

Internal Evaluation in the Higher Education System: A Case Study in Iran¹

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Abstract

This paper aims to report on the implementation of internal evaluation in the departments of the college of human sciences (theology, Persian language and literature, and accounting and economics) in Ilam University, Iran, in order to improve educational quality. This paper points out the findings obtained from a case study of implementing internal evaluation, encompassing 12 steps, in the departments of a university in Iran. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used to collect data from the heads, faculty members, students, alumni, and library staff of the departments, as well as the immediate managers of the alumni. The methods of data collection included interviews, group discussions, questionnaires, and checklists. The results of the study show that two departments, Theology and Persian Language and Literature, were desirable in terms of the quality of the seven criteria under evaluation (department management and structure, faculty members, students, alumni, teaching and learning processes, implemented courses, equipment and resources of libraries), and the Department of Accounting and Economics was quite desirable in this respect. The study also indicated that there were differences among the departments in terms of the quality of the factors under evaluation.

Key words: internal evaluation, higher education, quality assurance, Iran

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, industries have come to understand that in order to stay competitive globally, a self-assessment to continuously improve organizational performance is required (Venkatraman, 2007). Similarly, as Lerner (1999) mentioned, universities are driven to engage in a strategic planning process by a variety of forces. These include: increasing demand for higher education concurrent with a decline in government funding, changing student demographics, and a need to compete with the emerging models of higher education while keeping the essence of a traditional comprehensive university. A strategic planning process can help prepare a university to face these emerging challenges. In addition, on the basis of regional reports sent to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the four key elements of globalization relevant to qualifications and quality assurance in higher education are:

- The growing importance of the knowledge society/economy.
- The development of new trade agreements which cover trade in education services.
- Innovations related to information and communication technology (ICT) and education.
- The emphasis on the role of the market and the market economy (OECD, 2004).

These factors and other global changes have encouraged higher education systems around the world to be more responsive to local needs, national concerns and global issues. It is extremely difficult to meet these challenges, given the environment of limited financial resources, and it is clear that institutions must reexamine traditional methods of operation and innovate in order to remain viable now and in the future. This new competitive marketplace in higher education and the belief that universities should integrate education and training as they prepare students for the complex and highly differentiated labour market has promoted an increasing interest in the issue of quality in the education. In fact, today there is a general agreement on the need for accountability in the higher education and for establishing policies and processes to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of

quality (ESIB¹, 2003). As stated by Bazargan (2007), higher education systems need to be accountable and consider rapid policy changes to meet the realities of the changing world. 'Traditional higher education programs have been required to demonstrate more explicitly their quality and effectiveness. Institutions should primarily be responsible for the quality of their education, their research and their other services. As strikingly pointed out by Billing and Temple, the heart of a quality strategy should be self-evaluation (Billing and Temple, 2001).

As Bazargan (2005) similarly argued, to cope with quality problems at the university level, an internal evaluation has been suggested in helping faculty members become more effective in achieving departmental goals and in upholding both relevance and quality in higher education. This article, first, briefly reviews the background of higher education evaluation in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Then, after noting the definitions of quality assurance and the process of internal evaluation in higher education system of Iran, it presents the result of internal evaluation in Ilam University. Finally, policy implications obtained from the implementation of this project are discussed.

Background of higher education evaluation in Iran

Debate on the quality of higher education has been intensified since the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the 1980s. Factors such as competitive situation, re-defining the function of state, globalization, and emerging knowledge economy have led universities to redefine their objectives and constantly monitor and evaluate their performance (Farasatkah et al., 2008). Indeed, Iran's higher education system faced rapid quantitative development and weakness of outputs in recent years. Experience shows that output growth in developing countries depends on the availability of workers with relevant and quality skills. Universities can be an important facilitator of such skills through their activities. This requires that the universities carry out these functions well. To ensure this, the governments of some developing countries have started to introduce quality assurance in their higher education sector (Lim, 1999). The

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higher education system in Iran, as in many other developing countries, is concerned about equity, access and quality of higher education. Iran has been active in designing and implementing a pilot program for internal quality assessment since 1996. A national self-assessment program at major departments was implemented in the years following 1996. The University of Tehran, as a pioneer in higher education, is the only institution that has developed a centre for university quality assessment in Iran. Based on the experience from implementing internal evaluation in the Medical Sciences Universities (MSU) in 1997, various attempts have been made to assess quality at both national and institutional levels, and many universities volunteered to carry out self-evaluation. Like many other universities, the University of Ilam volunteered to implement quality assurance. Quality assurance at university and departmental level has two parts: self-evaluation by departments and external evaluation by a review committee consisting of experts (Mehralizadeh, 2007). Internal evaluation is a promising tool in helping faculty members to become more effective in achieving departmental goals and in upholding both relevance and quality (Bazargan, 2000). Filteau (2007) argues self-assessment can frequently be used for one or more of the following purposes:

1. To strengthen the internal quality assurance mechanisms of institutions;
2. To facilitate self-improvement in the overall quality of higher education;
3. To encourage continuous improvement;
4. To motivate institutional planning and systematic evaluation;
5. To lead to the realization of ownership for quality;
6. To monitor internal quality;
7. To clarify the mission, goals and objectives of the program and institution;
8. To reach beyond the systemic constraints;
9. To increase program options;
10. To restructure the curriculum;
11. To encourage a research culture;
12. To improve documentation and the use of information technology;

13. To improve student support services;
14. To improve staff quality;
15. To improve faculty development of programs;
16. To create greater unity among members and, at the same time, constructive competition among sub-units;
17. To rediscover strengths and potentials;
18. To trigger healthy practices;
19. To make changes in policies and practices of the management;
20. To improve resource allocation for academic activities.

In this study, internal evaluation was implemented towards quality improvement in three departments of the Faculty of Human Sciences of Ilam University, namely Theology, Persian Language and Literature, and Accounting and Economics. The present study will be useful because it will provide a systematic analysis of the perceived levels of success of QA efforts by several different participants involved at the departmental, faculty, university and Ministry of Science, Research and Technology level.

Concept and process of implementing internal evaluation in higher education system of Iran

In a competitive environment, quality assurance (QA) is an important topic for everyone who is involved in education: the academic staff, the students, as well as the taxpayers. QA, in higher education, refers to a series of review procedures designed to safeguard academic standards and promote learning opportunities for students (Opre and Opre, 2006). Quality assurance examines many facets of the input, process and output of an educational system (Barnett, 1987; Church, 1988). QA has been described as a global movement with local variations (Dunkerley, 2002). According to Nguyen et al. (2009), in Europe, quality in higher education is often closely associated with the output. In the past, the US linked quality with resources (input and process); however, since the 1980s, the US Department of Education has required that assessment of student learning outcomes be included in the regional association accreditation standards.

Many researchers like Harman (1998), Smeby and Stensaker (1999), Van Damme (2000), Bling (2004) and Farasatkah et al. (2007) have tried to compare quality assurance framework in higher education. These comparisons show that a "general model" of quality

assurance does not universally apply, but that most of its elements do apply in most countries. As noted by Biling (2004), the general model provides a starting point from which to map deviations. On the basis of the study conducted by Farasatkah et al. (2007), comparative analysis of the quality assurance system in higher education throughout the world reveals that there is a great deal of convergence and consensus on the one hand and considerable diversity on the other hand. In many countries, there exists consensus, or in other words a type of world class, on some dimensions of the quality assurance system. However, remarkable variety in the experience of those countries emerged, which stems from contextual and cultural diversity. As stated, e.g., by Barnabè and Riccaboni (2007), when we analyse both the European and the non-European quality assurance systems, it turns out numerous evaluation schemes that evolve a variety of standards and guidelines for internal and external assessments.

In support of this, Harman (1998) argued in learning from international experiences on quality assurance it is important to select elements which can be integrated in the national culture and characteristics of the national academic system. Indeed, it is far from certain that a model that suits one country or region is also fit for accommodating an academic environment in another country. As stated by Damme (2002), most quality assurance and accreditation systems are developed by the state and under legal frameworks by the state. Their focus is confined to assuring the quality of programmes delivered in the country itself to domestic students. The degree and type of differentiation in any higher education system is determined largely by government regulatory and funding policies, together with institutional policies and the operation of market mechanisms. For example, while in the United Kingdom QA is highly centralized in manner, the Germans' model is decentralized federally. Hence, as stated previously, transferability of quality assurance systems from one nation to another is related to cultural differences. Similarly, as stated by Biling (2004), these variations are determined by practicalities, the size of higher education sector, the rigidity/flexibility of legal expression of quality assurance and the stage of development from state control of sector.

In support of this, in their article entitled “Criteria for Accreditation in Vietnam’s Higher Education” Nguyen et al. (2009) analyse the development of accreditation standards and processes in Vietnam and argue that although higher education in Vietnam has borrowed from Western models, it is vital for it to adapt to local needs and experiences. Similar initiatives in other countries including Japan, Germany, and Italy have usefully shifted the policy debate toward developing quality assurance systems that closely correlate with a combination of the domestic socio-economic background in conjunction with international factors and trends.

Additionally, Mok (2000) argued, higher education systems are not immune from globalization and managerialism, not all nations or institutions have responded to globalization in the same way because of individual specificity in history, politics, culture, and economy. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) claim that any quality model developed must be sensitive and represent the expectations of the stakeholders. For example, the quality assurance system in Vietnam borrows from the US quality assurance system (internal and external evaluation). Definitions of quality in this country appear to go along with Harvey and Green (1993), with some unique differences in the underlying perceptions among Vietnam’s educators that affect their conceptualisations of quality. Due to great differences between the two countries in economic, cultural, historical and political characteristics, since 2004 the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam (MOET) has tried to adapt this system with the national characteristics. Hence, in addition to considering the main elements of the quality assurance system in the world, the quality assurance system in any country should take into account the cultural, historical and socio-economic features of the country. "Think globally and act locally".

As was mentioned previously, QA at the university and departmental level has two parts: self-evaluation (internal evaluation) by departments and external evaluation by a review committee consisting of experts. Admittedly, QA begins by establishing a mission for the institution, followed by the functions that have to be carried out to achieve this mission and the objectives for each function are then set out, and a quality management system is introduced to ensure the quality of the programs. Lastly, an external audit system is

installed to assess the effectiveness of the management system. In quality assurance, institutionally defined goals are considered as standards for assessing quality, to bring into play a participatory approach to self-evaluation involving all faculty members. The program director or department head acts as facilitator in the self-evaluation process. It can therefore be said to be 'collegial self evaluation' (Bazargan, 2002). For instance, according to Pritchard (2006), one of these models in Germany, established in 1994, is the Association of North German Universities. Its procedures for evaluation have three components: (1) an internal evaluation by the subject teachers themselves using a checklist to establish strengths and weaknesses; (2) an external evaluation, which consists of experts visiting the subject and producing a report that they discuss with colleagues and then publish; and (3) recommendations resulting in mission-based agreements between the subject representatives and the management of the university.

Based on the experiences of internal evaluation implemented in different universities in Iran, the process of internal evaluation at the academic departments is divided into 12 steps (Bazargan, 2001). These are as follows:

1. Familiarizing faculty members with the objectives and process of implementing internal evaluation.
2. Establishing an internal evaluation committee and division of work.
3. Developing a timetable to implement internal evaluation.
4. Identifying factors (inputs, processes, products, outputs and outcomes) that display departmental quality and agreement on these factors.
5. Identifying program/institutional goals.
6. Defining evaluation criteria or program/institutional goals that are considered as the basis for judgment.
7. Identifying indicators for assessing the factors under evaluation.
8. Determining the required data.
9. Selecting or developing data collection instruments.
10. Data collection.
11. Analyzing data to prepare pilot report.
12. Distributing pilot reports among the academic staff and

receiving their opinion to prepare the final report.

In this study, we examine the quality of program/institutional factors (inputs, processes, outputs), based on implementing these steps for quality improvement.

Methodology/data collection

The purpose of this study is to implement internal evaluation as the first step of QA process at departmental level in human sciences in order to improve quality. There were six populations from three departments of human sciences (Theology, Persian Language and Literature, Accounting and Economics) in this study. The participants are: heads of the departments, faculty members, students, alumni, immediate managers of alumni and library staff of the three departments. Table 1 shows the different groups of survey respondents in the total population and the sample. The process of internal evaluation implemented at the departmental level was based on the 12 steps mentioned above. Through the different workshops and interviews with faculty members and by experience from internal evaluation implemented at the departmental level, especially on the medical universities, and according to the organizational elements model (Bazargan, 2003), seven sets of criteria, 25 indicators and 114 indices were identified and prepared. These are as follows (also see Table 1):

1. Department management and structure (7 indicators)
2. Faculty members (3 indicators)
3. Students (3 indicators)
4. Alumni (3 indicators)
5. Teaching and learning process (3 indicators)
6. Implemented courses (3 indicators)
7. Library equipment and resources (3 indicators)

Table 1: criteria and indicators

Criteria	Indicator
Department management and structure	Qualifications and appointing methods of heads of departments Planning and organizing department activities Methods of department evaluation Methods of implementing of internal seminars Budget and funds Department development plans (physical, academic) Communication between head of the department and higher level managers
Faculty members	Personal characteristics Research and educational activities Relationship with students
Students	Personal characteristics Students' information about the field of study and labor market Distribution of admitted students
Alumni	Personal characteristics Scientific activities of alumni Skills and performance
Teaching and learning processes	Learning and teaching strategies Achievement tests Utilizing technology in teaching and learning
Implemented courses	Course objectives Contents and background of implementation Conformity with human and financial resource
Library equipment, and resources	Accessibility of staff and faculty members to educational and research resources Financial and physical resources of the library

To carry out the project, workshops were held at each of the participating departments. The purpose of these workshops was to make faculty members familiar with the objectives of self-evaluation and motivate them to take part in the project. To place mission objectives of the department such as teaching, research, and professional services, faculty members derived mission objectives from the motivational, inspirational and directional statements which existed in the department. We used qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data from the target population of this study including: heads, faculty members, students, alumni, immediate

managers of alumni and library staff (see Table 2). These methods included interviews, group discussions, questionnaires, checklists and workshops. To collect the data from students, alumni and library staff we used a questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale, and we used interviews, checklists and group discussions to collect data from heads of the departments and immediate managers of alumni.

Table 2: population and sample

Category		population sample		Sampling
head departments(directors of academic departments)		6	6	
Faculty members	Theology	8	8	Census
	Persian Language and Literature	9	9	
	Accounting and Economics	8	8	
Immediate managers of alumni	Theology	21	21	Census
	Persian Language and Literature	17	17	
	Accounting and Economics	9	9	
	Library staff	8	8	
Students	Theology	123	67	Stratified Sampling (appropriate allocation)
	Persian Language and Literature	181	82	
	Accounting and Economics	394	108	
Alumni	Theology	361	120	Stratified Sampling (appropriate allocation)
	Persian Language and Literature	380	120	
	Accounting and Economics	60	43	
Total		1195	626	

Data analysis procedure

In this study, in order to analyze the data collected from the participants, descriptive statistics methods (frequency, mean, and percentage) and the weighting method were used to judge the quality of the factors under evaluation by comparing the present situation with

departmental objectives. For example in order to determine the mean of faculty members' opinions about organizational characteristics, first the options of the questionnaires were weighted (in other words, quantitative options switched into qualitative grades): very much=5, much=4, average=3, little=2, very little=1. Then the mean of the numeric values of the answers was calculated by using the following formula:

$$\text{Point of each component} = \frac{\text{Point of each option*its frequency}}{\text{number of respondents}}$$

For this purpose, we used a five-degree Likert scale for the questionnaire items that represent the extent of desirability of criteria.

In order to facilitate the judgment about the results of the criteria, indicators and indices of the above continuum were divided into three levels: undesirable (1-1.66), quite desirable (1.67-3.33), and desirable (3.34-5).

Eventually, based on the results obtained from applying the indicators, policies and action plans are suggested to be implemented at the departmental, faculty, university, Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT), and the national level for quality improvement.

Results and discussion

The results of the internal evaluation in which the different aspects of the departments have been judged from the viewpoint of the faculty members, students, alumni and other people involved reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the departments. The results of the research in general showed that average of seven criteria under evaluation (Department management and structure, Faculty members, Students, Alumni, Teaching and learning processes, Implemented courses, Library equipments and resources) in three departments was quite desirable (2.56) (see Table 3). Based on the information from Table 3 and Figure 1, more attention was paid to "library equipment and resources" in the three departments (3), whereas less attention was paid to the area of "management and structure of the department", especially in the department of Persian Language and Literature

(1.85). Providing facilities and equipment that faculty members required to participate in the planning of department activities, in addition to the allocation of adequate financial resources and budget by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology to research can help to promote this area. The criterion “faculty member”, like other factors under evaluation, was quite desirable. In order to improve the quality in this regard, departments need to recruit experienced and new members, seek opportunities for continuing professional development and acquiring information from internal and external authorities. “Students” was another criterion for evaluation. In this regard, the results indicate that the Department of Accounting and Economics, with mean 2.33, needs to improve the activities related to students. Regarding this, we can suggest to: select students with the better academic background, motivate students to participate in the research plans, interacting with students and giving them consult and organize students, time, materials, environment and content for instruction effectively. The criterion alumni had received the second least attention after the "department management and structure". The alumni office for the development and facilitation of the relationship between departments and alumni can be established to receive the opinions of this group to improve the learning and teaching process and explore the skills that are required for labor market. About the teaching and learning process, as shown in Table 3, like other departments, the Department of Accounting and Economics has weakness in this respect. Louis (1994, 2006) argued that capacity of schools for innovation and reform relies on their ability to collectivity process and understand the application of knowledge in teaching and learning. Hence to improve this area, the department needs to use technology and media in the process of teaching and learning, holding workshops on new methods of instruction with the participation of all faculty members, interact with students and receive their ideas about the process of teaching and learning. It is important that Ilam University encourage its departments to measure student learning so as to make more effective choices in the design of curricula and selection of pedagogical alternatives. Regarding the educational courses, the data revealed that the courses implemented and delivered need rethinking and reviewing to adapt to the students’ expectations, for instance, by delivering courses according to students’ interests and

collecting the students’ opinions about the content and curricular plans.

Since the status of three departments regarding each criterion was the same, so briefly, based upon the results obtained from implementing internal evaluation in these departments, we offer the following recommendations in order to improve each criterion:

Table 3: results of seven criteria in three departments

Criteria	Department			All departments
	Theology	Persian Language and Literature	Accounting and Economics	
Department management and structure	2.14	1.85	2.14	2.04
Faculty members	2.54	2.6	2.9	2.68
Students	2.66	2.66	2.33	2.55
Alumni	2	2.66	2	2.22
Teaching and learning processes	3	2.66	2	2.55
Implemented courses	3	3	2.66	2.89
Library equipment and resources	3	3	3	3.00
Total	2.62	2.63	2.43	2.56

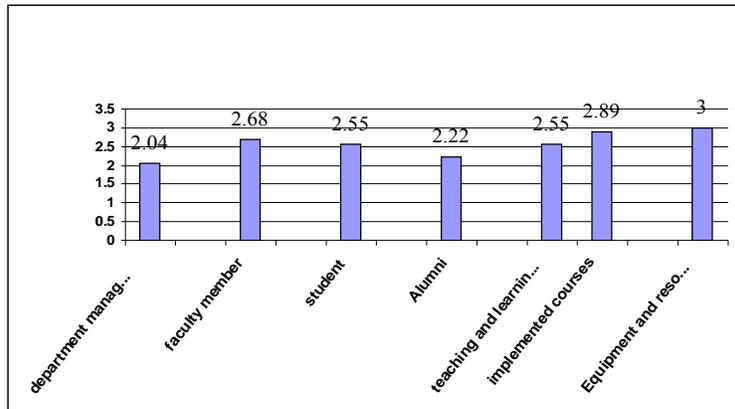


Figure1: Average of seven factors under evaluation in the three departments

Department management and structure

- Providing and developing comprehensive guidelines for planning and evaluating department activity with the participation of all faculty members.
- Developing guidelines about research qualifications and research methodology by the help of faculty members.
- Motivating and encouraging faculty members in order to increase their participation in planning department activities.
- Evaluating educational activities of faculty member by students, based on scientific models
- Providing plans for developing the departments (human, physical and financial resource)
- Needs assessment of labor market in order to produce outputs relevant to the labor market demands.
- Developing procedures to assess research activities of faculty members.
- Developing strategies for quality assurance at university level, which emphasizes that academic quality is an essential responsibility of each academic department or program and that quality assurance processes therefore need to be designed by and appropriate to each department or program.
- Planning for employment of prominent and experienced researchers as faculty members.
- Encouraging scientific communication with other universities, colleges and institutes through scientific meetings and conferences at national and international level.

Faculty members

- Basic computer-related instructions and curricular support for faculty members to make better use of computers in their teaching.
- Providing incentives and opportunities for faculty members to communicate and collaborate on their teaching as well as in the design of curricula and instruction.
- Considering the quality and quantity of research activity of faculty members besides educational activity.
- Using awarding system for faculty members or research projects to facilitate a dynamic environment and research spirit.
- Requiring the faculty members to submit at least one article per

year.

- Providing environment of collaborative research activities and providing the required incentives and opportunities.
- Providing appropriate facilities and equipment for faculty members.
- Establishing a new policy of encouraging staff to employ IT approaches to enhance learning and teaching methods.

Student

- Establishing a procedure for assessment of academic achievements of students.
- Providing better communication between departments and students in order to better understand students needs.
- Preparing and publishing brochures and leaflets on the academic fields to inform students.
- Focusing and emphasizing students' research activities.
- Developing the interaction between students and staff by holding regular meetings.

Teaching and learning processes

- Planning and implementing seminars on effective teaching methods and learning styles, and promoting active learning approaches instead of lecture-based education.
- Emphasizing the utilization of teaching aids in the teaching process by faculty members.
- Continuous improvement of educational quality through assessment of learning, systematic solicitation of feedback, and the collaborative design and correction of curricula, teaching and student learning methods.
- Providing opportunities and conditions to exchange educational experiences with other departments.
- Encouraging academics to use modern technology by offering them incentives and training to develop their own course materials on the web.
- Improving course content and teaching methods of faculty members to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

Educational Courses

- Designing and implementing courses that equip students with

skills required for the labor market.

- Developing effective evaluation measures for continuous evaluation of courses and curricula with respect to the students' abilities to develop and enhance their intellectual and professional skills.

- Respecting the students' opinion and their feedback during course dropping/adding.

- Developing fields and disciplines according to the labor market demand and the society.

Library equipment and resources

- Increasing the library fund to get more books, subscribe to electronic journals and databases.

- Expanding the computer center and computerizing the library.

- Providing access to online documents by using appropriate computer systems.

Alumni

- Establishing a database for alumni to follow up their activity.

- Communicating with the alumni.

- Getting prominent alumni involved in research activities.

This report can be a basis for the procedures necessary for continuous improvement of the quality of the department, developing the necessary culture and conditions for accountability in departments, monitoring the internal quality, improving staff quality and clarifying the mission, goals and objectives of the program.

Lessons learned

We would like to point out some lessons learned with regard to implementing internal evaluation in the academic departments. Firstly, planning and implementing internal evaluation in higher education institutions at departmental, faculty and university levels requires proper culture and environment. The faculty members and other people involved should be interested in the development and application of the internal evaluation system so that they become aware of the importance of "quality" in their academic departments more, and follow the process eagerly. Secondly, internal evaluation can act as an organizational learning system. Through internal evaluation faculty members, students and others involved (team

learning) try to identify goals and objectives (shared vision), develop criteria and indicators for assessment and evaluation (mental models and personal skills) and provide tangible feedback to enable the institution to improve performance and improve continuously (systematic thinking).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was implementing internal evaluation in the academic departments of the Faculty of Human Science (Theology, Persian Language and Literature, Accounting and Economics) in Ilam University, to improve educational quality. Internal evaluation as the first step of quality assessment is the best indicator showing how far we should go to achieve certain aims, analyze the quality of the activity of such a system and achieve logical results. The most important result of internal evaluation was that the process promoted the concept of quality among the departments, which eventually leads to clarifying the mission, goals and objectives of the departments. Furthermore, the strengths and weaknesses of the departments are identified. We offered recommendations and an action plan to remove the weaknesses and enhance the strengths. Finally, this study can be a basis for external evaluation in the departments of the Faculty of Human Sciences of Ilam University.

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