

External Evaluation: a Requirement for Accountability and Responsiveness

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Abstract

Quality assurance as a comprehensive term encompasses all policies, processes and actions maintaining and developing higher education quality. Quality assurance emphasizes on external goals of evaluation, one of which is to assure learners, public and government that each unit, department, program or institution manages its quality. thus quality assurance focuses on accountability.

This article first describes importance of external evaluation and necessity to conduct it, then considering the fact that two educational programs leading to bachelor degrees of nursing and obstetrics, which their internal evaluation have already completed, are volunteers to go under external evaluation. Explains steps of external evaluation and focuses on the external aspect of evaluation to assure quality of educational programs following internal evaluation.

Key words: QUALITY ASSURANCE, EVALUATION, EXTERNAL EVALUATION

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Introduction

Importance of issues like quality, evaluation and quality evaluation and quality assurance in the process of reforming higher education systems is extensively appreciated and is frequently confirmed.

Establishment of an evaluation system for quality of education provides a tool for universities to revise their activities, to determine their strengths and weaknesses and to choose suitable options to reform their programs. Related experiences

show that the first step in path, internal evaluation, leads to participation of all staff of educational system not only in education and research but also in propitiation, finance and management.

An accountable system provides opportunities to run debates between institutions, and experts on one side and interested parts of society on the other side, therefore leads to survival and development of the entire higher education system. It has been proved through experiments that whenever external experts are consulted, change and development will begin more easily (1). If evaluation is considered as a process to make judgments and recommendations about quality, both internal evaluation and external review by experts, which are needed to confirm internal evaluation's results, to make

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developments and to be accountable, are necessary for quality assurance, which intern encompasses policies, processes and actions maintaining and developing higher education quality. Setting goals of evaluation and deciding about definition of quality possibly influence the method and type of evaluation. Although a single external evaluation could be conducted, what current related literature emphasizes on is doing external evaluation following internal evaluation, based on its report (1).

There are controversies about definition of external evaluation. Regardless of the variety of definitions, universities should externally evaluate their activities for two reasons. The first is the necessity to be accountable and responsive. Stakeholders are interested in their quality of educational units being approved through external evaluation. Second is that external evaluation in different forms lead to self awareness, since it provides the universities with opportunities to see themselves as they really are. Self awareness in turn leads to reform of activities and thereby quality improvement. Universities must not consider external evaluation as a threat but an action toward learning (2).

Regarding quality development, knowledgeable external experts in form of external teams of experts could bring new views of opportunities and assets, which have not been thought of within the university. Adding an external aspect increases validity of results of internal evaluation (1,3).

Steps to do an external evaluation

Institutional evaluation focuses on the management of an institute, its financial and academic aspects and activities and priorities. Program evaluation focuses on a department, and deals with teaching and learning. There, external experts and the process of external evaluation is being discussed based on “Quality assurance guidelines: procedures and actions” of foundation for European Education.

Peer Review

Peer review is a relevant term which is often used to indicate involvement of external experts

in the process of evaluation. Peers are experts from the same educational field which is going to be judged. External evaluators are practically selected from a wide range of fellow academic leaders, educational experts, experts in field of evaluation and consumers of higher education. External experts could be different depending on the type of evaluation; for instance representatives of employers, educational experts including fields of education, management and quality assurance together with academic peers could conduct program evaluation. Experts of institutional evaluation are usually selected from managerial positions of higher education like university chancellor, university vice _ chancellor, faculty dean and official administrator. It is necessary to train external experts to develop required skills and attitudes like objectivity, fairness, appreciativeness, persistence, intuition, good humor and the most important one, eagerness to develop education and research as products of good teaching and management to height level standards. Thus training external expert team to acquire above attributes and the way of conducting external evaluation is necessary and develop their skills and judgment abilities.

Tasks of external expert team are to:

- 1- Confirm the content of internal evaluation’s report.
- 2- Provide opportunities for discussion between evaluators and the subjects being evaluated, which increase self awareness developed during the process of internal evaluation.
- 3- Site visit and to write the report.
- 4- Provide a suggestion for further improvement of the organization.

External evaluation team must be led by a leader who is responsible for the team’s activities. A secretary is in charge with taking notes during each site visit and writing the reports.

Training external experts is a necessity and requires information about evaluation goals and steps.

A good expert team generally needs:

Experts independent of the organization under evaluation

Experts that would be accepted by the

organization under evaluation.

An external evaluation team skillful at all essential aspects of the evaluate organization.

Clear statements about tasks of the leader and the secretary.

Mission of external evaluation team in doing program evaluation is to:

Provide a view of program's quality, educational process, curriculum, students and etc during site visits.

Provide a view point of relationships between the evaluated unit, department or program and the relevant institution, university or faculty.

Make recommendations to develop educational quality.

Mission of each external evaluation team in doing institutional evaluation is to:

comment about quality management and capacity for strategic planning of the higher education institution.

Suggest recommendations to the high education organization to develop quality management and capacity for strategic planning.

Preparation for site visit

Before every site visit, external experts meet each other to determine the general areas of evaluation and also the areas in need of clarification through discussion with different groups.

This meeting must provide a framework of questions which will be used as a reference during the site visit by experts. The framework should be accurate, comprehensive, and clear.

Preparation for site visits includes two steps:

Analysis of the report of internal evaluation and any other reports.

Pre-visit meeting

External evaluation teams also receive required training.

First step is the analysis of the report of internal evaluation. First task of each expert is to read guidelines developed by the unit for internal evaluation, internal evaluation report, and all additional documents. The purpose of this task is to extract questions and issues which deserve more attention during the site visit. Questions which are considered in analysis of internal evaluation report include:

Does the report adequately reflect current situation and is it analytical?

Are goals and objectives clear?

How far are goals and objectives achieved?

Are recommendations to remove weak points and reinforce strengths clear and practical?

Is there any missed information?

How was the process of internal evaluation?

For institutional evaluation four more strategic questions exist:

What is the institution trying to do?

How does the in institution trying to do it?

How does the institution get informed about its performance?

How does the institution change to improve?

In this step external experts don't reach a final judgment. They just have a primary concept based on written information. This concept will be evolved during the site visit through discussions among experts. Each expert is asked to make a list of questions and recommendations for discussion in the following step, the pre-visit meeting.

Pre-visit meeting, held in the morning or night before the site visit, is the first opportunity for external expert team to work as a team.

The following issues are discussed in this meeting:

Questions framework- in program evaluation, each expert has implicit ideas about quality of the curriculum; first step in this meeting is to clarify the framework for other team members, in order to reach an agreement about what constitutes quality of curriculum in this special unit. In institutional evaluation each expert has believes about quality of institutional management. The first step in this meeting is to identify these believes in order to reach an agreement about what constitute quality management and the mechanism of strategic change in this special higher educational organization.

Discussion about the report of internal evaluation- this step focuses on ideas and questions arising from reading the report of internal evaluation by experts. The purpose is to prepare a sensible agenda to visit and agree upon the issues that will be followed.

Discussion about the site visit- the secretary describes practical aspects of the site visit, trip arrangements, visit schedules and etc.

The schedule of site visit

Site visit takes two or three days. All team members participate in the meetings. Expert team interview official administrative, staff, students and also they are allowed to receive additional information from all stakeholders. The report of internal evaluation must be accessible to all participants in meetings.

After introduction of external expert team, questions will be asked which are better to be open-questions rather than guiding ones. Responses should be listened carefully and if primary answers are inadequate, additional question will be posed. It is best to avoid debating with participants.

The table below shows typical similarities of program and institutional evaluation.

The first meeting in evaluation of both program and institution is meeting with management of institution, chancellor of university or dean of faculty or both. In this meeting authority and goals of external evaluation are explained and issues related to mission and priorities of institution are discussed. Considering evaluation of institution another meeting with leadership staff is held to discuss a wider range of issues related to mission and priorities of institute, ability of the institute to maneuver important strategic issues, quality development and relationship with

units of institute. In internal evaluation a meeting is held with higher managers during which official aspects of strategic planning and quality management like the method of budget allocation, policy of appointment and development of staff are discussed. The meeting with internal evaluation group is specially important in site visit. This meeting allows external evaluation team to ask questions to clarify the methods used for internal evaluation, the way of discussion about internal evaluation report and any issues which is not completely clear and discuss more deeply about subjects included in internal evaluation report.

In program evaluation a meeting with academic staff is held to discuss curriculum content, goals and objectives, students' assessment methods, exams, impacts of research activities on education and so on. It is important to explain goals of evaluation and the way to follow up in order to relieve concerns about the evaluation process which could be considered as a threat. On the other hand in institutional evaluation a meeting is held with academic staff in the unit to use the experiences of academic staff and ask them about appointment of staff, development policy, quality management of teaching and research. This is done with academic staff who are not included in leadership of the unit. Students are an important source of information about capacity and educational qualifications of staff, relationships between components

Table. Similarities of program and institutional evaluation

Program	Institution
First meeting with management of the institution	Meeting with leaders of institution
Meeting with internal evaluation group	Meeting with leadership staff of institution
Meeting with academic staff	Meeting with internal evaluation group
Meeting with representatives of related committees	Meeting with higher managers
Meeting with students	Meeting with representatives of related committees
Focusing on learning environment	Meeting with leader of unit (faculty dean)
Free time	Meeting with academic staff of the unit
Internal meetings	Meeting with students of the unit
Final meeting with management of institute	Focusing on learning environment free time
	Final meeting with management of institution

of program, curriculum organization in external evaluation of programs. Thus a meeting with student is specially important. Considering students' roles in evaluation of teaching and staff, students act as important source of information in evaluation of institution. Students could be asked about their experiences of management and control quality. It should be noted that students' groups who take part in meetings must be representatives of students' population of the unit and must be selected randomly. Besides, the meeting must be held without presence of staff, so that students will be assured to talk freely. It is better to divide students into two groups of freshmen and the others.

A small part of the site visit is specified to visit learning environments including lecture halls, laboratories, seminar rooms, libraries, learning supportive services and so on. It is helpful to arrange a free time to allow staff and students to talk with external experts. The unit must guarantee that it will inform all staff and students of the time of the meeting. External evaluation team should have the opportunity to hold at least two internal meetings. In these meetings individual team members discuss about their ideas. External evaluation team should take half a day to organize findings and each expert must complete a part of the draft of report. The site visit ends with a meeting with representatives of the institution who participated in the first meeting. This meeting is held for two purposes: to thank the institution for its hospitality and to ask the participants to identify any further issues more.

The expert team should have the report on their minds, so that their explanations and questions reflect the outline of the draft. Any explanations should be considered as a primitive evaluation, not a final judgment.

The report of evaluation

Finishing up the site visit, the secretary of external expert team writes a draft of external evaluation report based on experts' reports and also her/his own notes of internal discussions during visit. The secretary distributes the draft among team members to receive their feed backs and their individual observations. When the final

report is developed it will be sent the unit to be checked if there is any real mistakes and misunderstandings. The external expert team must decide about the explanations of the unit. Changes will be made to the report and the final report will be sent to the institution or the unit.

Discussion

Having thought about evaluation and planning for it, now it is time to conduct evaluation. Major reforms in education have always been along with major reforms in evaluation. In 1930s and 1950s evaluation largely progressed in the fields of student's performance assessment.

However in 1960s evaluation of projects, educational materials and programs progressed significantly and expanded extensively to all levels of programs, projects and institutions, and then at national and international levels(4). Internal evaluation has been conducted in 15 educational departments of Shahid Beheshti Medical University. Given the fact that external evaluation following internal evaluation is obviously necessary, undertaking external evaluation needs involvement of higher levels of departments' management and the university. It is because involvement of management in evaluation process increases their commitment to accomplish evaluation and put the results into practice and yields helpful information for decision making. Thus the role of external evaluation as a managerial tool needs to be emphasized on and to be considered as the basis for future decisions along with quality development. The results of external evaluation provide suitable opportunities for running discussions among managers and also recommendations about quality, through recognition of weaknesses and strengths. Universities are centers for training and preparing efficient, qualified and skilled human force in response to real needs of society in different areas. Therefore, universities as subsets of the higher education system play a key role in the process of development of any countries. Having a look at changes happened in our higher education system during two recent decades

regarding students' population shows quantitative growth without paying adequate attention to quality of universities. Some researches showed that evaluation of quality of higher education system suffers from lack of a defined and organized framework. Thus a suitable strategy needs to be considered for quality development through evaluation of programs and institutions of higher education. Regarding national and international experiences, internal and external evaluations of educational programs should be the main focus(5,6). Considering the experiences (1,5,6,7) and above facts, we need to establish an efficient system for evaluation, which would be able to develop the higher education system besides the quality of education and research. The system for evaluation must come from within the higher education system considering its needs and compatible with its features. External evaluation following internal evaluation based on goals of the value is useful, therefore it is recommended to conduct external evaluation after internal evaluation which leads to a comprehensive involvement at levels of educational departments. External evaluation provides a new view of opportunities and asset to make developments, which have not been thought of during internal evaluation.

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