statistics

	Value	df
Pearson Chi-Square	273.56	16

Under 5% level of significance at 16 degree of freedom, the tabulated value is 26.296 but the calculated value is 273.56 which is highly greater than tabulated value therefore null hypothesis is rejected. It can be said that all the factors determining quality assurance are not equally likely with respect to quality assurance in higher education.

In the context of subjective respondents, three questions are asked with one option and multiple choices related with existing system of quality assurance, difficulties faced while applying quality assurance system and yes/no question asking whether quality assurance

practices increase the overall performances on institutions or colleges. Moreover, one open-ended question was asked to address their views.

Table 9: Existing System of Quality Assurance in Tribhuvan University

QA Systems	No. Of Responses
Accreditation	37
Assessment	28
Auditing	5
Combination of above or other	2
Total	72

It is inferred that there is not a single method of quality assurance in TU. However, 51% responded that TU has been following accreditation system of quality assurance in existing situation.

Table 10: The major difficulties in applying QA

Causes of difficulty	No. Of Responses
Rapidly increasing no. of institutions	12
Substantial increase in the no. of faculties	9
Emergence of different kinds of institutions	21
Internationalization of higher education	30
Total	72

By analyzing the responses from table no. 10, it is found that 41% respondents think the internationalization of higher education has caused to make difficulty in the application of quality assurance in higher education. Likewise, 29%, 17% and 13% respondents think emergence of different kinds of institutions, rapidly increasing number of institutions and substantial increase in the number of faculties respectively to be the cause of making difficulty in the application of quality assurance.

Table 11: Quality assurance system

Responses performance of QA	No. of Responses
Yes	69
No	3
Total	72

By analyzing the responses from the table no. 11, shows that there are 96% respondents in favour of quality assurance practices increases the overall performances of any institution. Finally, there was an open ended question for the respondents on about mentioning some suggestions to improve the quality assurance system in Nepalese Higher Education. Most of the respondents focused on improving curriculum, faculty development, establishing reward system, discourage political pressure and implementing strict rules and regulation.

Findings

- Faculties play prominent role in assuring the academic quality.
- Affiliation criteria somehow weak to promote the quality in higher education in TU.
- Well trained and experienced resource persons are the pillar in the higher education to provide quality education in TU.

- Well trained and experienced resource person, assignment, project work and other research activities, admission of the students on the basis of merit, discipline of the students and changed behaviour of the students are the first five prime factors determining quality assurance in higher education.
- It is inferred that there is no single system of quality assurance in TU. However, according to 51% respondents, TU has been following accreditation system of quality assurance in existing situation.
- Internalization of higher education has caused mainly to make difficulty in the application of quality assurance in higher education.
- It is found that quality assurance practices increases the overall performances of any institutions.

Conclusion

Education has been accepted as the primary means of a country's all round development. TU is a pioneering autonomous institution of higher education in Nepal. As a leading university, TU has been offering about 2079 subjects in different program in higher education. However, it has a great challenge to assure quality to its all type stakeholders in the globalized world. Out of various stakeholders, faculty members and administrative staffs obviously play prominent role in the quality assurance process. Faculties play prominent role in assuring the academic quality because they are key factors in higher education. TU has not followed the single system of quality assurance but research activities, exposure visit of faculties, refresher training has been provided.

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