

Impact of Self Academic Audit (SAA) on program level accreditation: a case study in Pakistan

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Abstract

Higher education institutions HEIs consider accreditation as a means to authenticate the quality of the academic programs. The accreditation of academic programs with the accreditation councils has become an important feature of the HEIs including Pakistan. Due to the importance of accreditation of academic programs with the respective accreditation councils, the research on the enablers and challenges faced by the university towards accreditation process is getting importance. There is diminutive research available on the benefits of self-academic audit of academic programs for higher education quality accreditation. This study aims to examine the impact of self-academic audit for accreditation of academic programs on the evaluated university. A qualitative case study was adopted using documentation and in-depth interviews as the research methods to explore perspectives of participants regarding the benefits of academic program accreditation. The qualitative research examines the impact of self-evaluation process for higher education quality accreditation from the perspective of managers, academic and administrative staff of the university. Data were collected through 12 face-to-face in-depth interviews. The interview participants were quality professional, members of quality assurance committees from faculty, department representatives, and focal persons for accreditation process from university. Nvivo software was used for in-depth qualitative analysis. Relevant analytical techniques for validation of various generated themes from the transcribed data. Coding nodes, word tag clouds and tree maps were generated. The findings of the study shows that the self-academic audit phase facilitated the university to

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gather evidence of measures taken at the university and the standing of being recognized was taken as a carrier of prestige enhancement. The study found eleven sub themes and five major themes in terms of benefits of self-academic audit. The process, on the other hand, was also perceived to be burdensome, time and cost consuming, but after getting successful accreditation from the accreditation councils the significance of self-evaluation process is disclosed. The study highlighted features of self-academic audit contributed in the successful accreditation of academic programs. The five majors themes in terms of benefits of self-academic audit include evidence management, approvals, communication, culture and accountability. The study was delimited to only internal quality assurance mechanism and adopted one case study approach. In future, the results of the study could be utilized for multiple cases and for their reflection on external quality assurance mechanism as well. Few suggestions presented for the quality managers regarding enablers and challenges the HEI faced in self-academic audit. The study provides directions for future research.

Keywords: Self-Academic Audit, Program level Accreditation

1. Introduction

After establishment of the Higher Education Commission – HEC in 2002, the concept of quality assurance and accreditation became centre of quality education in the Pakistan. The mechanism of quality assurance has two major aspects; including internal and external quality assurance. The external quality assurance comprises evaluation of academic programs by the external bodies (e.g. NACTE, NBEAC) on the basis of set standards Internal quality assurance includes “self-academic audit” of the academic programs by the institution itself as per council’s standards. The process of self-academic audit enables the institutions to meet the standards of the accreditation councils for program level accreditation. This study encircles identifying the benefits of self-academic audit. “Collegial process based on self and peer assessment for public accountability and improvement of academic quality” (CHEA, 1998).

"The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality." (DOE, 2001). HEIs take accreditation as a tool to corroborate the quality of their academic programs and allied facilities.

The accreditation of academic programs with the accreditation councils has become an important feature of the HEIs including Pakistan. In Pakistan 14 accreditation councils are established to ensure quality of the programs offered at institutional level. There are 09 independent professional councils while five councils have been established under HEC. Due to the importance of accreditation of academic programs with the respective accreditation councils, the research on the enablers and challenges faced by the university towards accreditation process is getting importance. There is less research available on the impact of self-academic audit for accreditation of academic programs.

The Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) system, is managed by regulations and administrative laws enacted by the respective higher educational institution. The development of IQA is basically due to the legal requirements from the national accreditation councils of higher education (Cardoso, Rosa, Videira & Amaral, 2018). These regulations have no legitimacy national application effect, but are restricted to the various institutions and its processes and systems. Thus, operation and managing of internal quality assurance is at the choice of the HEI, which typically holds this obligation in the context of existing official funds and capabilities. It is assumed that future research can endorse this point of view that IQA mechanism could be beneficial for meeting requirements of External Quality Assurance-EQA (Cardoso et al., 2018). Developing economies like Pakistan have been fronting numerous encounters to guarantee the quality of education. Lack of governance, weak internal quality mechanism and lack of merit in decision making have arose as main obstacles for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in implementing quality education parameters (Shah, Uqailli & Qureshi, 2017). Here comes need to explore and highlight the benefits of Self academic audit

(IQA) of academic programs for program level accreditation. On the basis of research gap, future direction and research problem main research question is articulated:

“What are the benefits of Self Academic Audit of Academic Programs for Program level Accreditation?”

To answer the research question, the study aims to identify impact of Self Academic Audit of academic programs for program level accreditation.

2. Literature Review

Quality is a multifaceted conception encapsulated with interconnected values which could be distinguished but not entirely alienated (Westerheijden, Stensaker, Rosa & Corbett, 2014; Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems, & Hout, 2013). The concept of quality is relative; however it is reliant on the perceptions of various stakeholders (Westerheijden, 2007). These stakeholders could be funding agencies or the society, the students or the employers, the administrators and the academics (Schindler et al., 2015). Historically, the idea of quality has been an evolutionary concept originating from the Japanese business community in the 1950s and 1960s. Between 1960s and the 1980s this evolutionary process gradually expanded into the American and European business worlds before finally spread its influences into the public in the 1990s and by extension, into higher education. During this period, quality was conceived as an idea of rationalizing the production process and the standardization of outputs to ensure efficiency and effectiveness (Stensaker, 2000). As Kohoutek (2014) stated that today there is a raising focus on the integration of quality assurance to adjust the interests in learning results in higher education. Hence quality became key principle in the production process and also, an essential instrument for competitive advantage in the business sector. In the public sector however, it became the instrument for ensuring efficiency (Stensaker, 2007).

According to (Bryman, 2012), theories are important in research to provide the setting and the justification for the research and also, the context

for understanding social phenomenon and offer interpretation for research findings. In the sector of higher education, this conception of quality have been reemphasized in recent times by the recognition that, the concept of quality has become "one of the most dominating and influential 'meta-ideas' globally over the last 20 years, invading both the private and the public sector" (Stensaker, 2007, p. 99). This period saw the adoption of business oriented quality assurance models such as TQM, ISO 9001:2000 and the European Foundation for Quality Management, excellence models as a tool to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the knowledge generation process (teaching, learning and research). Today however, there is considerable departure from the mere adaptation of business simulations of quality assurance, to the expansion of models that reflects changing dynamics and the complexities of quality issues of higher education. This new trends which may have been caused by structural misfit of the business quality assurance models justifies the need to beyond a pure application of business quality assurance models to alternative models that are flexible and integrated enough to reflects the peculiarities of higher education organizations.

QAAHE (2012) defined "Quality assurance is a set of processes, policies, or actions performed externally by quality assurance agencies and accrediting bodies or internally within the institution". Many definitions of quality assurance contain features of quality that pertain to accountability and/or continuous improvement. Old definitions of quality assurance have concentrated on accountability; but there are growing demands for a larger stress on constant development as well (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Singh, 2010; Nicholson, 2011). Lastly, few definitions of quality assurance are generally built e.g., "policies and processes directed to ensuring the maintenance and enhancing of quality"; (Opre & Opre, 2006, p. 422) while others classify exact features of quality that will be guaranteed e.g., "policies and mechanisms implemented in an institution or programme to ensure that it is fulfilling its own purposes and meeting the standards that apply to higher

education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular"; (Martin & Stella, 2007, p. 34).

2.1 Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)

Smeby and Stensaker (1999) have proposed a framework for analyzing the tensions between improvement and accountability. In this framework, six indicators related to internal and external dimensions of quality reveals a significant insight, which suggests that internal quality assurance (improvement orientation) provides a more flexible and viable option to ensure institutional competitive advantage, and opportunity for institutional growth. Firstly, the independent manager of an internal quality system has the capacity to initiate all decisions and determine which fields to be evaluated. This situation makes it easy to integrate internal quality assurance strategies with institutional strategy to ensure better results. Also, the absence of standardized evaluation methods promotes flexibility of internal quality system, and creates better room for the independent managers to adjust to changes in the immediate environment of the institution at the appropriate time. Again, the opportunity to nominate evaluators from within the institution provides opportunity to select people who are loyal, dedicated and understand the organizational culture in order to guarantee better output. Internal quality assurance mechanism mainly emphasis on curriculum development, research, teaching and learning, which conventionally have persisted the essential tools in knowledge development method.

2.2 External Quality Assurance (EQA)

Again, in the framework for analysing tensions in internal and external quality assurance (EQA) (Smeby & Stensaker, 1999), it could be realized that EQA primarily emphasizes on acquiescence and accountability. It needs that standards laid down by the authentic external councils that assist as roadmap to the processes of HEIs. EQA is gained through method of endorsement and peer evaluation. EQA typically functions at the national level and has

permanent and collective parameters, which are smeared to all pertinent institutes under their legitimate authority without or with slight deliberation to precise quality requirements of these institutes.

Table. 1: Comparison of External and Internal Quality Assurance

Attributes	EQA	IQA
Objective	Accountability & Compliance	Improvement & Enhancement
Authority	Legislative & Mandatory	Administrative & Optional
Nature of Regulations	Universal application	Local Application
Control	Government Agency	Higher Education Institutions
Level of Operation	National Level	Institutional Level
Nature of Report	Public	Private

2.3 Positive impact of Self-Academic Audit

The literature pertinent to the benefits of Internal Quality Assurance showed positive impact self-academic audit on achievement of External Quality Assurance i.e. academic program accreditation with accrediting councils (Silva et al., 1997; Vincenzi et al., 2018). Similar studies revealed that self-assessment of academic programs benefits in terms of providing university a mechanism to systemize evidences, supports and facilitates cumbersome procedures of approvals in inducting faculty and procuring Infrastructure (Pham, 2018). The internal self-academic audits encourage increased communication (Anderson et al., 2000; Dill, 2000) and collaboration amongst various stakeholder to involve them in quality conversation (Pham, 2018), culture of evaluation (Silva et al., 1997). The mechanism of self-academic audit brings transparent accountability (Dill, 2000) and sense of responsibility and accountability amongst stakeholders of the academic institution (Pham, 2018).

Although the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system is a potential tool for major transformation in the higher education area, it is furthermore clear from the above discussion that increasing stakeholder's participation in the sector has further strengthened the demand for accountability orientation of quality assurance.

The literature presented in this article about benefits of self-audit of academic programs highlights enablers of program accreditation, which probably lead to improved results of external quality assurance. As per gaps highlighted in the previous research there is need to highlight benefits of self-academic audit. The suggested framework is expected to be valuable for quality managers and consultants in developing, monitoring and implementing effective internal quality assurance mechanism for successful external quality assurance mechanism.

3. Methodology

The current research identifies one theoretical approach that is found to be helpful for addressing research gaps, guiding methodological approach and for enhancing internal quality assurance literature in general. Following Table connects Dynamic Capabilities Theory with the current research gaps and summarizes the implications for Self-Academic Audit and Internal Quality Assurance.

Table 2: Research gap and implications for research

Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece, 1997)	
Research Problems	Implications for Research
How HEI can enable themselves to meet the standards of accreditation council?	Dynamic Capabilities theory argues that: Dynamic capabilities theory examines how Institutions integrate, build, and reconfigure their internal and external firm-specific competencies into new competencies that match their turbulent environment.
The theory allows for identification of benefits of Self Academic Audit to meet the standards of external quality assurance	

3.1 Research Design

3.1.1 Qualitative Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach using data collected from interviews to discover participants' viewpoints about the impact and benefits of self-academic audit (IQA) on institutional accreditation (EQA).

Interview questions were adopted from previous studies (Pham, 2018), to identify benefits of the self-academic audit process. The interview questions were as under:

1. Have you ever participated in the process of academic program evaluation for accreditation? If yes please share your experience
2. How many academic programs of your institution are accredited with concerned accrediting council? Please share the details of every program and their category with council.
3. How do you prepare for program level Accreditation?
4. Do you have mechanism of academic program self-audit?
5. How do you conduct self-audit?
6. What were the benefits of self-academic audits gained by the university?

3.1.2 Data Sample and Data Collection

Subsequently the focus is on impact of Self-Academic Audit on program level accreditation, therefore authors selected case study of Bahria University as Higher Education Institution - HEI where five departments selected keeping in view their program level accreditation with their respective councils. The study sampled overall 12 participants from all five academic departments' along with participants from Quality Assurance Directorate of the University for interview. The respondents were faculty members, administrative staff having work experience of accreditation process and the officials of QA Directorate. The sample was selected purposefully to ensure representation from each department. Table 3 shows a summary of participants' demographics.

Table 3: Summary of participants' demographics

Department	No. of Participants	Participant's Designation		Gender	
		Faculty Members	Administrative Staff	Male	Female
Department of Computer Science	2	2	0	2	0
Department of Software Engineering	2	1	1	2	0
Department of Management Sciences	3	2	1	2	1
Department of Electrical Engineering	2	2	0	2	0
Quality Assurance Directorate	3	0	3	2	1
5 Departments	12 Participants	7	5	10	2

3.1.3 Procedure

Invitations to participate in the interviews were forwarded to the participants through their email addresses and personal sitting sessions were scheduled via telephonic appointment. Involvement in study was on volunteer basis and privacy was guaranteed. The selection of faculty members and administrative staff was only made on the basis of their prior quality assurance and self-academic audit experience. The interviews, which went around 30 to 40 minutes, comprised of questions with open ended nature with more penetrating to identify the aims of research. Participants' answers were taped and validated prior finishing the meetings. Twelve semi-structured interviews done in person meetings and sessions. A tabular depiction of research methodology is given as follows:

Table. 4: Snapshot of Research Methodology

Research Method	Qualitative
Approach	Inductive
Data Collection	Semi-Structured Interviews (30 to 40 minutes interview)
University	Case Study of Bahria University
Sampling Technique	Snowball Sampling
Study Sample	12 Participants (part of evaluation process)
Respondents	Quality professionals, academic staff, administration and officials involved in the accreditation process
Data Analysis	Coding and Thematic Analysis (Nvivo 10)

3.1.4 Data Coding and Analysis

The tapped interviews were converted into the transcribed form. The interviews incorporated in NVivo for storing, managing and analysing the data. The coding of transcribed text was done by three-stage procedure; it includes open, axial and selective coding (Neuman, 2003). In the first stage open coding began with a detailed evaluation of the transcription. During this procedure, patterns were identified, the full data was prepared into theoretical groups and evolving themes were then settled till then each interview had been appraised and done coding. Demographic information were also given to each member at this step, memos covering added ideas or opinions regarding the interview.

The following step was axial coding that evaluates the preliminary themes combined and settled with alike themes gathered together. Furthermore, one main class was chosen under that other connected topics converted subthemes. A concluding review i.e. selective coding finished the coding procedure with any discrepancies or overlying themes recognized and distinguished through associating and antagonizing extent of settlement between contributors' answers to confirm the arrangement.

4. Results:

The results of analysis recognized five major and eleven subthemes. These themes include Evidence Management, Approval, Communication, Culture and accountability. Following table depicts the eleven subthemes of major five theme along with their summary description:

Table 5: Major themes and sub-themes

Major Themes	Sub Themes	Summary Description
Evidence Management	Systemizing evidence	Self-Academic Audit (SAA) helped in systemizing documentation and evidence management and for further preparation for accreditation.
	Data and evidences preparation for accreditation	
Approvals	Supports and facilitates cumbersome procedures of approvals in HR and Infrastructure	Corrective actions highlighted by the SAA helped in removing deficiencies in faculty and required facilities at campus
Communication	Ownership to faculty	Due to close contact with FMs, sense of ownership was developed regarding accreditation of programs
	Administration and faculty	The SAA strengthened communication channels in quality assurance staff and faculty members
	Top management involvement	Exit meetings of SAA process effectively involves Top Management
Culture	Consciousness for standards of quality	Mechanism of SAA sensitized amongst the students, faculty members and administration
	Increasing collaboration	SAA synergizes the departments to collaborate for common goals

	Good practices	SAA benefited in achieving common objectives by adopting good practices
Accountability	Transparency in procedures	SAA mechanism brings transparency in everyday procedures and practices
	Sense of responsibility and accountability	Makes alerts everybody to be accountable anytime

Evidence Management	Approvals	Communication	Culture	Accountability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systemizing evidence • Data and evidences preparation for accreditation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports and facilitates cumbersome procedures of approvals in HR and Infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ownership to faculty • Administration and faculty • Top management involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consciousness for standards of quality • Increasing collaboration • Good practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency in procedures • Sense of responsibility and accountability

Figure 1: Benefits of Self-Academic Audit

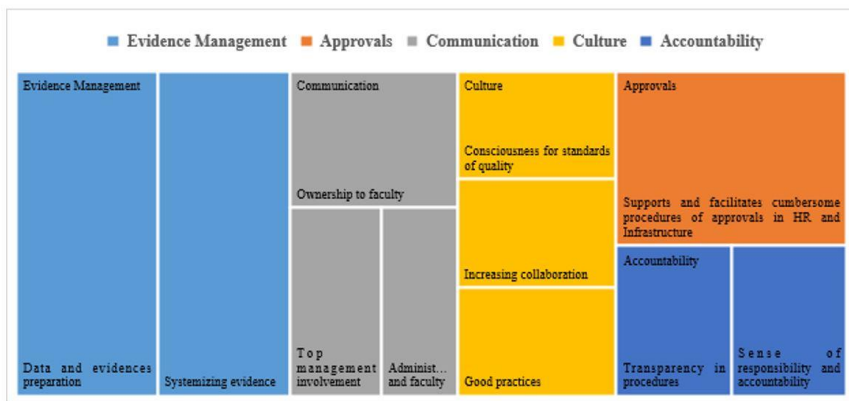


Figure 2: Five majors Themes of study



Figure 3: Word Cloud

5. Conclusion & Discussion

This part of the article discusses the main category of benefits of Self-Academic Audit and categories eleven sub themes and main five themes, during the investigations to answer the research question of this study: "What are the benefits of Self-Academic Audit for program level accreditation"?

5.1 Theme 1: Evidence Management

Mostly interviewees of the Self-Academic Audit process and relevant respondents were of the view that Self-Academic Audit helped in systemizing documentation and evidence management and supported for further preparation of accreditation of concerned councils.

5.2 Theme 2: Approvals

According to the respondents, after successful conduct of self-academic audit the teams highlighted corrective actions to be taken by the various stakeholders and concerned authorities inside the university. Fortunately, the process of identifying corrective actions by self-academic audit helped in improving required number of faculty members required in

each department. It also helped in maintaining the required number of faculty members in each department for each program as advised by the Higher Education Commission and respective accrediting agencies. Self-Academic Audit mechanism also helped in improving infrastructure facilities by initiating need from the relevant department and further made the approval process efficient. In the previous setup, the cumbersome process of approvals took long time to get through for hiring deficient faculty or to purchase required equipment for laboratories etc. but after identifying corrective actions and deadlines declaration, it made easier to achieve the targets and further prepare for external quality assurance.

5.3 Theme 3: Communication

The process of self-academic audit brings all stakeholders closer through close contact and brings swift communication; it gives sense of ownership to the faculty members about Internal Quality Assurance. Enhanced communication links the gaps between quality assurance officials and other stakeholders of the university. Moreover, the final exit meetings of the self-academic audit process with the top management also enables them to get involved effectively for improvement in internal quality assurance of the university.

5.4 Theme 4: Culture

The mechanism of Self Academic Audit gives realization to the stakeholders and synergizes the departments to collaborate with each other. It gives one common objective for one common practice for all. Due to corrective actions identified by the Self Academic Audit process the number of research paper publications in impact factors journals is also enhanced and developed a research and quality-oriented culture in the university.

5.5 Theme 5: Accountability

The respondents of the study highlighted that self-academic audit brings transparency in the system. It makes everybody alert to be accountable. A sense of accountability is also there in all stakeholders in daily routine jobs that brings quality for future and supports internal quality assurance mechanism.

5.5 Implication of theory

The identified research gaps are aligned with the Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece, 1997) that observes how institutions assimilate, develop, reconfigure their internal and external firm particular capabilities into new competencies that counterpart their unsettled atmosphere. In case of university, the institution has to prepare themselves for the EQA accreditations through the preparation done by internal quality assurance system including Self-Academic Audit etc. The stronger the internal quality assurance system will be the better the results the external quality assurance system will give.

5.6 Limitations and future research

The data was collected only from one institution, therefore, we cannot claim that our findings have provided a complete overview of the benefits surrounding Self-Academic Audit in the various HEI's of Pakistan. In future, the identified benefits of Self-Academic Audit could be utilized for multiple cases and for their reflection on external quality assurance mechanism as well. Perhaps most valuably, the framework of Self-Academic Audit benefits more significantly serve as catalyst to contribute in achieving targets of external quality assurance (EQA). Finally, those universities who don't have proper Self-Academic Audit mechanism, may take such benefits for the long run.

5.7 Conclusions

Anyhow, the over-all agreement on benefits of Self-Academic Audit is a complete view of variety of benefits of Self-Academic Audit that develops

this concept has to be studied more. There are number of authors who have conducted research on the Self-Academic Audit of academic programs. However, the current study enhances earlier work done while presenting a framework, exploring the benefits of Self-Academic Audit, using an integrative lens, assessing benefits. The addition of framework shows that it brings a better-off and supplementary strong clarification of academic Audit. The selected HEI received benefits from SAA in terms of Evidence management by systemizing documentation and evidence management and prepared for upcoming accreditations. Approvals; Corrective actions highlighted by the Self-Academic Audit helped in removing deficiencies in faculty and facilities. Communication; due to close contact with FMs during Self-Academic Audit, sense of ownership and enhanced communication links were developed amongst all stakeholders of the university. It further involved top management Vice Chancellor, Registrar and Director Campuses in decision making while presenting corrective actions plans. Culture; Self-Academic Audit mechanism gives realization and make the stakeholders conscious for quality standards, increased collaboration amongst departments, and give common objective. Accountability; Self-Academic Audit mechanism brings transparency and makes everybody alert to be accountable in future.

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