Perspectives on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Iraq: A Case Study at Ishik University

Ahmet Öztaş

Ishik University, Erbil, Iraq
Email: ahmet.oztas@ishik.edu.iq

Mehmet Özdemir

Ishik University, Erbil, Iraq
Email: mehmet.ozdemir@ishik.edu.iq

Çağrı Tuğrul Mart

Ishik University, Erbil, Iraq
Email: cagri.mart@ ishik.edu.iq

Abstract: Higher education system in universities has witnessed an immense development in quality assurance process for the last two or three decades. Though quality assurance is relatively new notion in Iraq, recently a steadily increasing attention for quality assurance programs has come into focus. Ishik University, one of the leading universities in Iraq, has modified the quality assurance programs that prevail in developing countries and adopted them successfully which led to considerable progress in improving quality assurance system. The implementation of quality assurance programs has played an effective supporting role in improving the quality of Ishik University. This study investigates how quality assurance programs influences performance improvement and encourages quality in teaching and research in Ishik University.
Key Words: Quality Assurance, Quality Assurance Programs, Iraq, Ishik University

1. Introduction

Each year Ishik University admits a large number of students with different aspirations and abilities, therefore excellency in academic knowledge and teaching effectiveness is at the core of education in the institution. As one of the leading institutions of higher learning, Ishik University is well aware of its role to keep abreast of latest developments in higher education and to improve quality through research and development work.

It is worth noting that constant efforts by the government to seek for quality and productivity in higher education, increased demand of students for higher education, increased use of technological devices in learning, profound changes in education, broad student diversity, variety of expectations by students, ongoing competition between universities and the need for enhancement of quality standards have triggered Ishik University to improve its performance so

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procedures have been set up to assure quality. Quality audit at Ishik University is a check to see the effectiveness of the activities in achieving its goals. This study introduces quality assurance mechanisms at Ishik University and aims to put forward how quality assurance programs influences performance improvement and encourages quality in teaching and research.

2. Student Enrollment

The increasing number of enrollments in Ishik University is changing the nature of education and the impact of these changes has rendered the quality assurance system to focus its lens on augmenting undergraduate teaching and learning. The enrollment decision process is dependent upon some internal and external factors which the students need to weigh before making the decision. Academic environment at Ishik University has always been an important factor that adults consider in deciding to enroll. Pursuit of knowledge as a personal growth opportunity influences learners to enroll in higher education (Kasworm, 2003); therefore Ishik University constantly seeks for developing strategies to enhance quality in teaching and learning. Learners are concerned about academic and social challenges in the decision process yet Ishik University balances learning, earning and living which play the major role when deciding to enroll in a higher education institution. Through integration of academic and social lives, Ishik University assists students by providing them intellectual and vocational advancement.

3. The Quality Assurance System at Ishik University

Quality assurance has been on the agenda of Ishik University since its foundation and its steadily ongoing impact has led the institution to give more attention to the promotion of teaching and learning function and academic performance of lecturers. Quality assurance is defined as "a systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and quality improvement" (Vroeijenstijn, 1995, p.30). The implementation of quality assurance system has yielded outstanding improvements in higher institutions which include reforms in curricula, higher standards in student assessment, pedagogical upgrading programs for academic staff, and more stimuli for academic publications.

Similarly, the establishment of quality assurance system at Ishik University has changed the landscape of education in the institution. High quality standards and comparability of qualifications with leading universities have been made possible. Currently, quality assurance is one of the main factors of evaluation at Ishik University and the university makes great effort to ensure that quality assurance practices and educational goals of the university are in harmony.

Ishik University through focusing on individual student needs is in constant quest for improvement in performance. Unsatisfactory educational provisions are endeavored to eliminate and high educational standards are set to promote improvement in quality. To maintain development of good practice at all levels of the institution, Ishik University has developed its own internal assurance system.

Quality assurance mechanisms at Ishik University:

Function
Teaching and learning
Employers Feedback
Assessment
Student Feedback
Academic Performance Improvement

Quality Assurance Procedure
- Staff Appraisal
- Peer Review (Classroom Observation)
- Teacher Portfolio
- Assessment of Outcomes
- End-of-course questionnaires
- End-of-semester questionnaires
- External Audits
- Internal Audits
- ISO Evidence
- Seminars
- Workshops
- Conferences
- Academic Publications
- Incentives for Improvement
- Academic Research Points Accumulation

A wide range of development functions have been arranged for the development of quality assurance system at Ishik University. These functions enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the individuals and the institution. Ishik University quality assurance system has developed various actions to achieve its specified purposes. For instance, conferences and academic publications are supported for continuing improvement in terms of quality. Moreover, Ishik University publishes three journals on different fields to provide lecturers a platform where they can disseminate their findings.

The ongoing quality assurance and performance improvement of Ishik University fits its educational purpose. All aforementioned procedures which constitute the internal quality process of the institution have led to significant outcomes.

4. External Quality Audit
One of the functions of external audit is to develop an institution's internal quality. External audit is a constructive factor which influences institutional quality enhancement (Askling, 1997). The goal of external quality audit is to ensure that education standards of an institution are adequate. Recent studies (Wahlen, 2004; Stensaker, 1997) have proved that external quality audit advances quality work to a significant extent. External monitoring have moderate positive impacts on teaching and learning, management both at the university and faculty levels, and

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motivation which stimulates the institution for continuous quality assurance. By the same token, quality assurance mechanisms at Ishik University have improved and gained momentum thanks to external quality audit, simply put external audits have been an opportunity for Ishik University to achieve improved outcomes in terms of quality assurance.

5. ECTS System

Reilly (1996) considers the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) as a common academic currency throughout the European Union. The use of ECTS is a prerequisite for the recognition of studies and diplomas in European area of education. It has been used to facilitate European mobility and credit transfer system, thus has become of key importance to higher education of Europe. The differences between national systems can result in problems with the recognition of educational qualifications but ECTS enhances the transfer of students between European higher education institutions with its impact on academic recognition. Moreover, ECTS promotes the transparency and comparability of European higher education system with other international higher education systems in the world. Ishik University, ensuring that it is fully aware of the potential of ECTS, has committed itself to implementation of ECTS in line with its objectives.

Ishik University creates collaboration with leading overseas universities to make full use of their technical and educational support. Currently Ishik University is cooperating with more than 60 universities in the world. These agreements aim to encourage student and staff exchange to experience teaching and learning at international prestigious universities.

6. Student Feedback (Questionnaires)

The most widely used form of teaching evaluation at Ishik University is standard feedback questionnaires. Student feedback has been central to Ishik University quality assurance system. End-of-course questionnaires by the students contribute to teaching effectiveness and professional development of academic staff. Lecturers improve their teaching by remediating their weaknesses revealed by the questionnaire data. Student feedback questionnaires are reliable resources to determine on teaching and learning (Marsh, 1987) hence ratings of students on their lecturers and their courses have an impact on improvement in the overall teaching quality of Ishik University. Rise in ratings of students over the last four years yield considerable amount of evidence that student feedback correlates with the quality of teaching and learning.

7. Peer Review

The most effective use of peer review or classroom observation is its influence on professional development (Montgomery, 2002). Peer-reviews provide academic staff with constructive feedback on teaching styles by experienced faculty members in accordance with this classroom observation has been considered as a key component to improving teaching and practice. Peer observation of teaching is used at Ishik University as a part of quality monitoring process and it has been proved to be useful for improvement of teaching skills. The process of peer

observation supports and assists lecturers to improve their teaching which affects overall teaching and learning quality at the institution.

8. ISO Evidence

Ishik University has been certified with the ISO 9001:2008 for Higher Education and Training Services. It is important to stress that Ishik University is at an advantage to strengthen clients' confidence as implementation of quality systems has been achieved at Ishik University. The quality system at Ishik University enables the activities to be orderly structured. Total Quality Management system which has been beneficial for the institution, is designed to put the strategies into practice

9. Conclusion

Quality assurance has become a core issue with increased awareness in higher education therefore Ishik University is in constant quest for improvement in terms of teaching and learning quality and research. Ishik University has set up its quality assurance system to improve quality through research and development work. The conditions required for the successful implementation of quality assurance procedures has been perpetually improved in the institution. Currently quality assurance at Ishik University is seen to be an important contributor to technical progress by improving productivity in research and teaching, moreover the application of quality assurance principles has produced the desired effect in the University.

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