

Quality Assurance and Internal Institutional Diversity at Higher Education Level: Bridging the Gap and Moving towards Quality Enhancement

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Institutional diversity is one of the most debated topics of policy and research in higher education. These debates emphasize an institution's diversity profile and its capacity to address diverse needs and the demands of society, which are associated with the development and expansion of higher education. Quality enhancement cells at higher education institutions are working efficiently toward ensuring and enhancing quality. Two major mechanisms include self-assessment and institutional performance evaluations, student demographics, faculty and programme profiles, institutional missions and internal organization encompass internal institutional diversity. This study aimed at exploring institutional diversity and developing a viable model for bridging the gap between quality assessment and quality enhancement. Semi-structured interviews from students, faculty and administrators of public sector universities in Islamabad revealed the magnitude of diversity. The suggested model recommends mutuality, inclusivity, multiplicity, reciprocity and flexibility by quality assurance processes to address internal institutional diversity in order to reach the ultimate target of quality enhancement.

Keywords: *quality assurance, internal institutional diversity, quality enhancement*

Introduction

Institutional differentiation or diversity is one of the most deliberated themes of strategy and investigation in higher education. Such deliberations emphasize institutional profile diversity and its aptitude to report assorted demands and needs of society which are generally linked with the development plus expansion of higher education. Institutional diversity is becoming a focal point for higher education policy-makers as these institutions have become the centre stage of public and political attention (Filippakou and Tapper, 2008). Higher expectations from stakeholders of higher education have become pivotal for addressing institutional diversity. The emergence of newer knowledge skills and competencies, new teaching-learning roles, widening access to

higher education, production of a greater pool of qualified faculty, efficient knowledge transference and on-going specialised expansion and educational developments have become increasingly imperative dimensions of higher education functions (Trow, 2005).

Quality enhancement cells at higher education institutions are working efficiently toward ensuring and enhancing quality. Two major mechanisms include self-assessment and institutional performance evaluation (Wiesner, 2017). Self-assessment is an all-inclusive procedure of looking reflectively at oneself in order to analyse aspects important to one's own identity. It serves as a motive towards self-evaluation and self-enhancement. Self-assessment initiative prompts people to seek information to confirm their uncertain self-concept rather

than their certain self-concept and at the same time, people use self-assessment to enhance the certainty of their own self-knowledge (Sedikides, 1993). Institutional recognition is both a process as well as a status. It ought to offer open authorization of a satisfactory minutest eminence in addition to incentive and opportunity for self-improvement in universities. It is implicit that a certain educational institution might be robust than others while perceiving flaws in a specific capacity may adversely disturb

the institution's status of recognition. Quality of academic programs, courses or graduates might also not be ensured through meeting institutional performance evaluation standards as well. These standards are mainly qualitative measures that weigh the institute's existing state of undertakings in terms of quality and its efficacy. Broad measures for measuring higher education institutes and creating self-assessment reports of educational agendas may include:

Institutional Performance Evaluation Standards	Criteria of Self-Assessment Reports
Mission and Goals Planning and Evaluation Organization and Governance Integrity Faculty Student support services Institutional Resources Curriculum & Academic Programs Transparency and Public Disclosure Assessment & Quality Assurance	Program Mission Objectives and Outcomes Curriculum Design and Organization Laboratory and Computer Facility Student Support and Guidance Faculty Process Control Institutional Facilities Institutional Support

Source: http://www.uaf.edu.pk/qec/downloads/SAR%20criterion%20_2_.pdf

Student demographics have diversified with the increase in participation rate in higher education. This diversification not only includes gender and qualification differences but ethnic, religious and social diversity as well. Students enrolled in higher education institutions bring with them diversified background including socio-economic variations. Hence, with an increase of diverse student clientele in higher education institutions, we need such programme orientations, pedagogical approaches and competent faculty that can address to the needs of such clients (Biggs, 2003; Christie and Stehlik, 2006). Institutional diversity includes differentiated institutional missions and varied emphases on teaching, research,

faculty development/continuing education, outreach and internalisation. To internalise is defined by the Oxford American Dictionary as to "make (attitudes or behaviour) part of one's nature by learning or unconscious assimilation: people learn gender stereotypes and internalize them." Through internalisation, individuals accept a set of norms and values that are established by other individuals, groups, or society as a whole. Kelman (2017) also theorizes that internalization is related to unconscious assimilation. So quality assurance systems have to take into account the institutional mission in a deeper sense in order to establish quality linkage between the process, product and the mission of the

respective organization (Blondal, Field and Girouard 2002). Governance, the functional orientation of different units, funding mechanisms and reward systems constitute the internal organization of a higher education institution. Diversity in these factors demands an all-around quality assurance procedure that addresses these factors strategically. Quality assurance has to assess the governance system of a higher education institution that should clearly define the roles and responsibilities of different tiers of that institution in decision making and policy development. The governance structure of a university must include an effective and autonomous governing body enabled to assure and strengthen institutional integrity and help in the process of fulfilling its multiple responsibilities for resource development and policy consistency in alignment with the institution's mission (Crosier, Purser, and Smidt 2007; DES , 2009). Higher Education Institutions are expected to illustrate those qualities within their working environments that they intend to impart to their students. These qualities may include justice, equity, truthfulness, and respect for human dignity and diversity. The faculty needs to be rewarded appropriately and equitably if they are striving to fulfil the institutional mission (Fraser, 2005).

Quality assurance criteria for self-assessment reports and institutional performance evaluation may affect internal institutional diversity as far as they may or may not take into consideration diverse clientele, diverse programmes, different institutional missions, aims and orientations. The uniqueness of institutions has to be

considered religiously while carrying out quality assurance procedures. After this discussion, it can be deduced that quality assurance may not be merely understood as specific evaluation and monitoring processes (such as data collection and analysis) but including all the relevant and diverse activities for defining, assuring, enhancing and maintaining the quality of a university from strategic planning to curriculum and staff development (Duff, Hegarty and Hussey,2000).

Rationale

Institutional diversity is becoming more focal to policymaking at higher education level as universities are moving towards central juncture of public as well as political attention, with the greater expectations that they must fulfil a wider range of needs and demands associated with the knowledge-based and skill-based societies. New roles, tasks and functions of higher education institutions have materialised that go beyond the simple function of research and teaching. Furthermore, widening access to higher education, producing a greater pool of qualified manpower, transferring knowledge to upcoming generations and constant specialized growth have become increasingly important dimensions of universities thus increasing the scope of quality assurance and enhancement for diverse learning and a knowledge-based environment (Huisman, Meek and Wood 2007). This study empirically explores the complex interplay and relationship of factors that drive diversity in higher education institutions and might affect the quality assurance processes. The driving factors of internal institutional diversity include

student demographics, faculty profile, programme profile, institutional mission and internal organization. These factors may conflict or reinforce each other and it becomes imperative to take a microscopic view of them as well in order to do justice to quality assurance processes. The complexity of these interrelated forces was derived from existing literature, its hypotheses or seemingly contradictory findings became a point of departure for the researcher.

Research Questions

This study aimed at addressing the following questions:

- i. What major elements of institutional diversity are related to student profile and faculty profile in higher education institutions of Islamabad?
- ii. How are major elements of institutional diversity related to institutional mission and internal organization in higher education institutions of Islamabad?
- iii. What can be a viable model of quality assurance to cater to internal institutional diversity in higher education institutions?

Material and Methods

The study was qualitative in nature with a grounded theory paradigm. Prior approval to conduct this research was taken from the Institution's research ethical committee. Data were collected through focus group discussions from 20 graduating students (10 male and 10 female), 20 faculty members (10 male and 10 female), and 10 administrators (5 male and 5 female) extracted through a purposive sampling technique from higher education institutions situated in Islamabad, Pakistan. Focus group

discussions were carried out after further dividing each group into mini-groups. Discussions were carried out for 90 minutes each with students, faculty members and administrator separately. These discussions were supervised by experienced moderators and recorded fully with the consent of the participants. Firstly, their opinions regarding institutional diversity were gathered and coded. Then, statements of respondents were converted into themes and finally, the themes were counted for result interpretation.

Results

Focus group discussions were carried out on three categories of respondents namely students, faculty members and administrators. Students discussed diversity dimensions of students in relation to ethnic, religious, social background, gender and qualification. Students' data suggested that previous academic qualification is the most influencing variable in creating diversity in student demographics. Most of the students stated, "*Previous academic qualification is a strong factor among students as it helps or mars the assessment process is carried out by quality enhancement cell. Those students who have a higher previous qualification are able to understand the assessment process fully. Whereas those having a lesser qualification do not perceive the importance of assessment for ensuring institutional quality*". Next was gender differences, which may create diversity in perceptions related to quality assurance processes. These results are in line with the studies done by Camino, Javier and Maria in 2014. In order to assist higher education institutions in planning to support teacher and course

evaluation processes carried out by students, quality enhancement cells should address educational diversity and gender diversity of students.

Twenty faculty members involved in the focus group discussion highlighted ethnic, religious and social backgrounds along with gender as lesser elements of faculty profile diversity. Whereas they viewed, “*academic and professional qualifications and functional emphasis are stronger elements catering to institutional diversity*”. Respondents stated, “*Faculty with higher qualifications and more experience are more open towards quality assurance processes. Those who are involved in research and collaborative projects view assessment as a tool for improvement and are positive towards quality enhancement practices*”. It can be deduced that academic and professional qualifications, as well as the functional emphasis of faculty, provide stronger parameters for diversity at the internal institutional level. Functional emphasis includes resources spent on continuing education, development and research. The more faculty is qualified and has a functional emphasis in the internal organization, the more efficient will be data obtained from them related to quality assurance. Christie and Stehlik (2006) have also suggested that faculty diversity has to be addressed in order to optimize quality assurance practices fruitfully in higher education institutions.

The institutional mission was the fourth theme of this research study and its sub-themes included emphasis on teaching, basic and applied research, professional

development, outreach and internalization. The institutional mission of higher education institutions focuses on basic/applied research, emphasize on teaching, professional development of their staff and outreach unanimously but internalization is a neglected factor related to institutional diversity. Quality assurance practices need to emphasize internalization as it is the demand of the day towards globalisation. This was stated by the administrators involved in this study. Administrators stated about an internal organization that, “*the reward system is the major factor contributing towards diversity in internal organization. Governance, functional orientation and funding mechanisms are almost at the same pattern in most of the universities. Reward system has to be addressed for maintaining quality at an internal level*”.

The framework drawn below takes into account the neglected microscopic lens for quality enhancement as discussed earlier in the form of institutional performance evaluation and self-assessment standards. Quality assurance leads to quality enhancement so the below-mentioned factors not only cater to internal institutional diversity but may also become mediators of the study if not properly addressed.

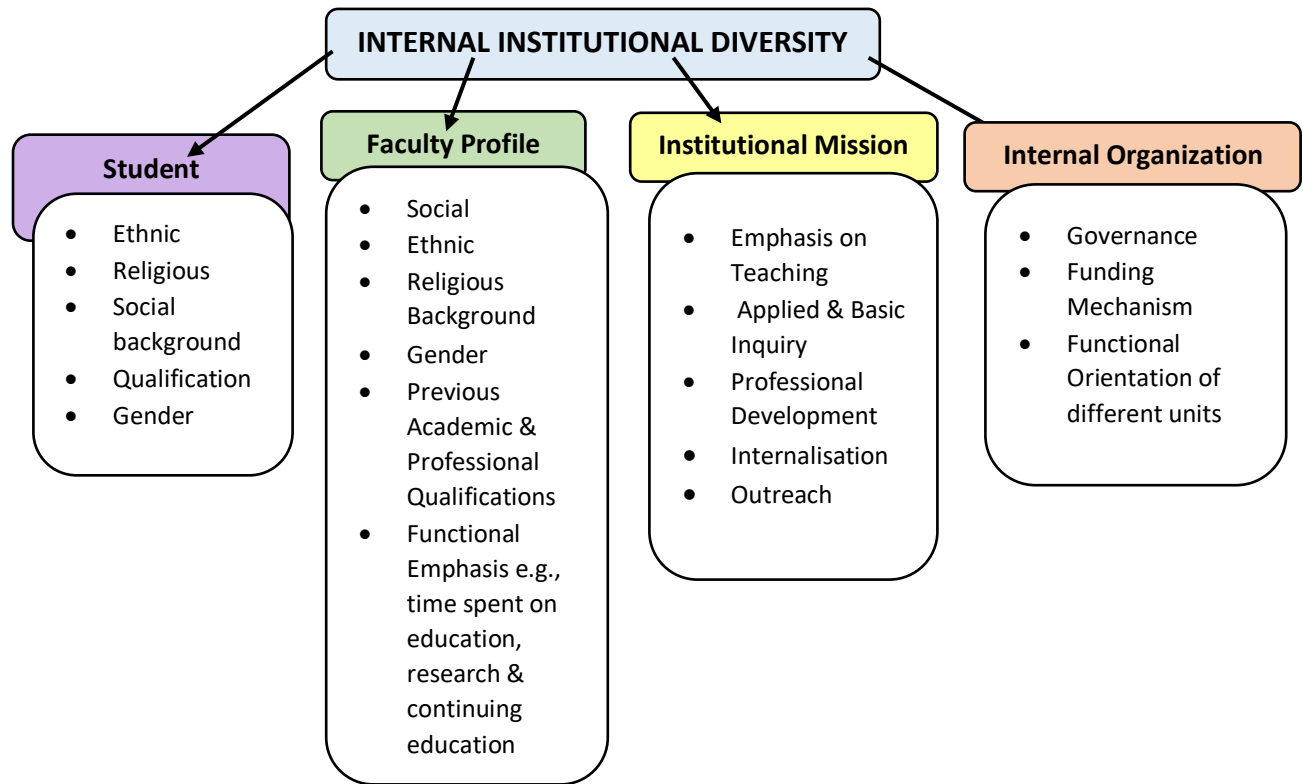


Table 2: Factors determining Internal Institutional Diversity

Discussion

The prime obligation of quality assurance lies with the higher education institutions themselves. In the public sector, inside institutional diversity is primarily connected with the diversity in the previous academic background of students, functional emphasis of faculty, diverse disciplines, internalization and reward system. Other factors pertaining to student, faculty and programme profile, institutional mission and internal organization are not very high on the agenda.

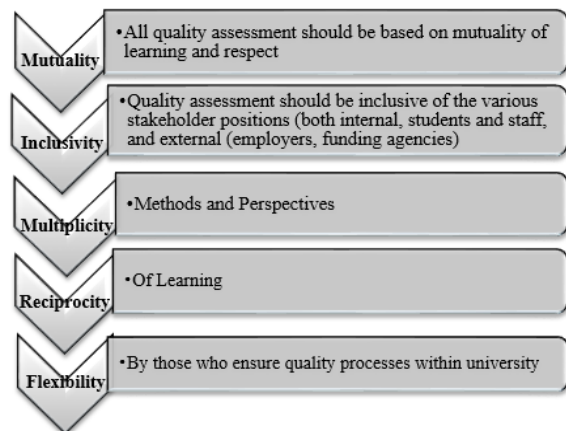
Students may be sensitized about quality assurance processes through seminars. The major diversity factors (i.e. gender and academic qualification) may not be ignored while obtaining evaluations. Students with less academic qualifications

may not be able to understand the importance of the quality assurance process so awareness seminars may be a helpful solution for this. Student support services may include the specific provision of personal, academic and career guidance to enhance academic quality (Douglass, 2004).

Faculty serving in higher education institutions must be made aware of new global trends in the evaluation of the teaching-learning situation. If the faculty accepts the concept of emerging trends, they will try to focus on continuing education thus making work of quality assurance agencies easier. Quality in teaching is imperative to quality in learning.

Internationalisation of universities is increasingly important due to the strengthening of the global dimension of

quality enhancement processes. Internationalisation of a university becomes the prerequisite of its sustainability. Thus, quality assurance and the ensuing enhancement of the internationalisation process within a university should become an important component of the overall quality assurance (Hazelkorn, 2009).



Quality assurance agencies must supplement a controlled methodology towards inner appraisal keeping in view the comprehensive dimensions of institutional diversity. The key to developing sustainable quality is solidifying practices through demand-based drivers of quality rather than

compliance drivers. Demand drivers need to embed the quality process whereas compliance drivers can only initiate the journey towards quality.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Quality assurance processes need to address internal institutional diversity in order to reach the ultimate target of quality enhancement. Keeping in view the gaps observed through analysis a viable model for handling institutional diversity in an effective way is proposed and it is open for further empirical study. The models suggest: It is highly recommended that quality assurance be considered as a means to an end, but not the end in itself. Quality assurance paves a path towards quality enhancement and it requires training and development of faculty, students and educational administrators. This objective may be achieved through counselling, training and capacity building of all the stakeholders of higher education institutions.

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