

Quality Assurance in Education of Thailand

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Abstract

This paper purpose to give an overview of quality assurance (QA), its role, function, and effectiveness as practiced and researched in education organizations. Some well-trodden ground will be revisited to place contemporary QA in its historical context. There is nothing new about government and other authorities' inspectorial interest in teaching effectiveness. Despite this, terms such as 'quality,' 'quality assurance', and 'management' are still hotly contested, particularly in Higher Education, since the increased focus on 'accountability' over the last three decades. Much overt and covert antagonism is shown towards those responsible for quality –amply demonstrated by letters and occasional articles published in the educational press. However, each institution can also establish a quality assurance system relevant to its context and institution develops its own system. Implementation, audit, and review are based on policymakers within the institution.

Keywords: Quality assurance; Quality assurance in education; Quality assurance in education of Thailand

Introduction

Thailand began reforming higher education in the late 1980s when the MUA prepared the first 15-year Higher Education Plan covering the period 1990 to 2004. The 8th National Higher Education Plan from 1997 to 2001 indicated that one of the six main policy directions would relate to quality and excellence. New quality assurance policies and guiding directions were announced in July 1996, and these stipulated that all universities improve and enhance their efforts to achieve quality instruction and an appropriate academic learning environment. (Harman, 2015; Pitiyanuwat et al. 2018). One of the main principles articulated was that all higher education institutions will establish quality management systems and work consistently to improve their performance. Subsequent important steps included establishing internal and external quality assurance procedures, developing manuals, running some pilot audits, and establishing performance indicators. These efforts were followed by the 1999 National Education Act, which legislated for extensive and comprehensive educational reforms affecting both public and private education sectors. (Harman, 2015). The MOE, the MUA, and the Office of the National Education Commission will be merged into a new Ministry of Education, Culture, and Religion. The public sector's role in higher education will be changed from regulatory to supervisory.

In comparison, the mission of higher education is being redirected more toward societal participation, student-centered learning, and lifelong learning. In 2002, all public universities will gain increased autonomy. In 2000, the higher education system had 1,639,149 students studying in institutions classified as degree-level institutions, of which 29 percent were studying at degree level. Nearly one-quarter of the higher Special Focus: Quality Assurance and Accreditation education age group are enrolled in higher education institutions, excluding open universities. (Harman, 2015) However, following the change in economic conditions since 1997, there has been some reduction in the total number of secondary school and higher education enrollments. As stipulated in Section 81 of the 1997 constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, a national education law is required, hence the drafting of the 1999 National Education Act, which became effective on August 20, 1999. Chapter 6 of the Act on Education Standards and Quality Assurance mandates the establishment of the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA), enjoying the status of a public organization. The announcement for establishing The Office was published in the Government Gazette, Vol.117, and Section 99A on November 3, 2000. The Office, therefore, became operational on the following day.

Accreditation and Quality Assurance in the Thai Education System

The Ministry of University Affairs/MUA introduced accreditation and quality assurance in 1996. All public and private universities have set up quality assurance systems and work towards quality teaching. Internal and external quality assurance was brought forward through the National Education Act 1999. As per the act, quality assurance in higher education institutions includes an external and internal system, and internal mechanisms are used for internal accreditation and quality assurance. External quality assurance is through ONESQA or the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment. This is a public organization responsible for external assessment.

Internal Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Thailand

Quality Assurance Framework: The foundation for Thai quality as a source framework lies in formulating standard criteria and requirements established by MUA for nationwide degree courses. All degree courses provided at public and private higher educational institutions,

especially transitional ones, must attain standard criteria before they are approved for starting operations. Over the years, MUA has transferred approval authorization to public higher educational institutions. Governing councils and academic boards are responsible for the quality of educational provision, including academic standard control. Some universities invite external experts to review curricula development and internal activities. The accreditation system is associated with professional degrees such as architecture, nursing, and medicine. For private higher educational institutes, MUA approves degree programs and accreditations. MUA is the Commission on Higher Education under the Ministry of Education. Three aspects of quality control are under its aegis: quality control, audit, and assessment. Framework provides autonomy to institutions to adapt their traditions. The quality framework proposed by the commission has nine components:

- Objectives, commitment, and philosophies
- Research and academic services
- Preserving culture and art
- Management and administration
- Budgeting and Finance
- Internal systems and mechanisms of quality assurance
- Learning plus teaching
- Student development activities

However, each institution can also establish a quality assurance system relevant to its context. Each institution develops its own system. Implementation, audit, and review are based on policymakers within the institution.

External Quality Assurance in Thailand

ONESQA: Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment was formed in 2000. It is an independent public body concerned with external quality assurance and accreditation. Each institution reviews its performance based on the following indicators provided by ONESQA:

- Graduate quality: Four indicators
- Support for learning resources: Five indicators
- Innovating and research: Four Indicators
- Academic support service: Two indicators
- Preserving culture and art: Two indicators
- Management as well as administrative operations: Five indicators
- System for internal quality assurance: Two indicators

Indicators: Only five of the 28 indicators are descriptive in nature. There are differences between institutions in the use of these statistical indicators for assessing the performance of institutions. Once certain standards are marked, the first review cycle is carried out by ONESQA to assess the external quality assurance system. The review cycle lasts for 5 years and comprises the following principles:

Standards of Assessment: International standards against which higher education is measured and assessed:

- Quality of academic standards upheld in educational institutions for higher education
- Upholding academic standard quality in universities and institutions
- National Education Act's objectives, principles as well and directives to guide the process

- Review and confirmation of the current system of the institute for assessment of quality and functions, keeping in mind their objectives, visions, missions, uniqueness, and academic autonomy
- Support for the implementation of the internal system of quality assurance in an institution
- Transparency and accountability while carrying out the assessment

Dimensions of Development: Three dimensions of development are considered, namely achievement, attempt, and awareness. Each university's self-review report and data are submitted to ONESQA before the external assessment is carried out. Extra documents and reports on the internal quality assurance system complement the external assurance system. Experts and academic authorities from various sectors constitute the team for review and assessment.

Importance of Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance (QA) emerged as a principal business methodology in the Western world throughout the 1950's and early 1960's. The concept of "quality" is somewhat elusive because it expresses a relative, though noticeable, difference between one thing and another. Relative terms such as "better," "superior," and "acceptable" are applied to judge quality. However, quality is a universally acknowledged factor in successful business. Winning companies are those that meet quality standards and for whom customer service is an obsession in every market in which they operate.

The concept of quality assurance is not a new one. However, the range of terminology and methodologies used to define, develop, and apply it are relatively recent. There are many different perceptions of what quality means in higher education. Varying definitions have been suggested, but reaching consensus has not been possible. Higher education's most widely accepted quality criterion is probably "fitness for purpose." Consensus about this does not solve the problem of what quality means in higher education; it just carries the discussion one step further to the question, "What is the purpose of higher education?". However, this is helpful since, to a large extent, the different opinions about the purpose of higher education lie behind the varying concepts of what should be meant by quality in higher education. The different approaches to quality reflect different conceptions of higher education itself. Several overviews of current theories and practices in national systems of quality are presented in chapter three. Conceptions of quality have been categorized in different ways, showing different perspectives and illuminating various aspects. 10 Most individuals include parts of more than one perspective in their personal conception of quality. Therefore, when looked at on an individual level, there may not be any significant differences between the ways different stakeholders perceive quality in higher education. Also, combining each perspective with a particular group of stakeholders should not mean that every individual sees quality in the same way; in every group, there are pronounced individual differences. However, the suggested perspectives represent fundamentally different views of what higher education is for. It is, therefore, important to describe each perspective separately to get a clear picture of what each stands for, the ideological basis, and the implications of the proposed view of quality. It will also make it possible to discover points of agreement and disagreement, thus providing a useful starting point for negotiations about a common platform for quality work in a given situation.

Defining Quality Assurance in Education Quality is often described as the totality of features and characteristics of a service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. Quality in higher education, according to Article 11 of the World Declaration on Higher Education published by the United Nations, is a multi-dimensional concept that should embrace

all its functions and activities: teaching and academic programs, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, faculties, equipment, services the community and the academic environment. (Hamad & Hammadim, 2011; Ganai, 2014) It should take the form of internal self-evaluation and external review, conducted openly by independent specialists, if possible with international expertise, which is vital for enhancing quality. (Masterplan, n.d.) Independent national bodies should be established, and comparative standards of quality, recognized at the international level, should be defined. Due attention should be paid to the specific institutional, national, and regional contexts to consider diversity and avoid uniformity. Stakeholders should be an integral part of the institutional evaluation process. Quality also requires that higher education should be characterized by its international dimension: exchange of knowledge, interactive networking, mobility of teachers and students, and international research projects while taking into account the national cultural values and circumstances. (United Nations, 1998). Principles of QA in Education Aristotle stated in his Book VIII of Politics that 'this education and these studies exist for their own sake.' In this context, quality assurance should exist alongside and support the idea of 'fitness for the purpose of education,' where the purpose is the development of society and the education of the individual. Again, two approaches can be taken to quality assurance, which can define the methods and type of QA processes that higher education institutions can combine:

What is the significance of QA?

Quality Assurance is a condition that leads to the achievement of transparency. It will ensure the quality of the academic (teaching, curriculum, etc) and structural (buildings, computers, etc.) provision of courses and allow an objective review of their quality. The transparency should be dialectical, meaning that the quality assurance should make institutions transparent and that the quality assurance in itself should be transparent, allowing the outcomes to be shared by the participants (actors). As students, we particularly want to overcome the obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement of students, recognition of courses and qualifications guarantee the 'fitness for purpose of our education' and ensure that the outcomes of higher education meet our expectations. (College "Center for Business Studies" in Kiseljak, n.d.)

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) of Thailand

Internal Quality Assurance is a scheme established by the Office of Higher Education. This year's Internal Quality Assurance Scheme was held at Siam University. This is in keeping with the National Education Act 1999, which says that higher education has to be evaluated and properly assessed. IQA, therefore, recommends a self-assessment and auditing of the activities of the universities every year. This is a close effort from the Ministry of Higher Education to maintain the educational standards of the Universities. This scheme prescribes rules and regulations that serve as the basis upon which the universities must work. The Universities are expected to compile their reports for the Ministry's assessment. The Ministry of Higher Education ensures that all the components of the IQA are adhered to by the universities by carefully studying the reports submitted to it by various universities. IQA has about nine components. One of the components of IQA is that universities make a self-assessment report and audit. Of course, the reports made by various Universities are sent to the officer of higher education yearly through their database.

The IQA scheme is organized occasionally to ascertain the continuous running of the education system at a level acceptable to the Ministry. Proper evaluation of higher education is necessary to give the higher education system much-needed credibility. Besides, it will instill

some confidence in the education sector that the system would not be subject to decay. IQA is compulsory for Universities to guarantee that the system continues to operate according to set policy standards. The university has had a considerable track record of active IQA participation for over 10 years. From time to time, it has audited and sent reports of its general administration processes yearly to the Ministry of Higher Education. Previous IQA reports from Siam University have suggested that there is still a need for further retraining of university staff. It has also been suggested that the system must be refurbished to guarantee the satisfaction of educational needs. Quality assurance in higher education has become an institutional and national issue across the Asia Pacific region and a global one. Universities and colleges worldwide are focusing special attention on designing and implementing new quality assurance mechanisms and systems to ensure that students receive high-quality and relevant education and that degrees and diplomas are widely recognized. Such recognition is seen to be essential not only by national governments and employers but also by other universities and employers internationally.

Quality assurance in higher education can be defined as systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions and systems to monitor performance against objectives and ensure the achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements. Essentially, quality assurance systems aim to provide appropriate evidence to substantiate claims made about quality and so to enable key stakeholders to have confidence about the management of quality and the level of outcomes achieved. (Sîrbu et al., 2007). Two stakeholders are individuals and groups who have a major interest in higher education institutions and systems, and their work and achievements. Quality assurance is particularly important in an age of globalization and knowledge-based economic growth. Globalization has brought numerous benefits, especially for countries that have taken advantage of liberalization of trade and technological breakthroughs. At the same time, globalization demands greater mobility of professional and skilled labor and increased efforts to achieve mutual recognition of university and college awards. More effective cooperation between higher education institutions and nations is essential in the modern world. Quality assurance today is driven by several pressures, many producing tensions and conflicts. These include the tensions and conflicts between the explosion and fragmentation of demand for student places on the one hand and unemployment, which affects an ever-growing number of graduates in several countries of the region on the other; between the provision of equal access and opportunity, and the financial constraints that follow the mass extension of higher education; between the pressures for increased institutional autonomy versus those for growing public accountability; and between ethical and moral obligations and the various pressures for the generation and communication of new knowledge and scientific discoveries. Faced with these pressures, higher education must develop new visions and forms of cooperation across institutions and nations. As the conference brochure emphasized, the quality issue cannot be disassociated from the quest for excellence. At the same time, the setting of academic standards and evaluation criteria should consider the diversity of situations across the region. Each nation and higher education system should put quality assurance systems and procedures in place that meet the local society's needs and culture—importing systems from one country to another need to be handled with care so that any new set of arrangements is anchored firmly in cultural and social traditions.

Quality assurance (QA) prevents mistakes or defects in manufactured products and avoids problems when delivering solutions or services to customers; ISO 9000 defines it as "part of quality management focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled." (John J. Steuby Company, n.d.) This defect prevention in quality assurance differs

subtly from defect detection and rejection in quality control. It has been referred to as a *shift left* as it focuses on quality earlier in the process. The terms "quality assurance" and "quality control" are often used interchangeably to refer to ways of ensuring the quality of a service or product. For instance, "assurance" is often used as follows: Implementation of inspection and structured testing as a quality assurance measure in a television set software project at Philips Semiconductors is described. The term "control," however, is used to describe the fifth phase of the DMAIC model. DMAIC is a data-driven quality strategy used to improve processes. (IDESTRAININGS, n.d.). Quality assurance comprises administrative and procedural activities implemented in a quality system so that requirements and goals for a product, service, or activity will be fulfilled. The systematic measurement, comparison with a standard, monitoring of processes, and an associated feedback loop confers error prevention.^[6] This can be contrasted with quality control, which is focused on process output.

Quality assurance includes two principles: "Fit for purpose" (the product should be suitable for the intended purpose) and "right first time" (mistakes should be eliminated). QA includes management of the quality of raw materials, assemblies, products and components, and services related to production, as well as management, production, and inspection processes. The two principles also manifest before the background of developing (engineering) a novel technical product: The task of engineering is to make it work once, while quality assurance is to make it work all the time.

The introduction of the National Education Act in 1999 has given a new connotation to the terms "internal quality assurance (IQA)" and "external quality assurance (EQA)." According to the Act, quality assurance in educational systems comprises internal and external systems. For internal quality assurance, each academic institute and its governing organization is responsible for overseeing the implementation of such internal mechanisms and ensuring they remain a part of the continuing management system. As for external quality assurance, the Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (Public Organization) (ONESQA) is responsible for the external assessment of institutions at all levels.

Historically, defining suitable product or service quality has been a more difficult process. It has been determined in many ways, from the subjective user-based approach that contains "the different weights that individuals normally attach to quality characteristics" to the value-based approach, which finds consumers linking quality to price and making overall conclusions of quality based on such a relationship.

Why a public organization?

Quality education is a public service required of the state, which must provide such education to all people. The state, therefore, entrusts the responsibilities of offering education responsive to the needs of direct beneficiaries, i.e., students and parents, as well as those of indirect beneficiaries, i.e., enterprises, the public, and society as a whole. For such a provision, the state must assess how far it complies with the national education policy and how far it serves the needs of the customers or different groups of beneficiaries. An external quality assessment agency needs to be a public organization that enjoys the status of a state body, which is neither a government office nor a state enterprise, to achieve the highest efficiency. With complete autonomy and power in administrative, managerial, and financial decision-making, it can carry out the assigned tasks more efficiently than through the bureaucratic line of command.

Reasons for establishing the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment

Like other concerns, education provision needs administrative and managerial principles for cyclical functioning. Evaluation is an essential step for feedback information, providing us with the basis for assessing the extent of target achievement. It also enables us to identify weaknesses or problems for which remedial measures are needed to facilitate subsequent planning and actions required to achieve the goals effectively and efficiently. It is, hence, crucial to recognize the importance of evaluation, particularly quality assessment by an external and neutral body. Such a mechanism will provide a meaningful assessment. It also gives all agencies responsible for education provision - from those at the national level to the smallest - i.e., educational institutions and classrooms, the incentives for self-evaluation so that the quality of education will be continuously enhanced.

Besides not being obligated to report to the agencies in charge of education, ONESQA enjoys complete neutrality and integrity since there is no outside pressure to distort the assessment, resulting in a genuine check and balance. External quality assessment is a public service for capacity-building to check how far the quality of education required by learners, society, and the state meets the desired standards and efficiency (Pitiyanuwat et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Commission on Higher Education or CHE is a catalyst in assessing higher educational institutions for accreditation and quality assurance. Internal and external quality assurance systems are well in place to provide feedback to institutions and universities. According to the Act, quality assurance in the educational system comprises internal and external systems. Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) is the responsibility of the institution and its governing agency to establish a system and ensure the continuing operation of such system. External Quality Assurance (EQA) is the responsibility of a newly established public organization, the Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA). This paper presents the skeleton outlines of both frameworks. The announcement of the National Education Act in 1999 further promoted the quality movement among Thai institutions. According to the Act, quality assurance in the educational system comprises internal and external systems. Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) is the responsibility of the institution and its governing agency to establish a system and ensure the continuing operation of such system. External Quality Assurance (EQA) is the responsibility of a newly established public organization, the Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA). x

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