THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISM IN PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Quality Assurance (QA) mechanism in the Higher Education facilitates graduates to achieve necessary knowledge, skills and attitude. In Bangladesh, Higher Education has been experiencing phenomenal quantitative growth within the last few decades and facing significant challenges to achieve expected quality. However, despite being late, Bangladesh has undertaken QA initiatives which have completed its phase-1 run in 2018. This study was initiated to understand the role of QA mechanism in pedagogical aspects of Higher Education Institutions. From the predetermined standards, four aspects (curriculum, teaching-learning, assessment, and research) were defined as the pedagogical aspects in this study. Two different sets of questionnaires were used to collect data from faculty members and students at the Institute of Education & Research, Bangladesh. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data. Analyzed data unveils despite several strengths the institute requires attention to address emerged weaknesses in all four aspects. Such findings also indicate that QA mechanism can directly involve stakeholders to examine pedagogical practices and identify areas for improvement. Although this study involved only a subset of participants and generalization neither was the intention nor was in scope, findings have yielded several considerable implications to open up space for critical debate.

Keywords: Quality Assurance; Higher Education Institutions; Pedagogical Aspects

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) prepare graduates with necessary qualifications to contribute and shape national and international goals. Such preparation requires structured Quality Assurance (QA) mechanism to foster necessary knowledge, skills and attitude. Although QA has always been a consideration for the academic professionals, an increased concern is evident since early 1990s to adopt it as an integral part of HEIs. However, conceptualizing QA is often slippery because of its multi-dimensional and contextual character. In general, it can be viewed as a formal mechanism to implement, maintain and develop several predetermined academic standards. In Bangladesh, after the independence in 1971, the state was solely responsible to provide higher education through few public universities. The number of HEIs boosted three decades ago when the government established National University to affiliate colleges and parallelly started
approving private universities. Such quick expansion without sufficient preparation of infrastructure and resources caused numerous challenges including outdated curriculum, poor teaching learning, weak assessment method and reduced research fund among the others. Most importantly, the whole initiative progressed without any tangible QA practice. Indeed, QA cannot happen automatically or accidentally, rather identifying the best approaches by relooking at the current practices and mitigate challenges accordingly should be the priority. However, despite being late Bangladesh has become aware that traditional QA is no longer meaningful to prepare students for economic transformation and become a high-income country within 2041. Accordingly, NEP [1] emphasized on QA and suggested considering it for setting up a benchmark or a reference point for future quality assessment. Establishment of Quality Assurance Mechanism in 2015 was the first step to promote QA in 69 universities. It was realized that self-assessment of the departments/institutes is indispensable to get direction and improve academic standards.

Several standards were mentioned to address in the SAM [2] for QA activities that include Governance, Curriculum, Student Admission Progress and Achievements, Physical Facilities, Teaching-Learning, Assessment, Student Support Services, Staff and Facilities, Research and Extension, and Continuous Improvement. Among those, Centrex [3] urges to confirm pedagogical activities as the first step to convert HEIs into a quality learning organization. Therefore, four aspects (Curriculum, Teaching-Learning, Assessment, and Research) were defined as the ‘pedagogical aspects’ for the purpose of this study. University of Dhaka, the oldest and the most prestigious HEI in Bangladesh, has completed its phase-1 run in 2018 after sincere efforts of four years QA initiative. Yet empirical examination to understand the role QA mechanism on pedagogical aspects is not available. To fill this gap, the study was conducted with an aim to understand the role of QA mechanism in pedagogical aspects of University of Dhaka. Harman [4] model was used with some modification to address the aim of this study: (1) surveys of teachers and students; (2) analysis of statistical information in line with the performance indicators; (3) peer-review by a panel of experts; and (4) finalizing a report to understand the strengths and weaknesses.

METHOD

Study Context

The Institute of Education and Research (IER) was selected as the study context as this multi-disciplinary research-led institution has been making significant academic contributions in the educational field for the last six decades. Alike other professional degree offering HEIs, IER prepares students to be acquainted with modern teaching-learning and research to enhance their professional effectiveness and learning and to promote curricular initiatives. It offers undergraduate, post-graduate and doctoral programs to keep pace with the changing educational demands of the society and the
country. The aims of this institution are to (1) promote and to provide facilities for advanced study and research in education; (2) provide teaching, training and guidance to prepare candidates for the pedagogical demands of the society; (3) provide support for those who were already qualified to engage in educational work at primary, secondary and tertiary level; and (4) conduct research to inform the policymakers for further educational demands. Such uniqueness encouraged the researcher to select IER as the study context of this study.

Sample

Faculty members and students were believed more relevant on pedagogical aspects than other stakeholders and considered as the sample of the study. All faculty members i.e. 38 and a number of 236 students (out of 551) were purposively taken as sample for this study. First year students (total 111) were excluded from an assumption of inadequate understanding of the selected issues.

Instruments

Initially two different sets of questionnaires for teacher and students were obtained from the SAM [2]. The questionnaire, duly pre-tested, was finalized though a review workshop with the faculty members. However, the questionnaires were not identical, in terms of content and number of questions, though some parts were common. Participants were required to respond to a question by selecting: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Undecided, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree.

Data collection & analysis

The following sequence was followed for data collection (1) a three-member committee was formed from faculty members considering interest and experience; (2) the committee developed an activity schedule, oriented data collectors with the instruments and followed up the process; (3) the committee organized the data for analysis. The data was analyzed by using computer software SPSS. Such data was presented in tabular and graphical format. Simple descriptive statistics was used, like central tendency, mean etc. Analyzed data was formally shared with all the faculty members in a workshop for the final approval.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Students’ Opinion on Curriculum

Six items were used to understand students’ opinion on curriculum (Figure 1). The value ranges from 2.75 for to 4.10 for with an average of 3.22. The average score indicates that IER has addressed the aims and objectives in curriculum although the items (1) ‘curriculum is effective in enhancing activity-based learning’ (3.04), (2) ‘curriculum is effective in developing analytical and problem-solving skills’ (2.84), and (3) ‘curriculum is effective in developing ICT & communication skills’ (2.75) require immediate attention as these skills are fundamental to cope with contemporary global economy.

Teachers’ Opinion on Curriculum

Twelve indicators were used to understand teachers’ opinion on curriculum. The score presented in Figure 2 ranges from 2.62 for ‘curriculum was reviewed and updated regularly with stakeholder consultation’ to 4.77 for ‘curriculum consisted program structure’. The indicators with higher and lower than the average score (3.89) indicate the strengths and weaknesses of IER. Like students, teachers also agreed that aim and objectives are clearly stated in the curriculum (4.74), however, IER needs to review and update the curriculum on a regular basis in consultation with the stakeholders (2.62) to foster students’ analytical ability (3.31). Moreover, the score of ‘current curriculum is appropriate to develop students’ analytical ability and skills’ (3.31) affirms students’ opinion on this point.
Students’ Opinion on Teaching Learning

Students’ opinion on teaching-learning was examined through seven indicators (Figure 3). The result shows that the value varied from 2.78 for ‘teachers were available for consultation with students’ to 3.70 for ‘class size was optimum for students’ interaction and feedback’ with an average score of 3.20. Data indicates that low intake helps to maintain an optimum class size (3.70) which creates scope to apply interactive pedagogy (3.37) and connect ideas from real life (3.32). However, students opine that using technological devices might be useful to convert the pedagogical approaches to be more effective (3.19) and teachers should be more accessible for further consultation (2.78).
Teachers’ Opinion on Teaching Learning

Seven indicators were used to examine teachers’ opinion on teaching-learning (Figure 4). The scores range from 2.64 for ‘academics have had enough opportunity to participate in different training programs for development’ to 3.77 for ‘class size was good for better teaching’. The overall average (3.29) indicates the strengths and the weaknesses in teaching-learning activities of IER. Data indicates that teachers also agreed on the indicator ‘class size is good for better teaching-learning’ (3.77). Teachers are positive that classrooms are well-equipped with modern technological devices (3.33) to apply diverse pedagogical approaches. However, such view is not similar to the students’ judgment on that similar issue. The low scores of ‘workload in teaching and research is justified’ (2.90) and ‘enough opportunity to participate in different training programs’ (2.64) reveal teachers’ inadequate scope for essential professional development.

| Indicator                                                                 | Score |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Class size was good for for better teaching                               | 3.77  |
| Diverse teaching methods and techniques were adequate                     | 3.67  |
| Teachers conducted classes with adequate preparation                      | 3.36  |
| Classrooms were well-equipped with modern technological devices           | 3.33  |
| Co-curriculum activities were vailable to foster student development      | 3.33  |
| Overall average score                                                    | 3.29  |
| Teachers workload in teaching and research was justified                  | 2.90  |
| Academics have had enough opportunity to participate in different training programs | 2.64  |

Figure 4. Teachers’ Opinion on Teaching Learning

Students’ Opinion on Assessment

Students’ opinion on assessment was examined through five indicators (Figure 5). The result shows that the average value varied from 2.42 for ‘students were given feedback on each assessment’ to 3.29 for ‘examination process covered all course contents’ with an average of 2.8. Out of five indicators, only two indicators were found higher than the average score (2.87). Particularly, as data shows, students felt that learning is assessed fairly (2.8) and they do not get feedback after each assessment (2.42). However, overall scores on students’ opinion on assessment are lower than the other aspects like curriculum and teaching-learning. Such findings oblige to reconsider the current assessment criteria of IER and its actual practices.
Teachers’ Opinion on Assessment

Six indicators were used to examine teachers’ opinion on assessment (Figure 6). The scores range from 2.62 for ‘diverse methods and tools were used to assess students learning’ to 3.95 for ‘both summative and formative assessment strategies were followed’. The indicators with higher than the ‘overall average score’ (3.24) are considered as the strengths of the assessment strategy. Teachers stated that diverse methods are used for formative assessment, however, such a view is not similar to the students’ judgment. A low score on ‘quality of assessment is maintained’ (2.90) reveals teachers’ approval on issues need to be improved.
Students’ Opinion on Research

Five indicators were used to examine students’ opinion on research and extension (Figure 7). The range of average score varies from 2.67 for ‘use of research outputs (theses, monographs and publications) in current teaching’ to 3.26 for ‘institute has policies and programs on research and extension services’. The indicators with higher than the ‘overall average score’ (3.00) are considered as the strengths of research and extension. Students were positive that IER maintains a research policy (3.26) and involves in community services (3.15), however, they were less convinced regarding the use of research outputs in current teaching-learning (2.67).

Teachers’ Opinion on Research

Eight indicators were used to examine teachers’ opinion on research (Figure 8) the score ranges from 1.74 for ‘research findings patented and used for commercial purposes’ to 3.29 for ‘IER has a policy and a program on research and extension services’ with an average of (2.75). Data reveals that teachers were positive on the existing research policy (3.29), though compared to the students, teachers are less convinced regarding the community service of IER (2.82). Data further indicates teachers’ concern regarding the ‘adequate funds and facilities are provided’ (2.58), ‘research outputs are regularly published in reputed impact factor journal’ (2.50) and ‘research findings are patented and used for commercial purposes’ (1.74).
CONCLUSIONS

QA mechanism at the HEIs is a new phenomenon in Bangladesh, therefore, to be effective such initiative must be in line with the economic ability, tradition of universities, culture of the educational society and future need of the country. Indeed, modernization of HEIs is imperative as it has become “an intrusive reality of every national higher system and will remain an important regulation and steering tool for many governments” [5]. However, such modernization should be done by using positive experiences of other countries or by avoiding mistakes in similar contexts. At the same time QA should not deny institutional purposes and government policies. This study involved only a subset of teachers-students and generalization was neither the intention nor was in scope, though findings have yielded several considerable implications which can open up a space for further critical debate on recent QA activities. For example, this study reveals that despite several strengths IER is experiencing several significant weaknesses and requires immediate attention to make the future citizen compatible with the changing global context. Findings created significant practical implications by unveiling which standards should be commended or the areas to be improved. Such findings also reveal that QA mechanism in Bangladesh directly can involve stakeholders to examine the current pedagogical practices and identify areas for academic improvement. It has also created scope for teachers and students to develop knowledge, skills, experience and capacity to accomplish the assigned QA tasks. DU-authority can also develop own standards and benchmarks to make the present pedagogical system more dynamic, challenging and qualitative to meet the demand for 21st century’s human resources. Since Ministry of Education declared all academic programs must have to undergo for a self-assessment exercise at least once in every four-year, such implications would be useful to reach into a comprehensive understanding on QA through further empirical researches in different contexts.
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