Assessing Quality Assurance for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in Malaysia: Reflecting on its Policy and Processes

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of higher education systems and globalization have placed demands on effective mechanisms for professional recognition of higher education credentials. Despite differences in the size and stage of development of their higher education sectors, many governments have found traditional academic controls inadequate for facing today's challenges. Organizations such as the European Commission (OECD) have made calls for new structures and approaches to quality assurance. Malaysia also has embarked on new quality assurance initiatives such as the Malaysian Qualification Framework, implementation of ISO 9001 Standard in higher education institutions, and intensifying collaboration with professional bodies. At the heart of QA is the issue of the quality of teaching and learning. In the Code of Practice of Institutional Audit (COPIA) and Code of Practice of Programme Accreditation implemented by the Malaysia Qualification Agency, teaching and learning has received extensive attention. This paper reviews the current status of national policy and processes for QA in teaching and learning, the extent of policy implementation, the processes implemented including assessment practices, recent trends and areas of emerging consensus as well as issues likely to shape policy over the next decade, and finally offers recommendations for effecting improvement and change in teaching and learning.

Keywords: Assessing Quality Assurance, Higher Education in Malaysia, Quality Assurance Policy and Processes, Quality Assurance for Teaching and Learning.

1. Introduction

Throughout the world there has been a move to mass higher education, and cross border education involving greater diversity of programmes. This expansion of higher education has prompted the rise of a variety of modes of course delivery hence posing challenges for the efficacy of institutional quality controls. Traditionally, academia has largely been left independent; this largely is in the interests of freedom to provide the environment for scholarship in research and writing. But times are changing. The external pressures for change in universities and colleges are increasing. Public funds are being reduced in many systems, competition is up, students are becoming more forthright about getting value for money, government scrutiny is increasing and external quality audits are more common. Businesses are critical not only about the skills and knowledge of graduates but about how universities and colleges operate. They feel that faculty have an outmoded view of teaching that has failed to keep up with advancing understanding of effective teaching. What business leaders say is needed most is assessment of learning as a first step. This led to the development of a more uniform and systematic approach towards quality assurance in both private and public institutions of higher learning (HEIs). The resultant code of practice is a design which is hoped to promote public confidence in maintenance of quality of higher education

In Malaysia, in view of achieving the country's aspiration of being a centre of excellence for education, a fresh impetus and direction resulted, with emphasis on the private sector of the higher education industry including that of the transnational sector which expanded at a rapid pace since 2002. Currently there are 20 public universities, 24 polytechnics, 37 public community colleges, 33 private universities, 4 foreign university branch campuses and about 500 private colleges in Malaysia (National Higher Education Action Plan, 2007). In 2010there were 80,000 international students studying in the country. Many of these private HEIs have established twining arrangements with universities abroad and therefore use the curriculum and materials in the original programmes. Since the programmes are foreign based but offered locally in Malaysia, they need to undergo stringent quality assurance measures by the agencies from the home country. In addition, they have to undergo the validation and accreditation process.In carrying out the process a number of related problems such avision and mission statement is insufficiently translated as the strategic plan of the faculty, lack of clarity in stating objectives and performance measures, incoherence in the programmes offered as there in no

clear articulation of goalsor student learning outcomes,and the programmes not getting inputs from research done by the faculty as shown by many developed countries, and all these pointed to a lack of pedagogical skills among the faculty members (Sharifah Hapsah, 2009).

2. Quality Assurance Frameworks

Most countries recognise the importance of quality assurance for both their HEIs and their respective programmes. Consequently, many of these countries have enacted policies on HEI quality assurance and drawn clear frameworks for guidelines to be prepared and enforced. In Great Britain, the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA's)academic infrastructure consists of a series of documents covering the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), Subject Benchmarks, the Code of Practice, the use of Programme Specifications and Progress Files. While HEIs are not required to conform to every element, the infrastructure provides useful guidelines on what needs to be done to ensure that standards and the quality of the student learning experience are maintained and enhanced. Subject benchmark statements set out broad expectations about degree standards in specific subject areas. HEIs are responsible for setting their own curricula but these benchmark statements are used at subject level to inform course design, delivery and review. They describe what can be expected of a graduate in terms of broad subject coverage and the techniques and skills gained on completion of a degree. Programme specifications give information about the specific content of a programme of study (such as the curriculum structure, delivery methods and assessment), and what knowledge, understanding, skills and other attributes the student will develop. The code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards has ten sections and provides guidelines for institutions on good practice in management of academic standards and quality (sections cover for example, assessment, admissions and external examination). Basically the framework employed covers two parts, quality assurance of the respective HEIs and quality assurance of their programmes.

In Australia, since 1998 funded institutions have been required tosubmit an Institutional Quality Assurance and Improvement Plan to the Commonwealth as part of the educational profiles process. The plans outline the HEI's goals and aims in the key areas of teaching and learning, research, management and community service. Each HEI is required to provide details of the strategies adopted to achieve the goals and the success indicators. In recent years the Government funded the development of a benchmarking manual. The manual provides sixty-seven benchmarks that HEIs can use to assess themselves against similar HEIs. The benchmarks cover the spectrum of HEI activities from teaching and learning to research, finances, internal management and internationalisation. In offering programmes authorisation by law to award higher education qualifications across a range of fields and standards set for those qualifications to be equivalent to Australian and international standards; teaching and learning that engages with advanced knowledge and inquiry; a culture of sustained scholarship extending from that which informs inquiry and basic teaching and learning, to the creation of new knowledge through research, and original creative endeavour; commitment of teachers, researchers, course designers and assessors, and to free inquiry and the systematic advancement of knowledge.

Similar requirements were called for in many other HEIs throughout the world such as at the University of Missouri which moved through this phase and is now taking stock of the effectiveness of quality assurance measures and their impact on academic quality and productivity. In Europe quality assurance policies and procedures underpin the framework for all levels of European Qualifications. In teaching and learning, quality assurance should include regular evaluation of HEIs, and their programmes and subject to regular review of context, input, process and output dimensions, while emphasising outputs and learning outcomes. In the University of Auckland it was reported that major features of the quality system for teaching and learning in the long term planning were establishing procedures and practices both periodic and continuous quality assurance at Departmental, Faculty and University levels, review and assurance of the quality of teaching and learning, setting up of committees at various levels responsible for monitoring and suggesting improvement for teaching and learning. These are embodied in the policy of which some of the features are:

1. All undergraduate courses and teaching are evaluated by students at least once every three years. Postgraduate courses of a significant size (e.g., 10 students or more) are evaluated by students at least once every three years.

2. Each teaching unit maintains a rolling 3-year Student Evaluation Plan, updated annually, for the conduct of course and teaching evaluations.

3. Summative evaluations are conducted using standardised instruments and supplementary questions approved by Teaching and Learning Quality Committee.

4. Student evaluations of courses and teaching are conducted in a way that enables students to provide anonymous feedback.

5. The results of course and teaching evaluations commissioned under Student Evaluation Plans are processed centrally in a timely manner and made available to the relevant teaching staff, Academic Heads and Faculty Deans as appropriate.

6. Teaching and Learning Quality Committee and Deans of Faculties receive annually an aggregate report on evaluation results.

7. Students are informed of any changes to courses and teaching that are made as a result of prior evaluations.

In implementing the policy the following activities and mechanism were emplaced in the processes. Firstly, in the evaluations and reviews of course quality these procedures were adapted. Student evaluations (using the University Course Questionnaire); regular discussions and feedback sessions among contributing staff; processes of programme accreditation and departmental reviews and annual performance review of staff by Head of Department were employed. These were done through the following mechanisms: Evaluations of teaching staff by students and peer review – at least once every 3 years of which the results were reported to and monitored by the Head of Department, and the academics can commission student evaluations (formative and/or summative) more frequently for their own quality assurance and improvement purposes. The tools used to gather the relevant information are the University Lecturing Questionnaire, University Tutoring Questionnaire, and Annual Performance Review of Academic Staff. Similarly in Europe for teaching and learning specific criteria used to assess quality are: quality of curriculum design and content; quality of instruction and teaching; quality of faculty-student relationship; quality of learning facility and quality of infrastructure.

3. Strategic Approach to Quality

In enforcing quality the European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards. Specific guidelines were developed in order to maintain through effective quality assurance activities which ensure that programmes are well-designed, regularly monitored and periodically reviewed, thereby ensuring their continuing relevance and currency. The quality assurance of programmes and awards are expected to include: development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes; careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content; specific needs of different delivery modes (e.g., full time, part-time, distance-learning, e-

learning); availability of appropriate learning resources; formal programme approval procedures by a body other than that teaching the programme; monitoring of student progress and achievement; regular periodic reviews of programmes (including external panel members); regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations; and participation of students in quality assurance activities. Under student assessment, the standard set was that students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently. The outcomes of assessment have a profound effect on students' future careers. It is therefore important that assessment emphasised the learning outcomes.

The MQA is committed to the continuous enhancement of quality. Rather than establishing a separate quality and enhancement strategy, MQA has developed an overarching Teaching, Learning and research Strategy. Teaching, Learning and Research Strategy has been developed as a result of a wide consultative process. This Strategy is seen as the main driver for change and for systematic enhancement. Hence the policies in place seek to identify the minimum institution-wide requirements with which all departments and centres are expected to comply to a common framework to ensure consistency of standards and equivalence in the student experience and to assure a high quality education whilst enabling appropriate diversity in local practices.

Institution policies and procedures for developing and maintaining academic standards and for assessing and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities are determined through its deliberative structures. Departments are responsible for their implementation. Schools/ faculties/centres of Studies are expected to monitor and ensure that their constituent departments do this effectively. Schools report on the outcomes of this activity to institution -level committees in order to inform consideration of institution -wide issues or provision, to identify areas of good and effective practice which might be disseminated to other areas of the institution and to identify areas of potential weakness where there may be scope for improvement. It also allows the institution to identify generic trends or themes which may require attention and/or wider dissemination. The key quality assurance and enhancement procedures benefit from the participation of external peer reviewers. Policies and procedures take account of appropriate external reference points and national and international good practice. There is a management framework for the development and support of quality assurance and enhancement, for fostering a climate of review and reflection, and for leading and setting targets for enhancement.

4. Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF)

Traditionally in Malaysia, higher education institutions (HEIs), through their senates and councils working in conjunction with the Public Service Department, took the responsibility in ensuring the quality of their programmes. However, as the practice of quality assurance evolves a much more systematic and rigorous quality assurance system was adapted, devised and put in place. The system will keep on evolving to ensure a globally competitive tertiary education is available in Malaysia.

Left on their own each public HEI took the initiative to improve the quality of its own institution. As quality assurance and Total Quality Management (TQM) gained popularity particularly in the private sector and had a major influence on the management thinking in industry, many of the public HEIs began to adopt TQM. In many years of trial it is found that its application has been generally more successful when related to administrative processes and service activities, rather than to academic functions. Questions raised following application of TQM to improve the quality and standards of HEIs and both in their degree awards and research activities led to the adoption of MS ISO 9000. This development is accelerated as Malaysia opened its doors to overseas degrees in the form of twinning programmes; and after the passing of the Education Act 1996 which opened up the country for the establishment of both overseas and local private HEIs. To complement the issues on quality, ISO 9000 becomes extremely relevant and useful. The standard provides the HEIs with a framework, platform, and a system for the construction of a quality management system that serves the varied stakeholder interests. Thus with ISO 9000 certification, the reputation of the HEIs had been enhanced.

As after 1996 with the establishment of private HEIs offering transnational programmes, issues related to programme quality and standards, comparability of quality of education, faculty staff, and facilities need to be resolved and the answer lies in the formulation and implementation of quality assurance policy. Through the Education Act 1996, The National Accreditation Board (LAN) was established with the mandate to formulate policies on standards and criteria for quality assurance, accreditation of programmes and providing advice and making recommendations to the Minister of Education for approval of programmes for the private HEIs only. Its objectives are to ensure provision of education in the private HEIs is of high quality and able to meet international standards. This led to initiatives being taken to study various frameworks of quality assurance from the different parts of the world including Europe and Japan and particularly those being enforced in New Zealand, Australia and England.

Finally five critical areas were selected to be focused and they were general prescription of type of programme and its objectives and outcomes, quality of curriculum and assessments; academic and support staff; facilities and resources and quality management systems. A programme which fails to meet minimum standards will be recommended for revocation of approval which requires necessary actions taken, and the institution monitored by the Ministry and LAN to ensure corrective actions are taken. This is a critical step in which further system improvement is made.

Standards and quality criteria were developed based on national and international best practices, and also in consultation with stakeholders. An important step taken in ensuring quality of professional programmesis the establishment of a number of joint technical accreditation committees. This arrangement is highly effective in ensuring quality of professional courses particularly in dealing with recognition issues, reducing cost, duplication and wastage of manpower whilst maintaining standards of professional programmes. Other challenges, some of which are solved through improving the quality system include ensuring that the students get good education, equality of access, funding, strengthening internationalisation initiatives and dealing effectively with issues of cross-border recognition. This is witnessed in forms of admission into graduate programmes in foreign universities in such countries as the United Kingdom, Japan, the United States and Egypt; research collaboration with foreign universities, staff and student exchange and formulation of joint degrees. The consolidation of the quality assurance system emerged with the formulation and issuing of the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF).

In the Framework nine areas were proposed for quality assurance and enhancement. These nine areas were: vision, mission goals and learning outcomes; design of the educational programme and teaching-learning methodology; student assessment; student selection and support system; academic staff / faculty; educational resources; programme evaluation; leadership and governance; and continuous quality improvement. These prescribed areas formed the basis for formulating the Code of Practice for Quality Assurance which functioned as programme standards of many disciplines, postgraduate standards, procedures, and reports of benchmarking outcomes, good practices, and training.

The principle underpinning the MQF revolves around the anticipation and thus avoidance of faults, and the improvement of learning management and products. Basically, it involves setting of standards, organizing of working procedures and reviewing the

attainment for further improvement. In the Malaysia Education Summit 2005, in the discussion on the findings of the quality assurance processes in public HEIs Sharifah Hapsah (2009) mooted the idea that self-motivation for quality is the answer, not compliance with thousands of bureaucratic laws and regulations. Institutional self-evaluation is the key to quality because only then can one be sure that quality is continuously maintained, improved and enhanced. The Codes of Practice for Programme Audit (COPPA) and the Codes of Practice for Institutional Audit (COPIA) thus provide comprehensive guidelines on general requirements in the nine areas mentioned. For each of these areas criteria or indicators were developed and standards set. Standards are defined as the expected level of attainment for each criterion and served as a performance indicator. Standards are specified at two levels of attainment: benchmarked standards and enhanced standards. Benchmarked standards are standards that must be met while enhanced standards are standards which are deemed desirable.

5. Teaching and Learning in the MQF

Underpinning quality assurance is a great concern with the quality of teaching and learning. This is true of all the quality assurance systems as practiced in most parts of the world as stated earlier. Hence the emphasis on the programme of studies and each course within it as offered by a respective HEI should have a clear statement of programme aims, objectives and learning outcomes. These will also be indicated in each of the courses offered within the programme. The quality of a programme is ultimately assessed by the ability of the learners to carry out their expected roles and responsibilities in society. As mentioned earlier, for each criterion in the main quality areas and in their sub-areas benchmarked standards and enhanced standards were set.

In determining objectives and learning outcomes for both the programme and the courses some of the requirements stated in COPPA are that the programme and courses must define aims, objectives and learning outcomes and make them known to the internal and external stakeholders. The programme and course objectives must reflect the key elements of the outcomes of higher education that are in line with national and global developments. For academic autonomy it is expected that an academic institution has sufficient autonomy over academic matters, and such autonomy should be reflected at the departmental level where the programme and courses are being offered. Consequently, the benchmarked standards set are that the department must have sufficient autonomy to design the curriculum and to allocate the resources necessary for its implementation to ensure the

achievement of learning outcomes. The academic staff must be given sufficient autonomy to focus on areas of expertise, such as curriculum development and implementation, academic supervision of students, research and writing, scholarly activities, and academically-related administrative duties and community engagement. For the enhanced standards it is hoped that the HEIs involved have a clearly stated policy on conflict of interest, particularly in the area of private practice and part-time employment. Meanwhile the boundaries of academic autonomy for the department and the academic staff should continue to expand reflecting the intellectual maturity of the HEIs.

In the area of curriculum design and delivery five sub-areas were given due attention and they are academic autonomy, programme design and teaching-learning methods, curriculum content and structure, programme management, and linkages with external stakeholders. In an area of academic autonomy an institution is expected to have sufficient autonomy over academic matters. Such autonomy should be reflected at the departmental level where the programme is being offered.

As for programme design and teaching-learning methods, the benchmarked standards are that the department must have a defined process by which the curriculum is established, reviewed and evaluated. The process must involve the academic and administrative staff of the department. The programmemust be considered only after a needs assessment hasindicated that there is a need for conducting the programme. The programmemust be considered only after the resources to support it have been identified. The programme content, approach, and teaching-learning methods must beappropriate and consistent, and support the achievement of programme learning outcomes. There must be a variety of teaching-learning methods in order to achieve the eight domains of the learning outcomes and to ensure students take responsibility for their own learning. For the enhanced standards some of the hopes deemed achievable are that the curriculum should encourage multi-disciplinary approaches to enhance student personal development through electives, study pathways and other means, which should be monitored and appraised, and the needs analysis for the programme should involve feedback from external sources including market, students, alumni, peers, and international experts whose comments should inform curriculum improvement.

In curriculum content and structure it is expected that a teaching-learning environment can only be effective when the curriculum content and structure of a programme continually keeps abreast with the most current development in the field of study. Thus the benchmarked standards set are that the

programme must incorporate the core subject matter essential for understanding the concepts, principles and methods that support theprogramme outcomes. And the programme must also fulfill the requirements of the discipline taking into account the appropriate discipline standards and international best practices for the field.

In the area of student assessment it is crucial that the quality assurance procedure is able to drive students towards learning. Convincing and reliable evidence is in the measures of student learning outcomes in the forms of examination results, assignments, research works, and experience acquired and competencies displayed during industrial training. The result of assessment also forms the basis in awarding qualifications. Hence, methods of student assessment have to be clear, consistent, effective, reliable and in line with current practices and must clearly support the achievement of learning outcomes. Particular attention is addressed in assessment principles, methods and practices, and aligned with programme content and outcomes. This is translated into benchmarked standards that the assessment must be consistent with the levels defined in the MQF, the eight domains of learning outcomes and the programme standards.

For the assessment methods the benchmarked standards are set in terms of the frequency, methods, and criteria of student assessment -- including the grading criteria which must be documented and communicated to students on the commencement of the programme, while assessment must be summative and formative, a variety of methods and tools must be used appropriately to assess the learning outcomes and competencies, mechanisms must be installed to ensure the validity, reliability, consistency, currency and fairness of the assessment methods, and the assessment system must be reviewed at appropriate scheduled intervals. Other requirements set in the benchmarked standards are that student assessment results must be communicated to the student within reasonable time, changes to student assessment methods must follow established procedures and regulations and communicated to the student prior to their implementation; there must be mechanisms to ensure the security of assessment documents and records. Lastly, the programme grading, assessment, and appeal policies and practices must be publicised.

6. Questions Raised on MQF Implementation in Teaching and Learning

As MQF is being implemented particularly in teaching and learning a number of macro-level issues were raised. For this paper these macro-level issues are issues related to:

1. What are quality assurance initiatives undertaken by HEIs?
2. To what degree are quality assurance specifications based on MQF being pursued at the faculty and department levels (programme and course levels)?
3. What are the mechanisms employed by HEIs to determine and to ensure compliance on the parts of the academicians?
4. What is the overall reaction by the academic staff with regard to the implementation of quality assurance using MQF?

7. Methodology

A survey was undertaken for this study. Ten public HEIs and private HEIs were selected to provide the data. Information sources are from the documents such as those found in course files, minutes of meetings and circulars; and interviews with academic staff. Ingathering the data four trained researchers were employed, and they were specifically instructed to gather specific information. In doing this they were given the interview protocol and guide on what information to look for from the available documents. The data gathered are mainly descriptive and hence they were presented descriptively in the findings.

8. Findings on the implementation of the MQF in teaching and learning

Renewed quality assurance initiatives were undertaken through a number of phases. Many HEIs such as Universiti Utara Malaysia, University of Malaya and Universiti Teknologi MARA in the early phase started emplacing the MS ISO9001:2000 framework. In 2002 for example, the certification of MSISO9001:2000 was bestowed upon University of Malaya which then verified that it has fulfilled the requirements of the said standard and is endorsed to practice a quality management system. University of Malaya Quality Management System (QMS) encompasses allthe core processes at the University which include teaching and learning, research andconsultancies, and their supporting services.

Internal quality assessment involves self-study bestowed upon each of the faculties or schools. In the first instance, programme review or assessment rests on self-appraisal by the programme committee or staff involved. Legitimate self-appraisal processes are guided by the mission and strategic plan of the university, department and the learning outcomes of the programme under review. It was observed that a necessary part of self-appraisal is the collection, presentation and analysis of relevant data about the programme. Specifically, a self study process involves collection and revision of data about the faculty and its educational programme, identification of strengths,

areas of concern and opportunities, discussion of strategic planning to ensure sustainability of the strengths and ways of addressing problems and lastly, making recommendations for further quality enhancement.

To facilitate implementation of the academic Quality Assurance all public HEIs, and some private ones have established quality assurance units or centres with the functions of planning and implementing quality assurance systems, liaising with Malaysian Qualification Agencies (MQA) and departments within each respective HEI, and providing training and guidance to the HEI staff. A brief survey of a number of HEIs indicates that there are various degrees of compliance to the MQF requirements. Evidence of compliance is found in various forms of documentations such as minutes of the meetings within each HEI and also with external stakeholders, letters corresponded to relevant persons and agencies, course files of the academics, student course assessments and assignments, examination results, and course assessments by various parties. Other evidence of compliance is found in the experience recorded and competencies of the academic staff displayed in the forms of their researches and writing activities, involvement in consultancy work and also in administrative capacities as heads of departments, deans and others.

One clear indication of the degree of compliance can be witnessed in staff course files. Many HEIs formulated various forms in an attempt to capture teaching and learning for courses offered. The number of forms issued varied and some even have as much as nine. They include course pro-forma, course outline, student learning time, programme objectives or learning outcomes by domains and levels, course objective or learning outcomes by domains and levels, and student assessment -- by domains and levels. In the pro-forma, for example the form must state a number of basic information such as learning outcomes, course summary and modes of assessment. The learning outcomes have to cover a number of prescribed domains. These domains are knowledge, practical skills, social skills and responsibilities, values, attitudes and professionalism, communication, leadership and team skills, problem solving and scientific skills, information management and lifelong learning skills, and managerial and entrepreneurial skills. In addition to those domains the learning outcome must also encompass transferable learning.

In trying to adhere to the set of procedures and comply with the standards set, the University of Malaya (UM) has improved its QA procedures. Newton (2000) realized that QA can improve quality assurance procedures in universities. The danger is that it does not necessarily improve the quality of student learning. In the present quality assurance systems, quality is defined and monitored by those outside the university. Commonly, it is quantity not quality that is measured. In teaching among others, the reviewers tend to pay attention to the number of graduating students, the grades they attain, the teacher to student ratio and student to computer ratios. In research, concern is focused on the number of refereed journal articles and the size of research grants. This in turn steers the sort of assessments that are used in universities. The danger of this is that those within the university might abrogate their responsibility for defining and assuring the quality of assessment.

The process of ensuring compliance of quality assurance activities involved both internal and external auditing. In the internal quality auditing the institution's internal quality assurance auditing begins with the process of preparing the database of the self-study analysis of each programme. The committee sets up by the HEI allocates the task of writing each section in the database to the most appropriate and knowledgeable person in the committee. A coordinator, a person familiar with the nine areas of standards as outlined in the COPPA and *Guidelines on Standard of Specific Disciplines at Bachelor Degree* will ensure that: all specific criteria in each nine area of standards are answered; sufficient reliable data and information are provided; the accuracy and consistency of data across sections of the database; the write-up is done and arranged according to the sections and sub-sections; required in the COPPA and wherever necessary, related quality document in the Quality Management. In some HEIs SIRIM's certification MS ISO 9001: 2000, is also included in the database. Other forms of feedback from students, staff and stakeholders are obtained to provide input for continuous quality improvement and self-study analysis. At the end of this process an internal audit team is then appointed by the HEI to study the documents prepared and conduct site visit to ensure compliance.

In the external quality assurance the HEI must first conduct a self-review and produce a self-study report which is not just an evaluation but which includes the institution's proposed quality improvement plans. The self-study report and database cover nine areas of standards in which each area is divided into several criteria which cover input and performance or management indicators. The panel of external assessors or auditors constituting mainly of peers will study the self-review report and other documents provided, conduct a site visit and at the end of the process would provide recommendations to the HEI to implement its own continuous improvement plans. The completed self-analysis report and the database are then presented to the management.

In the past most academicians believed that they were sole experts in their field and hence they were the best teachers in their fields. It is true if one refers to the mastery of content knowledge; however, teaching also involves pedagogical content knowledge, pedagogical skills and suitable personal disposition apart from having a conducive learning environment. In the quality assurance programme all those factors were reviewed and made known to those concerned in order to improve the teaching and learning process. There is no doubt that many academicians today are aware of this benefit, but some perceive the exercise as burdensome.

An overall view of the academic staff on the quality assurance review processes was quite positive. For many of them the quality assurance review provided an opportunity for HEIs to be aware of the status of quality of the programmes in the faculties. Most agreed that engaging in QA programme reviews forced them to gauge the quality of their courses and programme. In the process of preparing the documents and in executing them these academicians interacted and engaged among themselves and also with outside experts which helps to improve their collegiality and professionalism. The process improved programmes by pointing out the strong and weak points and areas for improvement. Programme reviews promote programme self knowledge because they involved critical self evaluation by programme groups. The outcomes of programme reviews help to improve programme planning. The internal self evaluation reports provided a baseline for continuous improvement processes. There is no doubt that quality audits can improve the quality of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, certain academicians and students sometimes feel disempowered by external quality assurance. Researchers, teachers and students in universities should be given a chance to comply with intrinsic standards of excellence rather than with those imposed from outside. In quality assurance one has to adhere to a set procedure and comply with a set of standards. The most common objection is that it promotes a "culture of compliance" within the university. As pointed by Harvey and Knight (1996), the demands on teaching staff to respond to external monitoring can adversely affect efforts to enhance the student learning experience.

The evaluation process contributed to the build-up of a self-evaluation culture in UM. The evaluation has further assisted UM academicians in becoming more reflexive about their practice, and the institutions have made their education programmes more transparent to the public and students. Programme reviews identified gaps in programmes that were already integrated and offered. They provided a platform for inculcating the culture of peer review system in UM, and inculcated quality practices at faculty and programme level, where quality is seen as an integral part of the teaching and learning processes.

9. Challenges and Recommendations

In reviewing the findings of this brief survey it is found that a number of challenges have to be faced particularly in implementation at the faculty and department levels, and new initiatives have to be undertaken in order to improve the system. Setting up of quality assurance units or centres is an important prerequisite step forward; however translating of the policy and the processes into action poses a problem. Lacking of clear empirical evidence of the positive effect of quality assurance exercise or review on either teaching or learning creates doubt regarding the usefulness of such an exercise among the academicians. Many case studies (Brennan & Shah, 2000)reported that the introduction of teaching quality assessment that is more attention given to the teaching function within the institution – to talking about teaching, and to monitoring teaching, led to more time devoted to the monitoring of teaching at the expense of time dedicated to teaching itself. To overcome these problems perhaps quality assurance review needs to be sensitive to the academicians' workload by being critical and selective in exacting them to the quality assurance exercise as insensitivity to the task performed by the academicians may lead to the defacement of their status as academicians. Perhaps the number of forms they have to fill may need to be reduced and details of information required may need to be less duplicative. For the sake of meeting the criteria and standards many of the specifications which lack flexibility have to be revised so that teaching would be able to accommodate reflection and freedom to propose, enact or even to choose from many of one's own ideas. In other words teaching should be a combination of both science and art.

In actual fact, academic auditing has great potentials. Dill (2000) drawing on studies on the outcomes of academic audit procedures in the UK, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Sweden argues that academic audits have placed attention to enhancing teaching and learning on institutional agendas. They have also helped to clarify responsibility for improving quality in teaching and learning at the individual, academic unit, faculty, and institutional level. Quality assessment can also affect the relative powers between students and academics. Students can be empowered by contributing their views and experiences to the assessment process and by using the public reports produced by the quality assurance system in making decisions about what and where to study (Brennan & Shah, 2000). On the other hand, Harvey and Newton

(2004) point out that most studies reinforce the view that quality is about compliance and accountability and has contributed little to improving the student learning experience. They argued that, in most countries, external quality monitoring makes no attempt to encourage quality in learning, but tends to be driven by accountability requirements.

Newton (2000) reports that in his case study, there was little support amongst staff for the view that student learning experience *per se* had been improved. Rather academic staff associated the quality assurance system with improved 'discipline' and 'technology' for validation, monitoring, and external scrutiny. Furthermore, it is argued that changes in learning outcomes are not necessarily linked to quality assurance mechanisms. Where positive changes to the student learning experience have taken place, these are not necessarily directly attributable to the existence of a quality assurance system (Newton, 2000) and, it is argued, the existence of external quality arrangements provides, at the best, a legitimation for internally-driven innovation (Harvey & Newton, 2004). It is argued that other factors completely outweigh the impact of external quality monitoring on student learning.

Although teaching is often an idiosyncratic and individualistic activity there are fundamental pedagogical elements which each academic staff should master before teaching is able to be improved. Time management, clarity about learning outcomes, sensitivity to monitoring, assessment and feedback at the right time and parts of learning, and ability to motivate students at the right time are some of these fundamental elements. Quality assurance as a system is able to provide clear and coherent guides particularly for the novice academic staff. For HEIs encouraging teachers to share their practice would help not only impact on outcomes for learners but also would help in enhancing teaching skills across the academic staff, young and old. In order to achieve this, HEIs need to help the academic staff overcome their inhibition about sharing information on teaching and learning.

HEIs also have to cultivate a culture of a curriculum meeting of the highest standards so that none of the academic staff is left unaware of what is taking place in the process of improving the teaching and learning and in accepting quality assurance as an integral part of the process. Information on the process, whether about the strengths or weaknesses would be useful in programme or course improvement as well as in staff development. Many unintended or collateral outcomes are found as the quality assurance exercise is enforced. Some academic staff have the tendency to take a defensive mode due to the intensity of the programme review criteria, thus resulting in staff not being honest about the quality of their provision. Some

succumbed to the circumstances resulting in not really being committed or convinced of what they are asked to do, yet do not display objection to what is asked of them. Some dishonestly take the opportunity to display their best performance in order to gain rewards while some others openly air their grievances against the system. It is also sometimes true that quality assurance exercise and review findings were wrongly used as information to rationalize and confirm academic staff promotion or demotion or even redeployment. Of course programme review findings are also used as a tool to promote personal agendas of those managing the HEIs. For whatever purpose the quality assurance review is used, one must try to ensure that teaching and learning should benefit from the exercise.

Programme and course review undertaken at department and HEI level is a source where academic staff can review the way a course was taught for them to decide on any necessary improvements or changes. In this process a number of reliable feedback sources were used and hence the feedback is much more helpful as it reflects the needs from different stakeholders, both immediate and long term. This exercise demands the cooperation and goodwill from all those who provide the necessary information. Time pressure needs to be taken into consideration. To do it yearly may pose a burden on those who are already overburdened, even for the students. Therefore programmes or courses with large enrolments or of strategic importance may employ a five or a ten-year cycle under the HEI programme review.

Many of the earlier issues on quality assurance implementation relate to the lack of trust among key players in the system. It is often mentioned in literature that in order for academicians to accept and implement changes, they must trust and own the process of problem definition and solution design. This is certainly the case in any quality assurance exercise. Only if the academicians accept quality assurance astheir own activity will the system be successful. Thus the self-evaluation and self-report can be useful in getting and building the trust of academic staff (Van Vugt, 2009). Recognising the importance of creating this trust the new systems of quality assurance that have emerged internationally include both intrinsic and extrinsic elements providing elements of self-study or self-evaluation, and peer review. Self-study has the advantage of being cost-effective, providing a high sense of ownership by the institution or unit being reviewed, and increasing the likelihood of improvements following from evaluation.

Despite the issues raised and challenges faced, it is important that HEIs and their academic staff be involved with the exercise in a positive way. A study should be undertaken to explore the impact of quality assurance practices on teaching and learning. In

such study good indicators of success in teaching and learning should be both in the forms of process and products. The indicators may be in terms of type of learning activities, degree of student participation, active learning time and so forth; for product indicators one can refer to the number of students who have successfully completed all components required for a qualification compared to the total number enrolled, student progression to higher level study, student retention in the programme and even student marketability.

10. Conclusion

Owing to a number of reasons among which are the rapid expansion of higher education systems with a diverse range of providers both public and private, and globalization with the demand for trustworthy organizations that can establish confidence due to economic constraints and a shift in priorities from advanced levels to basic education; emphasizing on the need for more effective mechanisms for the professional recognition of higher education credentials and encouraging of professional mobility through a growing number of regional and international integration processes has led many Governments in most parts of the world to focus their attention and their agenda for higher education on issues of quality assurance and quality enhancement.

Despite differences in the size and stage of development of their higher education sectors, many governments have decided that traditional academic controls are inadequate to face today's challenges and thus explicit assurances about quality are needed. Organizations such as the European Commission (OECD) for example, have reinforced this trend by their own calls for new structures and new approaches to quality assurance. Malaysia, not to be left behind, has embarked on a number of quality assurance initiatives such as in placing of Malaysian Qualification Framework, encouraging institutions of higher learning to implement ISO 9001 Standard and intensifying collaboration with professional bodies. At the heart of quality assurance is the issue of the quality of teaching and learning. In the Code of Practice of Programme Accreditation as implemented by the Malaysia Qualification Agency, the issue of teaching and learning as reflected in Curriculum Design and Delivery, and Student Assessment has been dealt with extensively. This paper reviewed and examined the current status of national policy and processes for QA in teaching and learning, the extent to which the policy was in place and the process implemented, the nature and the variations of the process implemented in instruction and other academic activities including assessment practices, recent trends and areas of emerging consensus as well as issues likely to shape

policy over the next decade, and finally offered recommendations for Government and institutions of higher learning might embark upon to hasten the pace of improvement in teaching and learning.

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