

AN INSIGHT INTO THE CONDUCT OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM REVIEWS – THE SRI LANKAN EXPERIENCE

Deepthi C. Bandara

Director, Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council,
University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka

Abstract

The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council of the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka conducted program reviews for the Faculties of Social Sciences and Humanities of all State Universities in 2017. The paper addresses the significance of reviewers in the review process since selection, training and capacity building of persons to serve as reviewers in the system is imperative for the conduct of successful reviews. A new manual developed for the program review of undergraduate programs in State Universities was used for the review process. This manual specified 8 criteria and standards for each criterion for which the review was undertaken after the submission of a self-evaluation report by respective study programs. This provided the reviewers the possibility to be objective during all aspects of the review process. Procedures specifying reviewer selection, capacity building for reviewers, conduct of reviewers, review chair – profile and role, program review framework, purpose and scope of program reviews, quality assessment - criteria and best practices, site visit by reviewers, assigning scores in a program review, program review report finalization, program review report writing and making review judgments were addressed. The review process was appreciated by the University system as a major step towards quality assurance of study programs in State Universities. Reviewer training has to be continued and extended on how to determine the validity and suitability of evidence, time management during a review, maintaining confidentiality of review details, writing objective review reports and not giving generalized statements and meeting report writing deadlines.

Keywords: reviewers, selection, capacity building, quality assurance.

Introduction

The University Grants Commission (UGC) is the apex body responsible for higher education in all State Universities of Sri Lanka. Currently there are 15 such Universities which come under the Universities Act of 1978.

The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) of the (UGC) was established in 2005 recognizing the essentiality of assuring quality in higher education.

The QAAC conducted the first cycle of subject reviews between 2005 and 2015. A manual was developed and used by reviewers for this purpose. However, it was realized that the reviews were quite subjective since specific criteria and their standards were not identified in the manual used.

Hence, under a world bank funded project on higher education for the 21st century a new manual was developed for review of undergraduate study programs of Sri Lankan Universities and Higher Education Institutions. This manual which specifies the review criteria and the standards for each criterion aimed to make the review more objective. It was launched at the end of 2015 and the second cycle of review of study programs was initiated.

The first round of program reviews in State universities with the new manual was in the Faculties of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities. These programs were selected as it was perceived that the programs offered by these Faculties did not address the 21st century graduate profile or attributes, which resulted in a mismatch between the graduates' skills and the labor market skills requirement.

The successful conduct of a program review depends on three aspects; namely, the reviewers, the reviewed program and the reviewing authority which in this case was the QAAC, UGC. This paper addresses the aspect of the reviewer since capacity building for the next generation quality assurance in Higher Education depends to a large extent on the capacity of the reviewers in performing objective reviews.

Reviewer Selection

Identifying personnel to serve as reviewers using the new manual was the first challenge faced by the QAAC, UGC in the review process since it is very important that selected persons should possess required knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) to be an effective and efficient reviewer.

The UGC determined the criteria for selection of reviewers so that equal opportunity was given to academics of the Universities. The application to be a reviewer was open and transparent and reviewers were selected if they satisfied the selection criteria. These were that, the reviewer shall

- be a Senior Lecturer (Grade I) from the Sri Lankan State University System and should have a PhD/MD or be a Professor in the system
- have significant training /experience on curriculum development and /or development of teaching and learning methods, assessment strategies and evaluation strategies
- have significant experience with University research funds
- have supervised a considerable number of undergraduate and postgraduate students
- have a significant number of publications in referred journals, in books, as abstracts and as conference proceedings
- have experience with relevant industry and community which were believed to capture the KSAs required for the reviewing process.

The first reality faced by the QAAC, UGC was that even though the academics selected had expertise and experience in their specific subject disciplines, review of study programs on prescribed criteria and standards were a new challenge encountered by them. A majority did not have experience from the first round and this was the first instance when they themselves were exposed to the concept of external quality assurance.

Hence it was essential that capacity building was undertaken to train the reviewers for successful conduct of reviews.

Capacity Building for Reviewers

The expected profile of reviewers stated in the manual was as follows

- High level of academic achievement in the respective discipline
- High degree of professional integrity
- An enquiring disposition
- Ability to act as an effective team member
- Good individual time management skills
- Ability to readily assimilate a large amount of disparate information
- Good command of data analysis, reasoning and sound judgment
- High standard of oral and written communication
- Experience in academic management and quality assurance

The response to the call by UGC to serve as a reviewer was encouraging and the pool of persons selected based on the advertised criteria were requested to participate in a mandatory reviewer training before they were assigned to reviewer panels since it was imperative that

selected persons were trained to serve in a manner befitting the profile. It was understood however that some of the desired attributes could not be developed with short term training.

Training programs for reviewers were conducted by the QAAC and the following aspects stated in the manual were highlighted as essential qualities in the conduct of reviews.

Conduct of Reviewers

- respectful, professional conduct towards staff and students at all times
- application of good practices provided through reviewer training on the conduct of peer observation of teaching
- acceptance of privacy of the review process
- acceptance of individual responsibility for assigned tasks within the review team
- acceptance of collective responsibility for the review team's judgments

In addition to the training of members of review panels, emphasis was also given in the selection of the review chair (as stated in the manual) and the following was highlighted.

Review Chair – Profile and Role

- lead a team of experts effectively and efficiently
- communicate effectively in face-to-face interaction
- work within given timescales and adherence to deadlines
- delegate responsibilities to the team members
- facilitate writing of the relevant sections in the review report
- compile and edit to produce clear and succinct reports

Program Review Framework

It was essential that the reviewers were also trained on the framework of the review process. It was critical that the reviewers abided by the timelines in order for the review to be conducted effectively and efficiently. Hence the following aspects of the review process were covered in the reviewer training

- Evaluate the SER individually
- Participate in panel discussion on individual evaluations – note key points
- Request for additional evidence by reviewers from the reviewed program
- Site visit by review team
- Send key findings document by review team to QAAC Director
- Send final draft report sent by Chairperson of review panel to QAAC director
- Forward final draft report for Comments from reviewed Program by QAAC director
- Incorporate comments from reviewed program by reviewers

Submit final report by review panel to QAAC Director **Training on External Quality**

Assurance (EQA)

It was important that reviewers were trained on the concept of EQA since it is the basis for peer review of programs in all spheres of higher education, facilitated through periodic review and feedback. The distinction between Institutional Review, Program Review and Subject Review were also explained.

Purpose and Scope of Program Reviews

The reviewers were exposed to the overarching goals of program review; namely, achieving accountability for quality and standards, adopting and internalizing good practices, inculcating a quality culture and facilitating continuous improvement of the study program.

Reviewers were informed that the criteria prescribed for scrutiny of programs of study in the manual had been selected by giving due consideration to the feedback received from the academia based on their experience from the first cycle of external review and that eight criteria were considered in a program review. These were:

1. Program Management
2. Program Design and Development
3. Human and Physical Resources

4. Course/Module Design and Development
5. Teaching and Learning
6. Learning Environment, Student Support and Progression
7. Student Assessment and Awards
8. Innovative and Healthy Practices

Quality Assessment – Criteria and Best Practices

The most significant feature of the new manual was that the review was conducted on the quality framework which consists of the above eight ‘criteria’ for any study program. Each criterion had corresponding ‘best practices’ and ‘standards’ resulting in an objective evaluation. The reviewers thus were trained on the scope of each criterion and the standards and best practices therein.

Criteria

In the program review process, the performance of the study program in relation to all eight criteria is considered for arriving at a judgment on the study program as a whole.

Best Practices

For each of the above criteria, quality principles are stated as ‘best practices’. In principle, any institutional operations, procedures, etc., become qualified as ‘best practices’ only if such ‘practices’ or adoption of such had resulted in value addition to any aspect of the study program.

Site Visit by reviewers

The link between review criteria and what the reviewers would look for lies in the evidence referenced in the SER with regard to each criteria. Hence the reviewers had to be trained on the important aspect of studying the evidence provided by the reviewed program and assigning appropriate marks for the evidence.

Reviewers also had to realize that the Internal Quality Assurance Units (IQAU) and the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) of the University have a major role to play in facilitating the process and that the reviewers had to work closely with them when on site during a visit.

During a site visit, the review team upon completion of the preliminaries would have to

- examine and verify (as far as possible) the claims in the program's SER with the Faculty/ Institute of any specific concerns arising from previously conducted program/subject reviews and/or reviews conducted by professional bodies.
- gather any further evidence necessary to enable them to form a view on the quality of educational provision, experience of the students, and the degree of achievement of the intended learning outcomes; and
- assess to what extent the recommendations and criticisms made by the previous subject and program reviews have been addressed.

The team also had to realize that all reviews will draw upon the following principal sources of evidence

- The (Self Evaluation Report) SER prepared for the review
- Evidence referenced in the SER
- Information gathered by the review team during the review visit

Since the knowledge, experience and professional standards of the members are crucial to the conduct of an objective and candid Program Review training had to be provided on the following:

Scrutinizing documentary evidence - The review team should consider all evidence furnished by the institution to verify the claims made in the SER and arrive at judgments.

Meetings/ discussions with staff and students - The review team should have meetings with individuals/ small groups of stakeholders. Observation of teaching-The review team should observe facilities, learning resources and learning sessions. Debriefing – At the

conclusion of the visit, an interactive meeting will be held between the review team and selected personnel from the reviewed program where the Review Chair will present the highlights of the findings and facilitate a discussion.

Assigning Scores in a Program Review

The eight criteria in the program review had differential weightage considering the impact of each on the quality of the program. Reviewers were trained on assigning scores for standards in each criterion. Conversion of raw scores to actual scores on the weighted scale was necessary and the formula and calculation procedure were explained to arrive at a final grade. In the Procedure for Use of Standards, the following terminology had to be explained.

- Standard-wise judgment giving ‘standard-wise score’
- Criterion-wise judgment giving ‘raw criterion-wise score’
- Application of weightage to obtain ‘actual criterion-wise score’
- Calculation of ‘Overall Study Program score’
- Grading of overall performance of the Program of Study

According to the manual, the ‘standards’ are usually established by an authority as regulations, norms, guidelines or principles through general consensus as a basis for comparison. Reviewers also had to be taught on assigning a score for each standard as 3, 2, 1, or 0 which had a descriptor of good, adequate, barely adequate and inadequate. The accompanying explanation of the descriptors were:

- 3 – No issues/concerns about the strengths and quality of the evidence provided,
- 2- Few issues/concerns about the strengths and quality of the evidence provided,
- 1- Major issues/concerns about the strengths and quality of the evidence provided
- 0- No relevant evidence provided

This had to be explained. A Program of Study could achieve a grade A, B, C or D depending on the final score achieved by them after the calculation procedure.

Program Review Report Finalization

The review report and process prior to publication was another key aspect that reviewer training had to consider. Reviewers were informed that

- the outcome of program review is a published report
- the report will give an overall judgment on the reviewers’ assessment of the quality of educational provision and student experience within the program and the standard of the award supported by a commentary on its strengths and weaknesses
- there will be a statement on the level of performance of the program under the Grading of A, B, C or D, based on the Study Program Score expressed as a percentage. The percentage depended on the final score achieved after conversion from raw to actual score and applying the different weightages
- the draft report will be submitted to the QAAC by the review team
- a copy of the draft report will be sent to the Faculty/ Institute for their perusal by the QAAC
- the draft report will be perused by Faculty/ Institute and if there are concerns they will make it be known to the QAAC
- a meeting will be facilitated by the QAAC between the review team and the Faculty/ Institute to resolve the concerns by discussion before finalizing the report

Since the outcome of a Program Review was that after the Faculty/ Institute accepts the program review report, it will enter the public domain through the QAAC website so that all stakeholders have access to it, the reviewer’s role in composing the final report was critical to the program reviewed.

Program Review Report (PRR)

It is the final outcome of an external peer review of a program of study.

The purpose of the Program Review Report would be to inform the Faculty/Institute and other stakeholders about the outcome of the review. Hence the Scope of the Report which included a brief introduction and review context of the University/HEI, Faculty/Institute and the Program of Study, a brief description of the review process (schedule of meetings as an appendix), the review team's observations on the Self-Evaluation Report (SER), an overview of the approach to quality assurance by the Faculty/Institute, Assessment of performance of the program based on the standard-wise scores and the actual criteria-wise scores, Final judgment of performance of the program based on the program score and Commendations and recommendations had to be included.

Review Judgments

It was important for the reviewers to realize that Program Review involves analysis of claims made in the SER and validation of the evidence presented during the site visit with respect to the eight criteria and standards in a Program of Study and thus that judgments should not be negative but constructive and supported by evidence, and recommendations should not be prescriptive but stated in a manner whereby the Faculty/Institute will be able to build upon what is already in place and strive towards quality improvement.

The review team would have given an indication of its conclusions at the final meeting held after the review visit and this meeting would have given the Program an opportunity to sort out any factual errors and misinterpretations made by the review team.

Reviewers needed to know that a request for discussion could be made by the reviewed program on receiving the draft report from the QAAC, about the contents of the report, prior to publication.

Conclusion

The site visits of all 41 reviews that were scheduled for 2017 have been completed now and 95% of the final draft reports have been received at the QAAC. The outcomes so far of this exercise is that

- the review process was highly appreciated by the University system as a major step towards quality assurance of study programs in State Universities
- it created enthusiasm for programs to perform well in the future
- it was a good source of information regarding a program's strengths and weaknesses
- follow up and tracking of future activities is essential
- reviewer training had to be continued and extended on the following aspects:
 - determine the validity and suitability of evidence
 - time management during a review
 - maintaining confidentiality of review details
 - writing objective review reports and not give generalized statements
 - meeting report writing deadlines

The QAAC, UGC is confident that the second round of program reviews scheduled in 2018, could be conducted with higher efficiency and effectiveness with the lessons learnt in the first round.

References

1. Manual for review of undergraduate study programs of Sri Lankan Universities and Higher Education Institutions. 2015, University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka