

Change for Quality Enhancement at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan: Views of Institutional Leaders

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are playing a vital role in improving the standards of society through capacity building and professional development of people. However, developing countries are still in a race of reaching on appropriate standards of quality at HEIs. Present research study is based on perceptions, views and experiences of institutional leaders about change for quality enhancement at HEIs. Research study is qualitative and follows interpretive research paradigm. Data were collected from purposively selected participants through semi structured interviews. Participants included institutional leaders of three universities and the Director, Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. Interviews were transcribed and data were analyzed qualitatively through categorizing and then coding (open, axial and selective). Research findings showed that positive changes are required for improving the quality of HEIs. Institutional leaders highlighted factors including culture that affect quality enhancement at HEIs. They recognized the positive role of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) and QAA for quality enhancement. However, a need for improvement in evaluation tools was communicated by them. Participants shared how they monitor the progress of change processes and manage the resistance in the way of change for quality enhancement in HEIs.

Keywords: Quality Enhancement, Change Management, Resistance Management, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Higher Education Commission (HEC).

Introduction

“Without a standard, there is no logical basis for making a decision or taking action” (Joseph M. Juran). The multiple dimensions of quality can be classified in two main types: intrinsic and extrinsic. The intrinsic modality of quality assessment refers to the properties of an entity whether it is a good or a service. The extrinsic modality refers to the outcomes, processes and the transaction in which a given good or service is involved (Allaire, 2012).

Over the past two decades, quality assurance processes in higher education have become increasingly common in many advanced countries of the world. A number of factors have contributed to this development. It is advocated both by government and industry that a well-educated workforce is essential to increased productivity and to maintaining a competitive edge in the global knowledge economy (Nicholson, 2011). To create trained manpower for the country, higher education is the most important tool. National Education Policy (1998-2010) focused to enhance the admission rate from 3% to 7% in the universities. Researches proved that admission rate has been increased but resources and infrastructure did not establish in that rate. National Education Policy (2017-2025) and HEC vision 2025 have goal to make higher education accessible for maximum adults by establishing universities and degree awarding institutions in each districts and underdeveloped areas of country.

Vlašić et al. (2009) pointed that educational effectiveness and success cannot be determined by quantity of institutions but from quality as well. The quality indicators and the criteria related to the quality indicators help institutions to identify the key areas of their activities as well as their own development opportunities, advantages, and disadvantages. Scientific and technological development, social and organizational changes are the key factors for the improving the quality of education. Momunalieva et al., (2020) mentioned attitude of staff towards students, qualification of teachers, university infrastructure, and financial aid as some of the factors that define the quality of education.

According to Nadeem (2018), administration, curriculum, and communication skills are important indicators of quality enhancement of higher education.

When an increased public funding for higher education is allocated to make higher education more accessible, particularly for under-represented populations, HEIs have greater accountability and quality assurance processes are used to measure their outputs (Nicholson, 2011). Quality assurance is very important concern for the HEIs that offer degree programs in numerous disciplines. Regulatory bodies of HEIs and accreditation councils are responsible for assuring quality. A research study found that systematic and structured processes of quality assurance are important for producing useful, effective and rewarding higher education reforms (Bornmann et al., 2006). Few other researchers added that quality assurance in higher education have become a central focus in both developing and transitioning countries (El-Khawas et al. 1998; El-Khawas, 2002).

Schwarz and Westerheijden (2007) stated that any program of higher education is primarily attached with three major areas: Teaching, learning and research. Quality assurance systems also aim to improve and develop mentioned domains. Hendel and Lewis (2005) elaborated that public educational policies need quality assurance as an obligatory part to accomplish the educational requirements of people. Accreditation, accountability and assessment are the processes of quality assurance. The goals of educational organizations must be aligned with government policies so that educational institutes may achieve their purposes. In a study, Ayeni (2012) discussed that clearly defined goals, deliberate planning, and effective management of human and material resources to improve the learning and teaching processes are among the features for the sustainability in quality assurance of educational organizations.

Nicholson (2011) stated numerous features that contribute towards the emerging focus of quality in the higher education. Pressure from the job market has made an awareness in the higher education for the service providers to prepare manpower not only having degrees but also have competency, skills, knowledge, and traits that are essential to fulfill the industry needs. Hence, they can effectively make their contribution for the development of the economy of country. The degree awarding institutions are accountable for meeting these challenges. He suggested that HEIs must have fully functioning quality assurance systems, processes and procedures to know and assess the level of the successful results of their programs.

HEC was established in 2002 in Pakistan to facilitate and monitor higher education in the country. HEC in Pakistan is constantly stressing for the improvement of quality of higher education, especially since the last decade (Nadeem, 2018). QAA was established by HEC to assure the quality of HEIs and their graduate and post graduate programs. Before the setting up of QAA, evaluation of higher education programs was not systematic in Pakistani universities (Usmani & Khatoon, 2013). A decision was made to launch QECs at university level by QAA. The task of program evaluation through Program Self-Assessment (PA) proformas was assigned to QECs (Usmani et al., 2010).

Many quantitative researches have been conducted on enhancing quality of higher education but no substantial qualitative studies are available regarding the experiences of institutional leaders about the change management at HEIs for enhancing the quality of higher education. In present study, the views, opinions and experiences of institutional leaders are gathered to get an understanding how they practically manage change and resistance in the way of change for enhancing the quality at HEIs.

Present study explores the answers of the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of institutional leaders about the change for quality enhancement at HEIs?
2. What are the experiences of institutional leaders regarding the factors including culture that are affecting the quality of HEIs?
3. What role the QAA and QECs are plying for improving the quality of HEIs?
4. How institutional leaders monitor change processes and manage resistance in the way of change processes?

Methodology

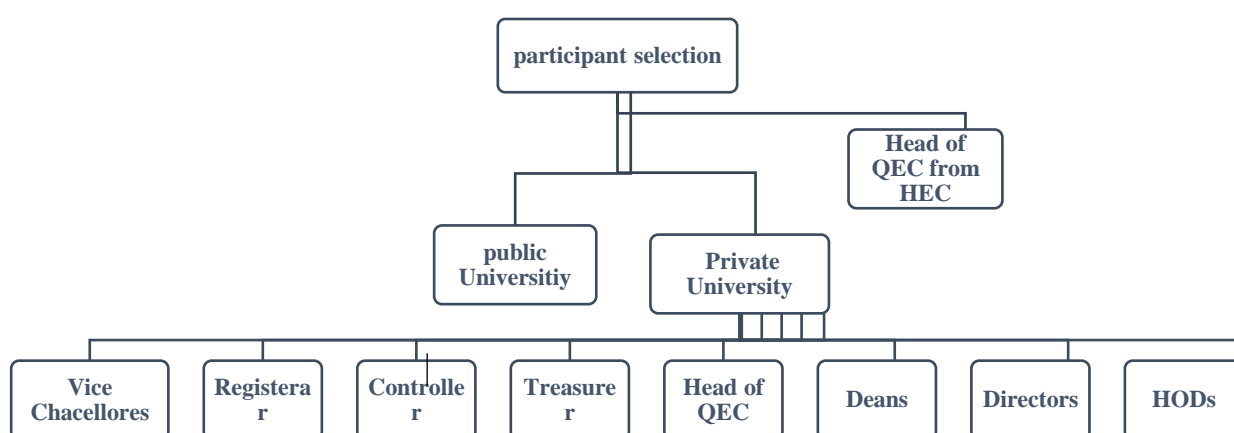
The present study is qualitative in nature. The study follows constructivist and interpretive research paradigm. Constructivism and interpretivist are unified concepts. They aim to understand the world as other people practice it (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012). The selection of participants was done by using

purposeful sampling technique as the requirement of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2005) as this sampling technique of qualitative research effectively identifies and selects information under limited resources (Patton, 2002).

Data were collected from 18 respondents selected from three universities of Lahore and Director QAA from HEC. Participants with minimum 10 years of work experience and having managerial post were selected. Participant were selected from one public university (University 1) and two private universities (University 2 and 3). Two HODs (one from social sciences (Education) and one from sciences (Chemistry)), two Deans, Director Research and Director QEC, Treasurer, Controller, Registrar and Vice Chancellor were selected from University 1 and 2 to know their experiences and views about quality enhancement and quality management. From the university 3, only the interview of VC (VC3) was conducted. Participants of University 1 and 2 are showed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Participants of the Study



Head of the QAA from HEC was also selected for interview to know all the planning phase of quality control in universities. Among the participants from universities, there are three VCs. VC 1 from public university has 23 years of work experience. VC 2 and VC 3 belong to private universities and have more than 40 years of experience. Controller 1 from public university has 33 years of experience and Controller 2 from private university has 24 years of experience. Both Treasures were Chartered Accountants. Treasure 1 has 29 years of experience and Treasure 2 has 40 years of work experience. Registrar 1 has 16 years of experience in her filed. Registrar 2 did not allow to give interview and share his experiences.

Dean 1 and Dean 2 from public university have experience of 23 and 25 years. Dean 3 and Dean 4 from private university have work experience of 29 and 35 years. HOD 1 and HOD 2 from public university have work experience of 23 years and 35 years. HOD 3 from private university has experience of 16 years. Dean 1 was offering responsibilities of Director Research as well. Director Research from private university has experience of 10 years and she is the participant with minimum work experience. Director QEC 1 has work experience of 24 years and Director QEC 2 has work experience of 25 years. Director QAA from HEC has experience of more than 20 years. All of the research participants were PhD except two: Registrar 1 and Director QEC 2. Both of them have MPhil degrees.

Data were collected through semi structured interviews to take the views and experiences of the institutional leaders. Instrument was made with the help of literature and validated by four experts of the field. Pilot interviews were conducted to assess the respondents' response rate, timing for completion of interviews, transcription of interviews, and data analysis processes (Veal, 2005). Instrument was

comprising six questions and emerging questions from the answers given by participants. Appointments were taken from all participants for conducting interviews either through personal visits, emails or phone calls. All interviews were conducted face to face. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Categorizing, connecting memos and display are the three main methods of data analysis in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2005). In present study, categorizing approach has been selected according to situation and data. In categorizing, the key purpose is making codes and themes from data. After transcribing the interviews, data were read many times to get in depth understanding of the data. Then open, axial, and selective coding was done. In open coding data was broken down in different parts to see similarities and differences. Then data was rebuilt in next step axial coding to establish connections among different groups. In third step selective coding, themes were created to give a new sense to the data.

Results

Director QAA from HEC told that HEC Vision 2025 has agenda to establish universities and degree awarding institutes at each district level. It is a great agenda but she raised the question if our government is ready to give us enough budget and resources? So, according to her plans must be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely). Answers to the research questions were as follows:

Need of Positive Change for Quality Enhancement at HEIs

Codes emerged from responses provided by the participants on the first question were that positive changes are necessary in our HEIs. Director QEC 1 told that “we do not require the changes that destruct the whole system”. Other participants added that we have to keep up with changing needs of the world. Our educational organizations must be up to date. We have to satisfy parents and students by fulfilling their expectations. Positive changes are required to improve the learning and teaching, to improve the quality of curriculum and faculty, and to set research directions. Positive changes are required to take quality measures and to keep pace with international standards of education.

Factors Affecting HEIs

There are lot of factors that are affecting the quality of HEIs in good or bad ways. Participants highlighted the factors that are causing hindrance in the way of implementing change for improving quality. These include lack of funding, infrastructure and other economic and technological factors. Treasurer 1 pointed that there is lack of competent and expert resource (faculty). Moreover, poor governance is badly affecting our institutions”. VC 1, Treasure 2, and Director QEC 2 mentioned that resources for HEIs are not increasing with the same proportion as the increase in population of our country. Registrar 1 told that previous practices/ precedents of change affect the forthcoming change processes. Dean 1 and Dean 3 expressed that conventional education system is leading to poor grooming in undergraduates. Non-serious attitudes of students lead to poor quality of higher education. Addressing the needs of students with poor financial position is another challenge as these students’ attention towards studies is divided as they have to earn as well. Dean 2 said that persons are appointed in administration against the merit due to political interference. Controller 1 told that lack of visionary leadership of educational ministries and poor policy making results in decreasing the quality of HEIs. VC 3 told that “there is low voice of faculty and students (absence of bottom-up approach in decision and policy making) in public sector universities”. Another important factor told by Dean 1 and Treasure 1 is that there is no strong linkage between industry and HEIs. Due to this factor our quality of education is not as it should be. Participants mentioned that National & International rankings have been given to HEIs by the accreditation councils who have implemented the Trends/ Standards for quality enhancement. HEC has given recognition system to institutions. Increased competition among institutions and increased demand of public for offering the latest courses are compelling HEIs for working for innovative efforts for quality enhancement.

Monitoring Strategies

Participants shared the activities they perform to monitor any change process in institutions. They set targets with deadlines and regularly review the progress through planned meetings with the stakeholders. Feedback from public and students helps them in monitoring the progress. Participants from private university said that they are using Learning management system (LMS) for monitoring most of the activities of faculty and students. In addition to that, Dean 2 told that quality is monitored by Accreditation

bodies, University QECs and QAA with the help of different tools like Institutional Performance Evaluation (IPE), Program self-Assessment (PA) etc.

The Role of QECs in Improving the Quality at HEIs

Participants acknowledged the role of QECs and shared that they have become a great source in increasing the quality of HEIs. They believed that they are performing a good job for monitoring and communicating about the status of quality to HEC. HEIs, faculty, and degree programs are being monitored by them. However, Controller 1 and HOD 2 showed little reservations with the evaluation proformas made by QAA and used by QECs. They mentioned that insufficient information is gathered regarding the performance through the use of these proformas as they require information in the form of Yes or No. Controller 1, Dean 1, and HOD 2 expressed that evaluation done by QECs is just a formality. It is our own responsibility to be honest in our duties and make possible efforts for quality enhancement and prestige of our institutions.

Resistance by Employees and its Management

Resistance is natural in the way to change process. Research participants also expressed this phenomenon and reported that it happens due to comfort zones of employees, their increased workload and time constraints. Dean 4 reported that sometimes they have to face negative behaviors of employees in the form of politics among faculty. Fear in doing new tasks also leads towards resistance for change process. Participants viewed that resistance can be reduced and managed by guiding them, communicating benefits of change, understanding their limitations, motivating them to keep their morale high and resolving their issues. HOD 1, Controller 1, and Controller 2 told that to make the employees realize their potential and maintain a relationship of trust, bonding and friendship may help them to be ready for accepting change. HOD 1 said that problems can easily be managed by documenting all things and allocating tasks according to personnel's capabilities.

Effect of Culture on Change within Institutions

The effect of culture cannot be denied in change process. Participants expressed their viewpoints about the effect of culture on change. Dean 3 mentioned that culture and change are two sides of a coin and change is directly proportional to culture. Habits of people, beliefs and norms of employees directly affect the institutional processes. Registrar 1 told that sometimes culture within institution and outside the institution contrasts a lot and becomes a reason of resistance. Controller 1 and Dean 1 told that every change process should be planned according to cultural limits of the employees and institution to avoid negative results. One of the Vice Chancellors from private university said that employees should match their values with the organization and organization should also take care of employees' values.

Discussion

The present research study answered the research questions comprehensively and revealed the experiences of institutional leaders.

Need of Positive Change for Quality Enhancement at HEIs

First question was why change is necessary for quality enhancement at HEIs? Changes regarding teaching, learning and Research and Development (R&D) were focused in the paper. Most of the participants focused and highlighted that positive changes are required for improving the quality of education by making improvement in attention and motivation of the students (learning), ensuring the skilled and talented faculty (teaching) and by setting research directions. Trends of research should be raised in our developing country up to the international standards. We will be able to compete and meet international standards and see our HEIs in international rankings by making positive changes. The institutional leaders agreed that change is crucial for quality enhancement at HEIs. However, participants shared that the change for the sake of change is not required but the positive and gradual change needs to be planned and implemented in our institutions. Only positive and constructive changes should be focused in our institutions, because sometimes some leaders bring changes only looking for and in craze of change without foreseeing its aftereffects in the institution and destroy the whole system.

Factors Affecting HEIs

Second question was regarding the experience of institutional leaders about the factors that are affecting the quality of HEIs? Respondents enlisted many factors. According to the institutional leaders,

the faculty is the main source for imparting knowledge to the students. Excessive manpower is available in our institutions as well as in country but there is a shortage of skilled, talented, and professional faculty. Another factor highlighted by the respondents was inadequate standard of education of students at the time of entry in higher education. Third important and common factor highlighted by the institutional leaders is the non-serious attitude of students towards studies that is becoming the cause of poor quality of higher education. Gap between research and industry was also highlighted by the institutional leaders. Graduates are unable to apply in the fields after completing higher studies what they have studied in the universities. According to them, this gap between theory and practice leads towards unemployment and job insecurity among graduates. Anastasiu et al. (2017) also reported that misalignment between employers' expectations regarding graduates' skills and what graduate study and learn from educational institutes leads towards unemployment or over qualification for vacant jobs of graduates. They suggested that if the educational programs at universities are aligned according to the market demands, graduates will find jobs that match their expectations with motivation to perform, industry and job market will have well prepared employees in their specific area with less costs, and such universities will be counted as prestigious ones who deliver a greater number of experts into the industry and market.

There were few other factors that were highlighted by HODs, Deans, and controller of public sector university. One is increased workload of teachers which results in their poor performance. Moreover, there is lack of Terms of References (TORs), Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and unclear job descriptions and policies. Respondents from private institutions mentioned that HEC award projects and grants to public sector universities only. Habibulah et al. (2012) identified resembling factors that are affecting the quality of HEIs in private universities of Bangladesh such as lack of resources in terms of infrastructure, lab facilities, and classroom facilities. Brookes and Becket (2007) identified change drivers in their study as political, social and economic factors. Institutional leaders in the present study also highlighted factors that drive change in institutions that include increasing demands of students and society, international standards of education, standards of different accreditation councils and steps taken by HEC and government to make higher education accessible to wider range.

Monitoring Strategies

Third question was what activities do you perform for monitoring the progress of your change initiatives for quality enhancement? Participants said that it is easy to monitor the progress of any change process with pre-defined standards and to track the progress through planned regular meetings with the concerned stakeholders. Getting formal and informal feedback from public and students also helps in monitoring the progress. Other ways to monitor the progress of programs and change initiatives are Accreditation Bodies and QECs in HEIs using different tools like IPE, and Program Review (PR). They also added that in each university there is a separate office of QEC that performs services of monitoring the quality of all programs and communicates reports and reviews to QAA in HEC.

HEC has developed 11 standards for IPE that are Mission Statement and Goals, Planning and Evaluation, Organization and Governance, Integrity, Faculty, Students, Institutional Resources, Academic Programs and Curricula, Public Disclosure and Transparency, Assessment & Quality Assurance, and Student Support. HEC has establish five new Accreditation Councils and coordinating with nine existing Accreditation Councils (Higher Education Commission, 2021).

Batool and Qureshi (2009) stated that two types of accreditation are held: Program accreditation and institutional accreditation. Institutional accreditation is done by HEC. Program accreditations are conducted through accreditation councils. Accreditation councils are working in collaboration with QAA of HEC. HEC has reviewed MS and PhD programs of approximately 140 universities/ HEIs (Higher Education Commission, 2021). All the undergrad level programs of HEIs are accredited by their respective accreditation councils. These councils assess their performance and build their capacity (Higher Education Commission, 2021). HEC has aim that national external quality assurance system and universities' internal quality assurance system should be parallel to each other (Jalal et al., 2017).

The Role of QECs in Improving the Quality at HEIs

There are 221 QECs in HEIs of the country (Higher Education Commission, 2021). Forth question was how do you perceive the role of QECs in improving the quality at HEIs? Participants recognized the role of QECs and acknowledged that quality has been improved with the establishment of QAA at HEC and

a QEC at each university. With the establishment of QECs, everyone is more vigilant for being accountable about their performances. Participants said that evaluation procedure are good as they monitor the programs, faculty, and students. Two of the participants, however, added that QECs and QAA should improve their evaluation proformas. Kavanamur and Baird (2016) argued that quality assurance agencies in developing countries need to embrace an extensive responsibility than just to conduct reviews as quality assurance can be a catalyst for longer-lasting assurance of quality within institutions.

Resistance by Employees and its Management

While replying fifth question that how do you manage the resistance in the way of change for quality enhancement in HEIs, institutional leaders talked about the resistance which they have to face and manage in way to the change. Participants told that wherever change comes, resistance comes first. Employees resist due to their old habits of working. They show reservation to work till late hour in days of increased workload. Institutional leaders said that they try to overcome resistance by guiding them and communicating benefits of change while understanding their limitations. Institutional leaders motivate the employees to keep their morale high and resolve their issues. They said that it is leader's responsibility to make their employees realize their potential. Implementing gradual and planned changes and staying positive throughout the process are the other ways to manage resistance as reported by them. Chandler (2013) described similar reasons for resistance to change such as faculty members, time factor, sense of territory, communication gap between administrators and staff, resource allocation, maintaining status quo, individual resistance, and power of unions. Aguirre et al., (2013) report that change efforts fail due to three main reasons: Resistance to change, change fatigue, and lack of skill in sustaining change.

Effect of Culture on Change within Institutions

Sixth question was how culture affects change processes? One of the research directors said while answering this question that culture always affects the change process but we are part of the same culture. Institutional leaders expressed that culture reacts to change positively and sometimes negatively. Martin (2013) also said that culture can support or resist the change process. It may be a blessing or may be a profanity to experience the change. The values, norms, and beliefs of members of any organization make its culture. Change and employees' culture should always be connected to the positive future of the organization.

Conclusion

Positive change initiatives with proper planning of change process are necessary to improve the quality of higher education and HEIs. Shortage of skilled, talented, and professional faculty, poor standard of education of students at entry in higher education, non-serious attitude of students towards studies, gap between research and industry, work overload of teachers, lack of Terms of References (TORs), Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and unclear job descriptions and policies are some of the factors that affect the quality of HEIs. Change management to improve quality at HEIs is very important task. Universities are assessed through QECs against parameters like progress against IPE. There are also self-assessment manuals available at the official website of HEC to monitor the progress. Institutional leaders suggested that monitoring tools developed by QAA should also be reviewed to make them more flexible for getting maximum information from university stakeholders. Universities also should provide proper and in time information to QAA to make timely decisions. Institutional leaders manage resistance for change among employees by guiding them, communicating benefits of change, understanding their limitations, motivating them to keep their morale high, resolving their issues, realizing their potential and maintaining a relationship of trust, bonding and friendship. Moreover, documenting all things and allocating tasks according to personnel's capabilities also helps the institutional leaders to manage change and resistance towards change. Habits, believes and norms of employees also affect the change process. Employees should match their values with the organization and organization should also take care of employees' values.

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