From Internal Evaluation toward Quality Assurance in Distance Higher Education of Iran

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Abstract

Iranian higher education (HE) includes two headquarters named Ministry of Science, Research and Technology and Ministry of Health and Medical education; it also contains about 1500 universities and HE institutions. There are presence and distance courses in HE. But because of the existing variety and flexible courses in distance education it attracts considerable notice to itself. This kind of education is mainly fulfilled through Payam-e-nour University (PU). Therefore, expansion of this education necessitates an evaluation of its quality and assurance system. PU with having 45 involved departments[4] is considered among universities providing distance education. Results of doing internal evaluation (IE) in departments of this university indicate the requirement of university attention to its input, process and output quality. Considering the diffuseness in educational region and centre of this university, existence of inequality in educational, studious and professional service exposure is unavoidable; however these cases with the mechanism of evaluation and accreditation could be recognized, and through their recognition or reduction, quality improvement would be possible. Hence, after reviewing of Iranian HE, with emphasizing on internal evaluation, achievements of one decade quality management in HE in general and in distance education in particular will be discussed.

Keywords: Payam-e-nour, higher education, internal evaluation

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4 In some departments such as Statistics, each regions is separately volunteered for IE(for example, 1& 2 regions, 10 region), but the other ones such as educational science, psychology, governmental management, … all regions of the university, did IE simultaneously

Introduction

In the last two decades, higher education has been faced so many challenges and problems. Increasing growth of students and demanding individuals for entering higher education, quantitative expanding of higher education system without considering available capacities, and the ability of economical, social and cultural context for accepting the huge number of collegial alumni, the major force for competing with institutions and other economical and social divisions for gaining more sources, decreasing financial sources of government and continuous force from society, employers, students and other stakeholders for taking more responsibilities, accountability and clarity of higher education are some of these challenges which force the university system to review its structure, mission, functions and processes. It is expected that university system work more efficient and economical than before. Therefore, it is simple minding that we pretend these challenges and increasing pressures will be decreased. Undoubtedly, our future is filled with intense vacillation in the situation that is more ambiguous than before.

Looking at current transformation of higher education system, indicates that higher education has to take care of quantitative increased crisis and financial limitations (Hashemi Golpaygani, 1993) and simultaneously, has to qualify maintenance, improve, enhance and assure by spending less sources and depending on efficient leadership and management in the higher education environment (Ramzdan, 1997).

During the last decade, quality has been distinctly changed to one of the focused subjects in higher education and so many discussions and studies have been taken place about it.

Therefore, it can be said that all related individuals in higher education system are emphasized on quality improvement, enhancement and assurance in its layers and elements, and it is assumed that allocating more sources to higher education, instead of output and less products, is derived from poor quality in the higher education system and its activities (Izadi, 1996).

When we talk about quality improvement, enhancement and assurance, we have to accept this reality that some kind of dissatisfaction from current situation is emerged and we have tried for

directing activities toward more validity (quality). To eliminate system deviations and defects and improve, the higher education system needs an appropriate evaluation and accreditation system. So, it can be said that in one hand, quality improvement and enhancement in higher education, and on the other hand responsibility taking, accountability and clarity of activities and performances have to be included in future plans of this system.

Literature review
Before referring to accreditation and quality assurance in international level and accomplished activities in national level, the concept of the quality should be reviewed. This is because in the absence of agreement on the concept of quality in higher education, it will be impossible to evaluate and assure and finally to develop it.

Quality is one of the key subjects that has always been considered in higher education; but its intensity and strength have to be different. Since 1990s, quality has been changed from lateral situation to prominent and distinguished subject. Although, one can suppose that quality is a self-apparent concept, but its determination and regulation in the form of a specific frame is difficult. Like beauty, quality is settled in the observer's eyes or in the mind of user (Bazargan, 2001). So, it should be said that presenting the sketch of quality is not always linked with objectivity and it changes with an individual's subjectivity. Therefore, it should be accepted that quality is not possible to be easily measured (Bazargan, 1995).

In the view of UNESCO, quality in higher education is a multifaceted concept that is highly dependent on the environmental situation of the university system, mission or situations and standards of university discipline (Bazargan, 2001).

On the basis of this, it can be derived that quality is not an achieved form of a general theory or a total model.

The offered definition of quality by International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education is nearly in line with most accomplished activities about quality evaluation in the international level in Iran. This institution has defined quality as the conformity of current situation of system with one of the following conditions:
 1. Determined standards

2. Missions, goals and expectations (Bazargan, 1995).

Doing the systematic evaluations on the basis of a scientific method and frame that aims at quality improvement, enhancement and assurance, is a rather new activity. The only country that has almost one century experience in this field is America. From the late 1800s, in this country, national and regional accreditation agencies were replaced with Eastern European systems and during 1930s they gradually changed to an effective force in higher education system of this country (Worthen & Sanders, 1987).

Usually two main functions of accreditation are considered in its definition. These two functions are considered in most higher education institutions of West Europe. Therefore, accreditation standards can be in minimum level (requirement) or in maximum level (excellence). The first case is usually in governmental accreditation procedures and the second case, in specialized organization procedures and professional councils, have been emerged (Van Damm, 2000). In the European countries, two kinds of accreditation is recognizable: its first kind has been started in 1989-90 in most countries of center and east of Europe, and it tended to maintain the quality of higher education and keep some kinds of central controls(Vlasceanu et al, 2004).

The second kind of national accreditation started in the late 1990s, the time when some European countries created accreditation and quality assurance systems (Vlasceanu et al, 2004). Six aspects can be characterized as basic and common forms of national quality assurance systems in higher education of these countries:

3. Participation and coordination by central government/ independent agency;

4. Doing self-evaluation and preparing a self-evaluation report;

5. External evaluation by external experts, specially on the basis of self-evaluation findings;

6. Publishing the outcomes of self-evaluation, including suggestions for improvement;

7. Implementing and actualizing suggestions;

8. Evaluating the appropriateness and effectiveness of the procedures and methods of quality assurance (meta-evaluation) (Lamicq and Jensen, 2001).

Among different countries, the experience of Ireland in this field is noticeable (Bazargan, 1382).

The quality assurance system in higher education depends on these three factors:

9. Self-evaluation;
10. External evaluation
11. Information for and from stakeholders (Higher Education and Training Awards Council, 2000).

In Asia, the experiences of Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, India and Malaysia are noticeable.

The activities of India are also important in the field of accreditation in higher education. By establishment of National Council for Assessment and Accreditation in 1994, this country worked toward necessary structure making for assessing and improving quality in higher education. The model of management-oriented internal evaluation and external evaluation for judging universities and higher education institutions were applied (Bazargan, 1382).

National experience in the field of accreditation and quality assurance

Although assessment in Iranian higher education system is admired and practical activities in this field started with the formation of supervision and instruction measuring office, the fact is that the applied methods of supervision and assessments have some common shortcomings:

12. They have no goal of specific frame;
13. They don't follow a specific methodology or model;
14. They have no necessary duration and continuation;
15. They neglect systematic views;
16. They are done according to necessity and expedient;
17. They are not followed by participation, coordination and affection;
18. They are not followed by making capacity for accreditation and quality improvement, enhancement and assurance in higher education;
19. There is no scientific and systematic structure for their management and leadership (Mohammadi, 2002).

Vision and necessity of doing evaluation through the means of

balanced and coordinated growth of quality alongside with quantitative growth of higher education and making scientific assessment and evaluation system of universities and efficacy of higher education institutions, were offered in the third development program in 2000. The turning-point of this field was considered a credit account in the third program, allocating it to the National Organization for Educational Testing[1] and establishment of the Center of Study, Research and Educational Evaluation. In this field, after the formation of a scientific committee in NOET, and regarding international experiences and also the experience of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, the accreditation model was accepted as an appropriate and flexible approach for quality assurance and response to fronting challenges in higher education. The process of doing accreditation can be imagined with these stages:

20. internal evaluation,
21. studying the internal evaluation report by peer review,
22. site visit,
23. judgment,
24. ongoing external review.

As stated before, the process of quality assurance (accreditation process) has two main and major goals: quality maintenance and quality improvement and enhancement toward increasing responsibility taking, clarity and accountability in higher education.

In order to qualify maintenance and improvement, primarily the internal evaluation, and then, the external evaluation are implemented.

The process of internal evaluation
Reviewing the literature and doing internal evaluation in departments indicate that the process of internal evaluation in the form of a systematic and flexible frame is implemented in 4 main stages and 14 steps, including: planning, implementing, acting and following, external evaluation and quality assurance and volunteering for accomplishing them.

Planning (steps before implementation): In this stage arrangements and pre requirements of doing the process are provided, and the

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[1] National Organization for Educational Testing (NOET)

situation for doing the proposal is defined. This stage includes eight following steps:

1. Making the members of systems (institution/program) familiar with the necessity, philosophy and role of internal evaluation in continuous quality improvement,

2. Structuring a directing committee of internal evaluation in the unit that is being evaluated,

3. Specifying and clarifying missions and goals of the unit,

4. Defining and setting factors,

5. Defining and setting appropriate criteria for each factor,

6. Defining and setting appropriate indicators for each criterion and defining the judgment criteria (achieving goals) for each indicator,

7. Specifying the required data for measuring indicators,

8. Designing and setting measurement instruments for gathering data.

b) Implementing: In this stage the necessary prerequisites and situations of implementation are provided. This stage includes four following steps:

1. gathering data,

2. analyzing data,

3. providing and setting a draft for internal evaluation

4. providing and setting the final report of internal evaluation

c) Acting and following: One of the manifest characteristics of internal evaluation approach in comparison with other common approaches and methods of evaluation is its utilization-focus aspect. In this stage, system (institution/program) on the basis of the evaluation results and emerging strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats works toward improving the current situation of the unit.

The only step in this stage is planning for implementing the results of doing internal evaluation.

d) The external evaluation and quality assurance: In this step it is expected that the evaluated unit informs about its situation as well as, acting for quality acceleration and validation of external peers. If the internal evaluation influences the group, and its necessity and philosophy are understood, the group will work intensively and voluntarily toward providing requirements and arrangements of external evaluation.

Payam-e-nour University has started the accreditation process since

2000, according to the above mentioned characteristics and toward achieving the stated goals. In this university 45 departments with their regions volunteered for evaluation, which can be categorized in 12 main majors (named: Mathematic, Statistics, Educational Science, Accounting, Psychology, Social Science, English Language, Geology, Physics, Governmental Management, Sport Science and Chemistry). Five departments have completed the process of internal evaluation, so in this research we try to investigate their results in order to find implementation for improving the quality in Payam-e-nour University.

Objectives:
Studying the mechanism of accreditation in Payam-e-nour University,
   Studying the level of quality in departments of Payam-e-nour University,
   Studying the suggestions of departments for quality improvement.

Methodology
In order to carry out this research, the technique of meta-analysis was used. Meta-analysis is a statistical technique for amalgamating, summarizing, and reviewing previous quantitative research. By using meta-analysis, a wide variety of questions can be investigated, as long as a reasonable body of primary research studies exists. Selected parts of the reported results of primary studies are placed into a database, and this 'meta-data' is 'meta-analyzed', in similar ways to work with other data, descriptively and then inferentially to test certain hypotheses (Neil, 2006). We chose the nine departments that completed internal evaluation in Payam-e-nour University as our sample and, performed our research on the results of the evaluation. These departments are: Statistics (regions 3, 4, 5), Statistics (regions 1, 2), Statistics (regions 8, 9), Statistics (region10), Governmental Management, Accounting, Educational Science, Geology, Psychology. We gathered our data by analyzing final reports of the internal evaluation. No questionnaire was designed for gathering data and the Meta analysis was performed on the provided internal evaluation reports.

Table (1): The factors and indicators of evaluation

Factor	Number of indicators	Percentage of indicators
Alumni	83	16.31
Educational courses	13	2.55
Employers	18	3.5
Equipments	48	9.4
Managing and organizing	20	3.93
Professors	148	29.08
Students	156	30.65
The process of teaching and learning	23	4.50
Total: 8	**509**	**100**

All departments determined factors and then divided them to criteria and indicators. In order to analyze data, we chose their factors and the related indicators of each factor. As indicated in table (1), in the process of internal evaluation eight factors were chosen by departments in Payam-e-nour University. Furthermore, some indicators were determined for measuring the factors. But the numbers of indicators were different among factors. The least number of indicators was 13 (educational courses) and the highest one was 156 (students).

All gathered data was analyzed by descriptive statistics. We considered a continuum, from 1 to 3, for the levels of quality and divided it into three parts: undesirable (1-1.66), relatively desirable (1.67-2.33) and desirable (2.34-3), and used it for judging about the quality of factors.

Results

In this part, on the basis of results, the research questions were answered.

1.What is the mechanism of accreditation in Payam-e-nour University?

As stated before, Payam-e-nour University has started the process of internal evaluation since 2000. Unfortunately, no special procedure was designed for accreditation of distance education in Iran. So this university, as well as other universities, followed the general procedure of internal evaluation. The number of volunteered departments of this university is summarized in table (2).

Table (2): The results of internal evaluation in departments of Payam-e-nour University

Department	Year of volunteering for evaluation	Number of the volunteered departments	Step
Mathematic	2000	1	3 (beginning)
Statistics	2003	1	12 (Completed)
Educational Science	2004	1	12 (Completed)
Accounting	2005	3	12 (Completed)
Psychology	2005		12 (Completed)
Social Science	2005		11 (providing report)
English Language	2006	4	1 (volunteering)
Geology	2006		12 (Completed)
Physics	2006		1 (volunteering)
Governmental Management	2006		12 (Completed)
Sport Science	2008	2	1 (volunteering)
Chemistry	2008		1 (volunteering)
Total number	12 departments		

As shown in table (2), since 2000 twelve departments in Payam-e-nour University were engaged in the process of internal evaluation. In the years of 2001, 2002 and 2007 no department volunteered for doing internal evaluation; but the highest number of volunteers (4 departments) was in 2006.

2. What is the level of quality in departments of Payam-e-nour University?

As shown in table (3), the general level of quality in the selected department is relatively desirable (1.83). We can see the desirable level, only for employers (3). It means that the alumni of this university have the necessary skills for their job requirements. The evaluated quality level for the alumni is relatively desirable (1.86). Furthermore, the quality level of managing and organizing (2), professors (1.91) and students (1.85) is relatively desirable. Finally, the results show that educational courses (1.31), equipments (1.49) and the process of teaching and learning are in undesirable levels. It

means that in the views of stakeholders of this university (professors, students and alumni), the current quality situation, especially for educational courses, equipments and process of teaching and learning needs to be improved. The departments provided suggestions in four levels (department, faculty, university, and Ministry of Science, Research and Technology) that could contribute to their quality improvements. These were used in responding the next research question.

Table (3): Internal evaluation results in departments of Payamenour University

Factor	Level of quality		
	Desirable 2.34-3	**Relatively desirable 1.67-2.33**	**Undesirable 1-1.66**
Alumni		1.86	
Educational Courses			1.31
Employers	3		
Equipments			1.49
Managing and Organizing		2	
Professors		1.91	
Students		1.85	
Process of teaching and learning			1
Total quality		**1.83**	

3. What are the suggestions of the departments for quality improvement?

The selected departments provided suggestions in four levels (department, faculty, university, and Ministry of Science, Research and Technology) that could contribute to their quality improvements. In this part, the suggestions of department about each factor are presented in four levels.

Table (4): Suggestions of departments for quality improvement

Factor	Suggestion	Suggestion level			
		Department	Faculty	University	Ministry
Alumni	Providing a cooperative context for students and institutions in case of needing the help of the expert of a department	▪	▪		
	Establishing a graduate association	▪	▪		
	Designing a graduate database	▪			
	Holding the conference related to the entrepreneurship		▪		
Educational courses	Considering needs of the society and adapting educational credits to them	▪			
	Increasing the presence hours in classroom	▪			
	Reviewing the books and plans	▪			
	Extending supplement courses		▪		
	Holding appropriate courses for enhancing knowledge and skills.		▪		
	Making connections with other universities, especially with the best ones internationally			▪	
Equipments	Increasing computerized equipments	▪	▪		
	Providing and improving the facilities for holding workshops	▪			
	Providing appropriate audio visual facilities for practical lessons	▪			
	Supplying libraries with necessary books and journals	▪	▪	▪	
Managing and Organizing	Considering students' views in planning department activities	▪			
	Designing an accurate database about students and faculty members	▪			
	Encouraging department members toward cooperative activities	▪			
	Continuous relations with other departments		▪		
	Making an appropriate mechanism for hiring faculty members		▪		
	Providing support for activities that need budget		▪		
	Allocating enough budget for hiring professors in poor regions			▪	▪

Factor	Suggestion	Suggestion level			
		Department	Faculty	University	Ministry
	Holding contacts with other universities for continuing education of the lectureships			X	
	Increasing participation of faculty members in planning university development			X	
	Establishing a policymaking association for reviewing the curriculum				X
	Providing a five year plan for improving the condition of departments				X
Professors	Considering research based activities as well as instructional ones	X			
	Hiring faculty members	X	X	X	X
	implementing experienced professors in practical lessons	X			
	Establishing a committee for interdisciplinary researches		X		
	Providing cooperative contexts for instructional and research based activities		X	X	
	Delegating the authority of hiring professors, with considering needs of departments			X	
	Designing a regulation about delegating academic positions to the professors				X
Students	Holding introduction meetings for new students	X	X	X	
	Making mechanism for encouraging students toward presence in scientific societies	X			
	Providing contexts for students to cooperate with related institutions and industries	X	X		
	Making consultant services for students		X		
	Encouraging students to study, by holding workshops			X	
	Hiring qualified professors			X	
Process of teaching and learning	Hiring experienced professors in teaching practical lessons	X			
	Holding scientifically interactive workshops about teaching and learning activities	X			
	Using audio visual media	X			
	Making relations with open universities around the world			X	
Employers	Increasing instructional and research based facilities			X	

Conclusion

As mentioned above, the results show that the general level of quality in the selected departments of this university was relatively desirable. Only the employer factor was in the desirable level. It means that the alumni of this university have the necessary skills for their job requirements. But alumni evaluated themselves in the level of relatively desirable. Furthermore, the quality level of managing and organizing, professors and students were relatively desirable. Finally, the results show that educational courses, equipments and the process of teaching and learning were in undesirable levels. It means that in the view of stakeholders (professors, students and alumni), the current quality situation of this university, especially for educational courses, equipment and process of teaching and learning needs to be improved. So the selected departments provided suggestions in four levels (department, faculty, university, and ministry) that could contribute to their quality improvements. After all, using internal quality assurance as an instrument for comprehensive quality enhancement in HE needs some requirements such as strong commitment of faculty members to quality improvement, building international relationships with peer universities, changing the policy making process in HE and so on.

We came to the conclusion that internal evaluation processes are potentially valuable, but they need to become an integral part of each department, university, and apply a nationally accepted framework of quality assurance and management. So, the process of self-evaluation that is in practice at Iranian universities requires the involvement of academic staff and a cultural transformation.

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