
Quality Assurance in Education of Thailand

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Introduction

Thailand began a process of reform of 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 for the period 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 for achieving quality of instruction and an appropriate academic learning environment. 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 procedures for internal and external quality assurance, 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. The MOE, the MUA, and the Office of the National Education Commission are to be merged into a new Ministry of Education, Culture and Religion. The public sector role in higher education is to be changed from being regulatory to supervisory, while the mission of higher education is being redirected more toward societal participation, student-centered learning, and life-long learning. In 2002, all public universities will gain increased autonomy. In 2000, the higher education system had a total of 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 is enrolled in higher education institutions excluding open universities. However, following the change in economic conditions since 1997, there has been some reduction in both 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 establishment of the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA), enjoying the status of a public organization. The announcement for establishment of The Office was subsequently 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 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 educational institutions includes an external and internal system. For internal accreditation and quality assurance, the internal mechanisms are used. External quality assurance is through ONESQA or Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment. This is a public organisation responsible for external assessment.

Internal Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Thailand

Quality Assurance Framework: Foundation for Thai quality assurance framework lies in formulation of standard criteria and requirements established by MUA for degree courses in the nation. All degree courses provided at public and private higher educational institutions, especially transitional ones will have to attain standard criteria before they are approved for starting operations. Over years, approval authorization has been transferred by MUA to public higher educational institutions. Governing councils as well as academic boards are responsible for quality of educational provision and this includes academic standard control. External persons with expertise are invited by some of the universities for review of developing curricula and reviewing internal activities. Accreditation system is associated with professional degrees such as architecture, nursing and medicine. For private higher educational institutes, MUA takes care of approval of degree programmes and accreditation. MUA is currently known as Commission on Higher Education under the Ministry of Education. Three aspects of quality control are

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under its aegis namely quality control, audit and assessment.

Framework provides autonomy to institutions to adapt their traditions. Quality framework proposed by the commission has 9 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 is also given the freedom to establish a quality assurance system relevant to its context. Each institution develops its own system. Implementation, audit and review is based on policy makers within the institution.

External Quality Assurance in Thailand

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

- Graduates 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 performance of institutions. Once certain standards are marked, the first review cycle is carried out by ONESQA to assess the external quality assurance system. 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 as directives to guide the process
- Review and confirmation of 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 internal system of quality assurance in an institution
- Transparency and accountability while carrying out the assessment

Dimensions of Development: 3 dimensions of development are considered namely achievement, attempt and awareness. The self-review report and data of each university is submitted to ONESQA before external assessing is carried out. Extra documents and reports on internal system of quality assurance 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) clearly emerged as a principal business methodology in the Western world throughout the 1950's and in the early 1960's. The concept of "quality" is rather 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 services is an obsession in every single market in which they operate.

The concept of quality assurance is not a new one, but the range of the terminology and methodologies which are now used to define, develop and apply it, are relatively recent. There are a great number of different perceptions of what is meant by quality in higher education. Varying definitions have been suggested, but it has not been possible to reach consensus. The most widely accepted criterion of quality

in higher education is probably “fitness for purpose”. Consensus about this does not solve the problem of what is meant by quality 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 it is the different opinions about the purpose of higher education, that 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 categorised 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 might not seem to be any significant differences between the way different stakeholders perceive quality in higher education. Also, combining each perspective with a particular group of stakeholders should not be taken to mean that every individual in that group sees quality in exactly 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 in order to get a clear picture of what each stands for, what the ideological basis is, and what the implications of the proposed view of quality are. 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, which should embrace all its functions and activities: teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, faculties, equipment, services the community and the academic environment. It should take the form of internal self-evaluation and external review, conducted openly by independent specialists, if possible with international expertise, which are vital for enhancing quality. Independent national bodies should be established and comparative standards of quality, recognized at international level, should be defined. Due attention should be paid to the specific institutional, national and regional contexts in order to take into account diversity and to 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. 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 ideal of ‘fitness for propose of education’ where the purpose is the development of society and education of the individual. Again, there are the two approaches that 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 it will allow an objective review of their quality. The transparency should be dialectical, meaning that the quality assurance should make institutions transparent, but also 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 and guarantee the ‘fitness for purpose of our education’ and ensure that the outcomes of higher education meet our expectations.

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) of Thailand

Internal Quality Assurance is a scheme set up by the office of higher education. This year’s Internal Quality Assurance Scheme was held in 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 on a yearly basis. This is close effort from Ministry of Higher Education in maintaining the educational standards of the Universities. This scheme prescribes rules and regulations which in turn serve as the basis upon which the universities must work with. The Universities are expected to compile their reports for 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 9 components. One of the components of IQA requires that the Universities should make a self-assessment report and auditing. 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 from time to time to ascertain continuous running of the education system at a level acceptable by the Ministry. Proper evaluation of the higher education is very necessary to give the much needed credibility to the higher education system. Besides, it will also instill some confidence in the education sector that the system itself would not be subject to decay. IQA is very compulsory for Universities in order to guarantee that the system continues to operate according to set policy standards. University has had a considerable track record of active participation in IQA for more than 10 years. It has from time to time 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 need for further retraining of university staffs. It has also suggested that there is need for refurbishing of the system to be able to fully guarantee the satisfaction of educational needs. Quality assurance in higher education has become not only an institutional and national issue across the Asia Pacific region but also a global one. Universities and colleges throughout the world today are focusing special attention on designing and implementing new quality assurance mechanisms and systems in order to ensure that students receive high quality and relevant education and that degree 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 in order to monitor performance against objectives, and to ensure 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. 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 growth of knowledge based economies. Globalization has brought numerous benefits especially for countries that have been able to take advantage of liberalization of trade and technological breakthroughs. At the same time, globalization demands greater mobility of professional and skilled labor as well as increased efforts to achieve mutual recognition of university and college awards. In the modern world, more effective cooperation between higher education institutions and nations is essential. Quality assurance today is driven by a number of pressures, many of which produce 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 a number of 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 new forms of cooperation across both institutions and

nations. As the conference brochure emphasized, the issue of quality cannot be disassociated from the quest for excellence, while the setting of academic standards and evaluation criteria should take into account the diversity of situations across the region. Each nation and higher education system should aim to put in place quality assurance systems and procedures that meet the needs and the culture of the local society. Importation of systems from one country to other needs to handle with care so that any new set of arrangements and anchored firmly in cultural and social traditions.

Quality assurance (QA) is a way of preventing mistakes or defects in manufactured products and avoiding problems when delivering solutions or services to customers; which ISO 9000 defines as "part of quality management focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled". This defect prevention in quality assurance differs subtly from defect detection and rejection in quality control, and 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.^[3] For instance, the term "assurance" is often used as follows: Implementation of inspection and structured testing as a measure of quality assurance 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. 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.^[3] It is the systematic measurement, comparison with a standard, monitoring of processes and an associated feedback loop that 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, services related to production, and 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 the task of 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 of internal and external systems. For internal quality assurance, it is the responsibility of each academic institute and its governing organization to oversee that such internal mechanisms are put in place and 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 what suitable product or service quality means has been a more difficult process, 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 in fact a public service required of the state, which will have to 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 the society as a whole. For such provision, the state necessarily has to 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, enjoying the status of a state body, which is neither a government office nor a state enterprise, in order to achieve highest efficiency. With complete autonomy and power in decision - making for its administrative, managerial and financial affairs, it has the flexibility to 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

Similar to the operation of other concerns, education provision needs administrative and managerial principles for the entire cyclical functioning. It has been well recognized that evaluation is indeed an essential step for feedback information, which provides 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 so as to facilitate subsequent planning and actions required to achieve the goals effectively and efficiently. It is hence crucial that the importance of evaluation be recognized, particularly quality assessment by an external and neutral body. Such mechanism will provide 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 under the obligation of reporting 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, the society and the state meets the desired standards and efficiency

Conclusion

Commission on Higher Education or CHE is a catalyst in the process of assessing higher educational institutions for accreditation and quality assurance. Internal as well as external systems of quality assurance are well in place to provide feedback to institutions and universities. According to the Act, quality assurance in educational system comprises of 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, Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA). This paper presents the skeleton outlines of both frameworks. The announcement of National Education Act in 1999 had further promoted the quality movement among Thai institutions. According to the Act, quality assurance in educational system comprises of 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, Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA).

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